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**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACED BY EUROPEAN WELFARE  
STATES: THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR CHILD WELFARE**

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## **Farewell to Maternalism” OECD-style – or is there one?**

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### ***Abstract***

Welfare state restructuring across advanced capitalist countries has come to entail a “farewell to maternalism – i.e. political support, in various forms, for mothers’ domestic caregiving role – albeit at different speeds and in different forms. This is not simply due to structural changes (e.g. the shift to post-industrial employment), demographics (ageing societies), nor even to the impact of second wave feminism, although all of these have contributed. It is also being pushed by international organisations like the OECD. Nor does the “farewell” simply involve retrenchment in the form of withdrawal of support for mother-caregivers. It also involves the prescription of policies designed to support mother-wage earners, though these can take different forms, just as did maternalist policies, with quite different consequences for women’s equality and childrens’ rights.

The OECD may not be able to push its policy prescriptions as forcefully as the European Union, the World Trade Organisation or the International Monetary Fund. Nevertheless it has become an authoritative source of policy advice. Through country reports and thematic studies it is able to promote policy learning, especially among the countries identified as “laggards.” It is therefore of interest to ask, just what sort of advice? This paper accordingly examines the OECD’s post-maternalist policy discourse(s).

By the late 1970s, the OECD had abandoned the Keynesian policy paradigm and its embrace of neo-liberalism was clear throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Toward the end of that decade, however, its policy prescriptions began to reflect a “third way” perspective, with a (liberal) feminist twist. It is this perspective that dominates the new social policy agenda announced in *A Caring World* and that carries through the important series dealing with policies to promote the “reconciliation of work and family, *Babies and Bosses*. As will be argued in this paper, this set of prescriptions at best promotes a shallow version of gender equality and does little for the rights of children. While this is the dominant view, an alternative that seeks to extend full social citizenship to women and to children, permeates its other thematic review – Early Childhood Education and Care. In this sense, the OECD provides resources to contending forces within the receiving countries.