

## FATHERS AND MOTHERS: DILEMMAS OF THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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# FATHERS AND MOTHERS: DILEMMAS OF THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE

*A Comparative Study in Four European Countries*

*by*

MARGRET FINE-DAVIS

*Centre for Gender and Women's Studies,  
Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland*

JEANNE FAGNANI

*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique,  
MATISSE, University of Paris-1, France*

DINO GIOVANNINI

*Department of Social, Cognitive and Quantitative Sciences,  
University of Modena & Reggio Emilia, Italy*

LIS HØJGAARD

*Institute of Political Science,  
University of Copenhagen, Denmark*

and

HILARY CLARKE

*Centre for Gender and Women's Studies,  
Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland*

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## PREFACE

At the risk of sounding frivolous, there is a good case to be made for the argument that women constitute the revolutionary force behind contemporary social and economic transformation. It is in large part the changing role of women that explains the new household structure, our altered demographic behaviour, the growth of the service economy and, as a consequence, the new dilemmas that the advanced societies face.

Most European countries have failed to adapt adequately to the novel challenges and the result is an increasingly serious disequilibrium. Women explicitly desire economic independence and the societal collective, too, needs to maximise female employment. And yet, this runs up against severe incompatibility problems that then result in very low birth rates. Our aging societies need more kids, yet fertility levels are often only half of what citizens define as their desired number of children. No matter what happens in the next decade, we are doomed to have exceedingly small cohorts that, in turn, must shoulder the massive burden of supporting a retired baby-boom generation. Hence it is tantamount that tomorrow's adults be maximally productive and, yet, the typical EU member state invests very little in its children and families.

Our politicians have come to recognize, more or less seriously, the need for a recast welfare state. Indeed, the new clarion call is for mother-friendly policies, usually defined as a basic package of maternity/parental leave plus access to day care. Some governments, like the Spanish, prefer that the package be delivered via tax-deductions – an approach that does little to help lower income families. Others, like the Dutch, attempt to persuade employers to furnish the package – a strategy that may run up against the hardening international competitive pressures that firms face. And, still others – Scandinavia *par excellence* favour public guarantees – putting their faith in the citizenry's willingness to pay taxes.

The great contribution of *Fathers and Mothers* is that it forces us to reconsider the merits of the basic mother-friendly policy package. This excellent cross-national study unambiguously shows that a truly workable and positive social equilibrium needs more than public support for mothers. It needs, somehow or other, to equalize the employment *and* caring roles of men and women alike. The conclusion I draw from this book is that policies that help reconcile women's dual role are, perhaps, necessary but they are not sufficient. To be also sufficient, we need policies that will make it more attractive and possible for men to dedicate themselves to their families.

The societal revolution that latter-day women are bringing about is mainly spurred by radical change in women's own life course behaviour. When one studies the life course behaviour of Europeans over the past 30-40 years, one is struck by an amazing asymmetry: beginning with educated women and eventually extending to most, we detect a clear masculinisation of female biographies. Women are converging with men in educational attainment, in participation rates and, especially, in life-long employment. The amazing thing is that women have done all the changing while men stubbornly cling to a life course model that closely resembles that of their fathers and grandfathers.

What *Fathers and Mothers* helps us realize is that no workable social equilibrium can materialise unless we somehow begin to also reconstruct the male life course. True, the data show that there are distinct national differences in the way men and women jointly distribute their energies, time, and responsibilities. As a Dane, I am of course happy to see that Danish men are somewhat more advanced along the 'feminisation' project than are their Italian, Irish or French brethren. But anything that would look like democratic sharing is nowhere to be seen. So the question we must ask ourselves is: what are the true obstacles to more equality between the sexes?

The empirical work that underpins *Fathers and Mothers* provides the reader with some valuable clues. The samples of citizens that the team of researchers study are quite small, but they opted for a design that is quite clever: interviewing people in both public and private sector jobs, and people from both high and low socio-economic status backgrounds. The need to improve upon productivity in the public sector will probably harden conditions for its workforce, but it is still evident that being employed in the 'soft economy' makes it far more easy for a parent to reconcile career and family. In contrast, there is little doubt that being employed in highly competitive, hard-economy firms implies levels of work and career commitment that leave less time and energy for children, cooking or cleaning. The huge public sector in Denmark is no doubt one reason why Danes appear somewhat more gender egalitarian. But only up to a point. Public sector employment is in large part a female ghetto, whereas Danish men tend to be highly concentrated in the hard economy. Why? Perhaps because of Denmark's gender equality policies. With only small gender wage differentials and a very generous package of mother-friendly policy, the median Danish employer will rationally discriminate against female candidates, simply because it is statistically highly probable that the woman will take full advantage of the opportunities for leave and absenteeism that are offered to her. The paradox here is that policies aimed to strengthen women's capabilities may, inadvertently, reproduce gender segregation in the labour market.

