

EPIC- July 1st proposal

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Women in Work and in the Family: Gender and reconciliation practices in South Europe, 1965-1995

Background of the research: conceptualising gender in current family and employment patterns

This project offers a comparative view of the recent changes in women's roles within the family and in the work in three south European countries, Greece, Spain and Italy. As a starting point the project considers the different trends followed by southern countries in changing family models and female labour market participation. Since 1965, a reduction in the fertility rate and an increase in the divorce rate has taken place in most European countries, at the same time women entered the labour market with a varying intensity and timing across Europe. Further investigation of these issues is important for two reasons. Since the start of the Second Demographic Transition, Mediterranean countries have shown a number of interesting singularities, suggesting the existence of a 'Mediterranean model' as a different pattern from those observed elsewhere in Europe. Within its characteristics there were two basic fronts where demographic and family situation in the South looked different: fertility decline and women's participation in paid employment. While there was a late but sharp decline in fertility levels in the three countries, participation of women in paid employment remains the lowest in Europe.

Such different behaviour from the rest of European countries however, has been explained little or it has been usually attributed to reasons of general welfare state and institutional frames which, although important, may obscure alternative explanations of gender model representations, variety in the ways women find to reconcile family and work and the different approach to new female roles by the different birth cohorts.

The research will try to answer to why the southern behaviour differs from other European patterns by looking into the ways that the 'two-roles' model fits in southern women's lives. It is expected that differences in terms of reconciliation strategies between three supposedly similar family and employment participation patterns will show why gender oriented employment and family policies are of great importance for female participation in the labour market in modernising societies.

Theoretical approaches and model

□ Family and paid work responsibilities are two important elements in women's lives not always easy to reconcile. Main constraining factors both in terms of more 'traditional' family practices as well as in terms of institutional and labour market structures in these countries are taken into account in order to create an initial comparative frame for southern women's different behaviour. However, the research will try to further illustrate the 'two-roles' model in terms of three gender cultural dimensions:

- the way dependencies between women and men are constructed (autonomy versus one-side/mutual dependency),
- the cultural construction of the relationship between generations
- the main social sphere for caring (in modern western societies: family, state, market and intermediary sector)

The relationship between the recent fertility and participation trends will be established by showing at least some of the possible combinations of the above variables that form different 'gender cultural models'. I define the gender culture as those norms and values that refer to the desirable, 'normal' forms of gender relations and of the division of labour between women and men (Pfau-Effinger, 1999)

□ Recent literature has pointed to the need for more historical studies on the south European context on female participation in paid work and its relationship to different gender orders (J.Rubery, 1999). It is expected that the study will develop some issues of relevance of policy and theoretical interest. Firstly, the changing roles of women within the family have a direct impact on the ways motherhood is being exercised and women in everyday life are orientated towards models of motherhood that are not necessarily the same as those reflected in state policies. On the other hand most theories of female participation in the labour market tend

to ignore the large amount of gender biased practices within the different workplaces in which women are found. As a result, the existing explanations offer a restricted number of applications both in terms of policy responses to family needs, as well as for theoretical developments on the role of gender in labour market participation.

- The expected reconciliation strategies will reflect at least three ways dealing with working and family life through gender culture norms like those described above:

1. Simultaneity of life events: women are found to construct life plans in the basis of maximising both their capacities for working as well as their wishes to have a family. This is the way in which shifts from one situation to the other are rapid and dynamic.

2. Consecutive life steps: women are found either on work or family depending on the life course moment. Most of the times this reconciliation strategy maximises the quality offer to work or the family but reflects also stronger gender perceptions on the way the family responsibilities are dealt at the same time a shift from one

3. Mono-lifestyle approach: women would be either found in the family OR in the work and maximisation of their activity towards one end comes as a natural consequence of their general life plan. No shifts are present.

All these three hypothetical models are subject to further analysis of the different gender perceptions attached to the life plans described above but also to the distinction between mothers and non-mothers, which is expected to be more important.

Comparative case study and research on gender

- Within the above levels of explanation many casual relationships could exist. The project's alternative solution is to consider the above dimensions of cultural gender models as prescribed patterns of behaviour and life plans related to the different social roles and relations within gender relations in the family. For that, the research will focus to the ways in which life plans are constructed by using the case comparison research design.
- Both qualitative and quantitative data are used in the research. Quantitative data are required for descriptive statistics, used to illustrate both major demographic

events, as well as for the labour participation of at least three birth cohorts. On the other hand, qualitative data are thought to offer a more concise picture of the processes undergoing women's working and family lives. Rather than using the 'sampling' logic, a 'replication' one will be used by incorporating a number of biographical interviews of working women. Biographical interviews are incorporated into the research design as part of a strategy for linking the meso and the micro levels of investigation, as well as in recognition of the fact that as far as women are concerned, it was essential to examine employment and family patterns over the life course, rather than in a synchronic fashion. Biographical interviews will be carried out with 60 working women, teachers and public administrators, in three countries: Greece, Spain and Italy. All women of the interviews will be aged between 30 and 60, fully qualified in their areas of work, married and with preference to the presence of children at home.

- The research will make use of the following sources:
 - Labour Force Survey (LFS)
 - Demographic series for major family related indicators
 - Family and Fertility Survey (Unece/FFS/project n.72-2000)

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