

Reconciling Work and Family Life: Gendering The OECD's Social Policy Discourse

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The OECD plays an important role in identifying common problems and laying out a range of “best practice” solutions for its member states - and those who would join their “rich man’s club” ranks. This paper focuses on the “reconciliation of work and family life” agenda, which constitutes an important component of its “active social policy” package. On the one hand, the reconciliation agenda responds to an actual development in a number of member states – the replacement of the male breadwinner with the adult earner family – that has given rise to a set of new social needs (care for very young children and the frail elderly) previously met by caregiver-housewives. On the other hand, for other member states, reconciliation policies are seen necessary to encourage women’s labour force participation as a solution to other problems such as child poverty, demographic change (falling fertility rates, ageing populations), or even the need to “modernise” social security systems.

There are, however, different ways of reconciling work and family life (Mahon, 2006). What sort of perspective does the OECD - or, more specifically, the Social Policy Division of the Directorate on Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (DELSA) – offer? It is argued that in the social policy field, the OECD is no longer singing from the neo-liberal hymn book and this turn toward “inclusive liberalism” is certainly reflected in the analytical grid used in the Babies and Bosses series. The “gendering” in the title, however, is intended to capture the dimension of “policy learning” on the part of the DELSA staff. The series started with a focus on measures to reconcile the paid and unpaid work of women, typical of inclusive liberalism. By the end, however, it had begun to embrace elements of a more egalitarian model, one in which men and women share care work within the family. An important (though not exclusive) source of its learning occurred as a result of the team’s reflection on Sweden. While it held fast to its inclusive liberal principles, concluding that the “high tax, high spend” Swedish model was not exportable, the team did draw the lesson that effective reconciliation requires measures aimed at changing men’s roles as well as women’s.