

**Research project: the rise in female employment and the process of welfare restructuring.  
Spain as a case of analysis.**

**1. Theory/model**

*Empirical question*

The aim of this research is to analyse the process of change and reform in two policy areas (active labour market policy and childcare policy) affected by a source of change: the rise in female employment. The **empirical question** to be researched is: how is the process of policy change developing in these two areas and, more specifically, how political variables (actors and institutions) influence the intensity and the direction of change.

*Political relevance: Explaining the politics of welfare restructuring*

The specific goal of analysing these two processes of policy change is inserted into a broader **political concern**: explaining the politics of welfare restructuring.

During the last years, welfare restructuring analysis has been mainly focused on either assessing the outcome (in terms of economic efficiency, social equity, etc..) or analysing the impact of exogenous factors on the process<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, very few studies have paid attention to the impact of endogenous (e.g. political) factors.

Studying the impact of political factors is relevant, then, because it contributes to the better understanding of the process of change. But it is also relevant for another reason. According to some authors, "in the context of policy research, political science and political sociology should contribute to the understanding and improvement of the conditions under which politics is able to produce effective and legitimate solutions to policy problems" (Scharpf:1997, p. 13<sup>2</sup>). Assuming this normative goal in the research, the inclusion of endogenous variables can be seen as the way to analyse the agency dimension of the process of change. Given certain structural conditions, what are the political conditions for producing more effective and equitable welfare restructuring outcomes?

*Theoretical relevance: what has been written on the question?*

There is an abundant literature on the role of political variables in explaining welfare state expansion. In contrast, as already mentioned, very few scholars have paid attention to the impact of political variables in the process of restructuring.

In studying the politics of expansion, two approaches have predominated; the resource mobilization approach (that stresses the role of the actors) and historical institutionalism (that emphasizes the role of institutions). During the 1990s, the shift to welfare typologies embedded the two approaches within a general causal model. Each cluster or category was then explained as the result of a particular interaction between actors and institutions. Historical legacy provided a backdrop to certain processes of working class mobilization and particular political class alliances, that led to different welfare designs.

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<sup>1</sup> An example of the first group of studies is Gosta Esping Andersen, *Social foundations in post-industrial economies*, Oxford University Press, 1998. An example of the second is Iversen and Cusak, *The causes of welfare expansion: deindustrialization or globalization*, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Fritz W. Scharpf, *Games Real Actors Play: Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research*, Westview Press, 1997.

In contrast, the political process has scarcely been explained in welfare restructuring. The predominant explanation is that the reform depends on strategic political choices, but that those choices are strongly dependent on the preexisting welfare regime structures (Esping Andersen:1998<sup>3</sup>).

The path dependency argument is enough to roughly explain 'macro-level' variations (e.g., among welfare regimes). But does not let us know how exactly it works, and more importantly, to what extent do the actors retain a significant degree of discretion in the process of restructuring. If there is an impact of the pre-existing welfare structures: is this a systemic impact, homogeneous across regions and sectors of intervention? How do pre-existing welfare structures constrain the range of future policy options? Do they affect the functioning and salience of institutions, or the balance of powers among actors? Or, rather, do they shape actors' or peoples' interests and preferences?

*Proposed alternative theoretical solution: welfare restructuring as a process of policy change*

Recent macrocomparative welfare research has tended to neglect the importance of the 'internal analysis' (e.g., the analysis of variations at the subsystem level). As several authors have pointed out (e.g., Janoski and Hicks:1994<sup>4</sup>) internal analysis is an important element in any macrocomparative research. Furthermore, it becomes essential when we want to study a new phenomenon and there is a need to either develop and construct new theories, or adjust the existing ones. This is the case for the study of the politics of welfare restructuring,

To try to answer these questions, my theoretical solution is to lower the analysis to the policy-making level. Only by doing this, will it be possible to construct new propositions about the way external constraints, actors and institutions interact in the process of welfare reform.

