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

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**Are family friendly policies for the family? Contradictions of
family friendly policies in a flexible era**

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Abstract

The organisation and composition of paid work and the family have changed dramatically in recent decades and so too has the context within which individuals and families organise their lives. These changes result from the interrelations between the shifting economic and political context, in particular the more competitive and global economic environment and changing lifestyle preferences.

Contemporary times are characterised by the widespread use of information and computing technologies and greater economic, political and social communications between peoples and between states. One of the drivers of contemporary change is the worldwide supremacy of neo-liberalism or the Washington consensus, referring collectively to trade liberalisation, economic deregulation, privatisation, and fiscal discipline. States adhering to this philosophy are constrained in terms of their freedom to manage their economies and finance their social policies and firms are compelled to operate within the intensely competitive global market, which shapes their internal working patterns and practices.

Paid work has become feminised and more flexible and families are more varied in their composition and working times. The significance of the male breadwinner-female caregiver model has declined in both Europe and the United States but the ensuing care deficit has not fully been resolved and to varying degrees both dual and single earning households struggle to find time to combine paid work with caring despite the increasing interest in and promotion of family friendly/ work life balance by the states and supra national institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which the family friendly policies, including flexible working practices are designed to assist families of whatever composition manage their work life balance and to what extent they facilitate the wider economic objectives of the firm or state. The paper also considers the extent to which they meet women's strategic interests and move towards greater gender equity or whether they are oriented more towards meeting women's practical gender interests, which enhance current well being but within the existing and currently unequal gender order.