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

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## **Restructuring Childcare Policy in France**

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### ***Abstract***

Care policies can take different forms, providing a range of services and cash benefits to carers and care recipients that may be designed to provide time to engage in the labour market or time to care. Different models of providing for care can be observed in Western European countries, in relationship with policies, with their form, their extent and concentration. Different countries operate different policy logics concerning carework. France has historically done more than the UK for example, to provide for care for children than for elderly people. Reasons can be found in demographic concerns underlying family policies and in republican ideas about state responsibility vis à vis children, as they represent the future of the nation.

**The French model of providing for childcare** is based on the idea that childcare responsibility should be shared between the state and the families. Policy logics, in respect of childcare, rely on the assumption that parents should have the “liberty of choice” according to their preferences for working or caring. It is assumed that mothers who prefer working should be supported in their choice with a set of childcare facilities, either in cash or kind, at a reasonable cost, and of good quality, in the interest of children (and of the birth rate). But, it is assumed also that mothers who prefer caring for their young children should have the opportunity to do so, in terms of labour rights as well as in terms of social rights. Thus, childcare policies, which are part of family policies, have developed alternately since the 70s with regard to support for working or support for caring. The result is a complex and ambiguous mix of measures and benefits. The alternation of right and left parties at the government in the 80s and 90s has contributed to balance childcare policies between different objectives: whereas the left encourages women's work, the right is more supportive of maternity and caring. In the eighties, proposals from a ministry of families of giving a “salaire maternel” to mothers (or fathers) caring for their children was strongly opposed and denounced by the left wing, the trade unions and the feminists, as being an incitement to leave the labour market and to come back to the male breadwinner model. Besides, the left support public collective childcare services as a priority whereas the right is more supportive vis à vis cash benefits and tax deductions allowing parents to purchase services. However, there is a consensus on the state support to childcare, and the necessity to increase the supply of childcare facilities, in response to a growing demand from parents.

Although the socialist government from the 90s onwards put emphasis on gender equality in family policies and also on the redistributing impact of family policies, these objectives are less explicit since the right has come back to power in 2003. In the same way, the working time policy is no more on the political agenda, and the priority is being given to a lengthening of working time so that workers can raise their earnings. New aims are being attributed to family policy such as raising the birth rate (as announced in December 2004 by the newly named minister of families and health), and supporting poor families. More and more childcare policy is associated to employment objectives: on one hand, it should encourage mothers to remain on the labour market, on the other hand childcare offers large opportunities for jobs. It is in this sector of childcare services that a large number of jobs have been created over the last ten years.

## **2 Childcare workers: a labour market highly segmented**

One impact of the French childcare policy is the segmentation of childcare labour market. The segmentation of childcare jobs echoes to the diversity of childcare services and benefits. Carers are divided into two groups: carers who are employed in collective services and carers who work at home, either in their own house or in the children house. The former are qualified and their qualification is attested by a diploma whereas the latter have no qualification. Childminders belong to the second group, together with family helpers who are not considered as belonging to the “professionnels” of childcare but rather to domestic jobs. The quality of childcare is a major issue for policies. Currently, focus is being put on the “professionnalisation” of childminders in order to improve the quality of care and also to give a status to these jobs, and social rights to carers.

## **3 Work life balance and children**

- *Working time and time to care*: The length of working time is a major issue for work and life balance and for time dedicated to care for children, especially when the two parents work full time. It is also of a major importance for a more equitable share of parental responsibilities. The reduction of working time as it was decided by the socialist government in France was an attempt to improve the work and life balance, although it was not the main objective of the laws reducing the legal working time. Different surveys measured the impact of the 35 hours law on the work and family life and reported that slightly more than 60% of parents with young children have stated a better reconciliation of their work and family life. However, this percentage is lower when parents have non standard hours of work.

- *Flexibilisation of working hours* : What happens to children when parents have a-social hours of work? How do parents manage with work and life balance? How do policies respond to this challenge? Standardisation of childcare services may be an obstacle for parents with a-social working hours. Family policy tries to respond to parents' demands for extending hours of childcare services by encouraging innovative practices. Implementation of the innovations is left to local initiatives. The demand for childcare at non standard hours is due to various reasons that can be professional reasons (very long hours of work, evening or night hours of work ...) family reasons (lone parents) or temporary problems in managing work and family life (health problems, violence ...). Preference for childcare by a childminder is often justified in surveys by the fact that their hours of care are more flexible than hours of a “crèche” which are rigid, whereas “crèches” receive a better mark when considering the interest of children. Currently, the family policy tends to introduce more flexibility in hours of care services, both by encouraging individualised forms of care by childminders, by encouraging the creation of “crèches” by enterprises, or by giving more support to collective childcare services that extend hours of care. Innovative experiences are developing in different cities.