This strategy has been followed by some authors, such as Paul Pierson (1994, 1998) and Fiona Ross (2000)<sup>5</sup>. However, their analyses have been specially focused on countries that are included in the liberal welfare state regime (US and UK). In these countries, the process of restructuring has mainly consisted in a process of dismantling pre-existing welfare institutions. As a consequence, they have conceived the process of reform as a conflict between those wedded to the status quo and those eager to dismantle social programs.

This definition is, in my opinion, too narrow to explain all the different dynamics of welfare reform that are being undertaken. To improve the model, I propose to start by how welfare restructuring is defined at the 'macro' level: as a process of reordering contributions of the state, market and family in the provision of welfare. From this point of departure, it is possible to distinguish between two types of politics in welfare reform processes. The first type affects those areas of intervention where reform is mainly centered on the redefinition of the state/market relation. In these areas, the politics of restructuring has consisted, almost everywhere, in a process of dismantling, or transferring responsibilities from the state to the market. The second type affects those areas where reform is about redefining boundaries between state and families. In these areas, the politics of restructuring is much more complex. On the one hand, there is a trend towards the 're-familiarisation' of social

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<sup>3</sup> Esping Andersen, op.cit.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Janoski and Alexander M. Hicks, *The Comparative Political Economy of the Welfare State*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Pierson, Paul, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Retrenchment*, Cambridge University Press, 1994; "Irresistible forces, immovable objects: post-industrial welfare states confront permanent austerity", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 5:4, 1998. Fiona Ross, "Framing Welfare Reform in Affluent Societies: Rendering Restructuring More Palatable?", in *International Public Policy*, 20:3, 2000.

obligations (that is, transferring responsibilities from the state to families). But, on the other hand, there is also a pressure to 'de-familiarize', since changes in family and individual behavior are compelling states to assume new obligations in areas such as child and elderly care. How is this dual dimension of the 'family question debate' (Saraceno:1996<sup>6</sup>) interpreted in different political contexts, leading to distinct policy responses? This is the question to answer.

## 2. Methodology

This research is conceived as an in-depth analysis of a critical case study: Spain. To follow the research, I will combine two kinds of research design, multi-variate analysis and case-comparative analysis), taking as unit of analysis the region (*Comunidades Autónomas*).

### *Spain as critical case study*

Spain is an interesting case to study for the three following reasons. First of all, studying Spain through macro-comparative research obscures much of what is happening concerning the impact of female employment in labour market and social policies. The fact of having one of the lowest female participation rates (at the aggregate level) obscures the fact that, for young women, rates are almost identical to those in other European countries. Secondly, unlike in other European countries, in Spain this new phenomena is producing very few responses from the public sector. The in-depth study of the process can help us to understand the reasons of this no reaction. And thirdly, in Spain both the process of policy-making and the industrial relation system takes place at a regional or provincial level. It offers an opportunity to include comparative analysis in the study.

### *Methodology and research design*

The research takes the region (*Comunidades Autónomas*) as unit of analysis. It combines two types of research design.

The first will consist of a cross-regional quantitative analysis among all the 17 Spanish Autonomous Communities. In the **multi-variate analysis**, the dependent variable will attempt to measure, through both quantitative and qualitative indicators, the level of responsiveness of policy-making to the new needs and demands generated by female employment growth. The independent variables will include both exogenous and endogenous variables. The first type will comprise several indicators linked to factors exogenous to the political system that can affect the process of female employment growth and/or its consequences (such as the economic structure, the social structure or the cultural/ideological context). The second type will include measures of the characteristics and functioning of the regional political system (e.g., social and political actors, structure of the political institutions, political stability,..). This first multi-variate analysis will permit us to assess the effects of the endogenous variables in the process of welfare reform, by controlling the impact of exogenous factors. From this first study, we will be able to refine our hypotheses about the way external factors, actors and institutions interact to produce different outcomes.

The second part of the research will be aimed at testing these hypotheses, through a **case-comparative analysis** of a few number of regions. The study will be carried through field interviews and documentary analysis, and will be focused on the process change in two different areas of welfare intervention (both affected by female employment growth): childcare and active labor market policy.

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<sup>6</sup> Chiara Saraceno, "Family Change, Family Policies and The Reestructuring of Welfare", in *Family, Market and Community*, OECD, 1997.