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INTRODUCTION

CHILDREN AND FAMILY POLICY: A FEMINIST ISSUE

Nancy Folbre and Susan Himmelweit

The treatment of women in society has always been linked to the ways care is provided to children and other dependents. Feminist theory has been shaped by debates over both the meaning and the organization of care. Many feminists argue that women should have greater freedom to pursue their own self-interest, rather than always caring for others. Other feminists insist on greater social validation and economic support for the caring work that women do. These approaches are not contradictory and both point to the importance of family policy as a feminist issue.

As more and more women move into the traditionally male market economy, the importance – and the vulnerability – of the traditionally female sphere of family care is becoming increasingly apparent. Market work is remunerated in terms that have some relationship to its productivity; nonmarket work is not. The opportunity cost of time devoted to family care is going up, intensifying a long-standing distributional struggle over who should pay the costs of rearing and maintaining the next generation of workers and citizens.

Family policies ranging from family allowances to state-subsidized child care and elder care are moving to the top of the political agenda in many developed countries. Feminist economists should be pleased that these issues are now getting more attention. But we should also be aware of the risks that public policies will not respond adequately to the needs of women or the dependents they care for. A special issue of *Feminist Economics* devoted to examining these issues is long overdue.

Many of the articles in this issue have a policy focus, exploring the experience of one particular country while raising concerns of relevance to families around the world. Comparative analysis suggests a remarkable common denominator: the pressure placed on women to maintain their traditional care responsibilities while also increasing their hours of paid work. The institutional results, however, vary considerably across countries. The research we present here addresses the evolution of state support for care in Sweden, Germany, Spain, the United States of America, the United

Kingdom, France, and Ireland. Among our authors, seven different countries are represented.

Sweden, Germany, and Spain represent three vertices of a triangle of European strategies. Swedish policy explicitly aims to help parents reconcile work and family responsibilities. German policy encourages married women to specialize in family care. Spanish policy largely ignores the problem, offering relatively little public support for care. Each of the articles dealing with these countries offers some surprises.

It is often assumed that the Swedish child care system emerged easily from a social democratic political system with a strong trade union movement. Anita Nyberg's historical account, however, shows that the "third sector" of voluntary organizations played (and continues to play) an important role. Feminists have often been dismissive of the German system of subsidizing housewives who stay at home. In addition to explaining exactly how this system works, Eileen Trzcinski makes a provocative case for more attention to its possible benefits. Spain has, by European standards, an underdeveloped welfare state. Cristina Carrasco and Arantxa Rodriguez explain why, and also outline specific strategies for change – state subsidies of nonprofit community-based organizations and employment practices that acknowledge the importance of family work.

Clearly, progressive family policies must address the crucial importance of time, as well as money and emotional effort, as an input into the provision of care. Women could simply adopt a traditional male model of employment, and outsource all their care responsibilities to the market, following a "universal breadwinner" model. But such a strategy could both reduce the quality of care and lock many women into low-wage jobs in traditionally female occupations. Carmen Sirianni and Cynthia Negrey explore this dilemma in their article on the ways in which work time has been gendered. They insist on the need for a "feminist politics of time" that could promote gender equality in the fulfillment of family responsibilities.

A series of shorter articles dig deeper into specific policy issues. Focusing on the U.S. context, Barbara Bergmann makes a strong case for subsidizing child care, rather than supporting parents at home. She also outlines a means-tested child care subsidy that could reduce poverty for mothers and children. In Britain, such a subsidy is currently being introduced. Diane Perrons offers a detailed analysis, comparing it with the French policy of subsidizing both maternal and nonmaternal child care. While the French approach offers parents more choice, it reinforces class divisions, with high-income families more likely than those in low-income families to take advantage of paid child care. In her account of current debates over child care policy in Ireland, Jo Murphy-Lawless comments on the pressures created by rapid economic growth and escalating demand for labor, which may help shift public policy in a more supportive direction.

The three last articles return to theory, reminding us that mainstream

economics does not provide the conceptual tools we need to analyze the provision of care. Iulie Aslaksen, Charlotte Koren and Marianne Stokstad offer a compelling critique of the conventional analysis of children as a “consumption” good, showing how mathematical models of public investments in child care should consider the externalities created by investments in human capital. They also emphasize the need to move beyond an analysis of human capital to a larger consideration of ways in which social relationships affect the quality of life. Susan Donath calls for an analysis of what might be termed the “care sector” of the economy, an area of employment with a dynamic of its own. Care services are different from most other sorts of labor because they include a personal and emotional component. It is difficult to improve productivity without reducing quality, a factor that has important implications for the cost of care and the wages paid to care workers.

Deborah Levison concludes this special issue with a plea for taking children seriously as economic actors in their own right. In a sense, they are treated the same way that women used to be, as family members without separate interests of their own. Instead, we should think of children as active agents who demand a voice in their own education and development.

The early nineteenth-century French socialist Charles Fourier suggested that the level of development of a society should be measured by its treatment of women. Almost two hundred years later, women themselves are insisting that social progress should also be measured by the quality of care provided for children and other dependents.

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