Slide 1

# Restructuring Childcare Policy in France

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Slide 2

## Introduction:

- Three main reforms since 2002:
  - Creation of a childcare benefit package (PAJE)
  - Revision of the working status of childminders
  - Innovative responses to parents' calls for more flexible childcare facilities
- Objectives are:
  - Diversification of childcare provisions
  - Individualisation of childcare
  - Improvement in quality of childcare care work

## The French model of providing for childcare

- A shared responsibility between families and the State
- Principle: “freedom of choice” for parents
- A wide range of benefits, in cash and kind
- “Reasonable” costs for parents
- “Good quality” provisions (“*accueil*” rather than “*garde*”)

## A wide range of childcare provisions

- In cash (various allowances reducing childcare costs or compensating the loss of income of the parent carer)
- In tax deductions
- In reductions in social security contributions

## How are children cared for?

- Children aged 3 to 6
  - 98% attend pre-school (“*école maternelle*”)
- Children under 3 who do not attend pre-school
  - 54% cared for by one parent or a family member
  - 26% cared for by a childminder or a nanny
  - 17% cared for in a collective structure (“*crèche collective*”, day-care centre, “*crèche familiale*”, “*crèche parentale*”)
  - 3% cared for in both an individual and a collective structure

## Two approaches of childcare

- Pedagogic model of education and child-upbringing
  - Early education
  - Collective socialisation
  - Pedagogical concepts of education and qualified staff
- Domestic model of childcare

## Childcare arrangements vary according to:

- Parents' level of income
- Parents hours of work
- Location of home: rural/urban; Paris/ other cities
- Parents who cumulate asocial hours of work with low income and living in rural area often have no other solution than withdrawing from the labour market (with or without parental leave and parental care allowance) or relying on informal care.

## The reform of childcare benefits

- Objective: simplify the childcare benefits system and give more choice to parents between working or caring
- One package combining several childcare allowances whatever the type of care by a parent or a paid carer

## Childcare work: segmentation of occupations

- 95% of childcare workers: female
- Two contrasted groups of workers:
  - In collective services : medium -and high-level qualifications; public diplomas; hierarchy of occupations: “*puéricultrices*” (nurses with a training in childcare), educators of young children, nurse assistant, ...)
  - At home : no diploma required
    - Childminders : obligation of pre-contact training
    - Nannies and baby sitters: not considered as childcare occupations but rather as domestic occupations.

## Duality of occupations and qualifications

- Reflects two approaches of childcare
- Work in collective structures is precisely defined and referred to pedagogical concepts
- Childminders employment and working conditions depend on local conditions:
  - wages dependant upon demand for childcare
  - working hours sometimes very long

## Reform of the childminders' status

- The profession of childminder was first regulated by law in 1977:
  - the “*nourrices*” became “*assistantes maternelles*” thereby obtaining professional status
  - They had to be approved by local authorities and provided with short pre-contact training
  - Their wages were fixed according to the number of days of care, and subjected to a minimum.
  - The number of children they were allowed to care for was restricted.

## Aims of the 2004 reform :

- Revising the legal status of childminders
- Improving the quality of this form of childcare
- Improving working conditions of childminders in order to make their work more “professional” and more attractive.
- Developing individual childcare that is cheaper than collective childcare for public sector budget, and more in line with ideology and values of the government.

### III- Impact of the flexibilisation of working time on childcare

- Working time reduction : end of a story
- Increase in parents' demand for more flexible childcare services
  - professional reasons: development of non standard hours of work, evening, week-ends ..
  - family reasons: more lone parents
- Parents' preferences for childminders
  - despite preference for collective childcare (better for the child)
  - Many parents find time schedules of collective childcare too rigid

### Innovations in childcare

- Family policy supports innovation in childcare services to respond to parents' demand for flexibility
  - By encouraging individualised forms of childcare (by lowering the costs of childminders for low and medium income families-Paje-)
  - By inciting companies to invest in childcare (through tax credits)
  - By extending family policy financial contributions to innovative childcare services

## Innovation is:

- In childcare policy governance at local level: development of new partnerships between family policy institutions, local authorities and companies or civil society (“childhood contracts”)
- In diversification of childcare provisions better adapted to the diversification of the demand (extended hours of care; social needs for emergency care; social inclusion of children..)
- In organisation of childcare at local level: better coordination between different childcare services

## Conclusion

- Is there a paradigm shift in France?
  - The redesign of program for childcare support: back to the family responsibility?
  - The encouragement to individual childcare services : response to employment strategy but implications on the approach of childcare
  - Changes in the working time regime and implications on gender equality and on fathering