We should, of course, be careful not to place the entire blame on 'structure'. As Katherine Hakim and others have taught us, contemporary women remain exceedingly heterogeneous with regard to their life preferences. The full-blown career woman remains a fairly small minority. And, no doubt, a substantial

proportion remain principally dedicated to motherhood and, hence, select educational and employment trajectories that are inherently mother friendly. We also know that marital homogamy remains as powerful as always, meaning that pressure on the male partner to share household and caring work will depend very much on the female partner's preference set. Much of the variation that *Fathers and Mothers* identifies among couples – and between nations – may be explained by factors related to working life or welfare state programs. But I think it is a safe guess that much of the variation is also caused by differences in preferences and how these, in turn, shape the bargaining process that unfolds between mothers and fathers.

Existing obstacles to equal sharing may be formidable and preferences are surely deeply rooted in our cultures. The good news that emanates from this book is that neither one or the other is immune to change. Fathers and mothers in Denmark fare substantially better than in other countries, in part because the welfare state diminished incompatibilities and, I believe, also because there are stronger incentives for men to embrace a more feminine life course. In Denmark – and even more in Sweden – a growing proportion of fathers now interrupt their careers in order to dedicate more time to their family. The best news on this front is that the duration of these interruptions is increasing.

Existing dilemmas of the work-life balance will clearly not evaporate soon, probably not during my life-time. Indeed, when we consider the current status of the policy debate across the European Union, there is clearly a very long way to go. But we can accelerate good policy making and this is what this important book should help accomplish. A far greater equality between the sexes in the family-work nexus is now, more than ever before, a precondition for the welfare of individual citizens and, simultaneously, also for the collective good.

Gosta Esping-Andersen

Barcelona, 15th September 2003.

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In France, Jeanne Galinié, Research Assistant to Dr. Jeanne Fagnani, assisted in the French literature review and data collection.

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In Denmark, Malou Juelskjaer collaborated with Prof. Lis Hojgaard in carrying out the Danish literature review and data collection, and she organised the Danish Interviews. Maria Dohlmann, Gitte Henchel Madsen, Aviaja Sigsgaard, Karen Steller Bjerregaard and Christina Fauerby conducted the Danish interviews.

In Ireland, Mr. James Williams, Head of the Survey Unit, Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, was responsible for carrying out the analysis of the four-country data; he was assisted by Ann-Marie McCafferty. Mary McCarthy collaborated with the authors in conducting the Irish interviews. Megan Berry organised the Conference, "Fathers and Mothers: Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance", held at Trinity College in June 2002 at which the preliminary findings of the study were presented; Nicola Connolly contributed to the drafting of tables. Keeley Wynne and Mairead O'Sullivan provided research assistance in the final stages, including responsibility for the painstaking tasks of editing, design, layout and preparation of the manuscript for publication.

The contributions of all of these people were invaluable to the study itself and to the final outcome of this book.

Finally, the authors wish to express their very great thanks to all the individual respondents for their essential contribution to the research, as well as to the many organisations and individuals in all of the countries who participated in the study.



## NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

### DR. MARGRET FINE-DAVIS

Dr. Margret Fine-Davis is Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies, Trinity College, Dublin, and was Director of the cross-cultural project, "Fathers and Mothers: Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance." She was a founder member of the Centre for Women's Studies at Trinity and was its first Acting Director.

Dr. Fine-Davis is a social psychologist with primary research interests in changing gender-role attitudes, social psychological aspects of women's employment, and social indicators. She has conducted numerous studies in these areas, both in Ireland and using cross-national European data, including a time-series analysis published by the Joint Oireachtas (Parliamentary) Committee on Women's Rights, which demonstrated that gender role attitudes in Ireland had shifted significantly during a period of rapid legislative and social change. Her research has also focused on the issue of childcare and its centrality to equal employment opportunities. She was a member of the Irish Government Working Party on Child Care Facilities for Working Parents, which reported to the Government in 1983. She also represented Ireland on Eurostat's Working Party on Subjective Social Indicators, which carried out one of the first series of harmonised surveys in this field. She is currently directing the Work-Life Balance Project, under the EU EQUAL Initiative, which is studying attitudes to work-life balance of the Irish population and experimenting with innovative pilot schemes in the area of flexible working for parents and other groups.

She is a member of the International Editorial Board of the *European Journal of Women's Studies* and was formerly a member of the Editorial Board of the journal, *Social Indicators Research*.

### DR. JEANNE FAGNANI

Dr. Jeanne Fagnani is Research Director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, MATISSE, University of Paris-1, and was the French partner of the cross-cultural project, "Fathers and Mothers: Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance." Dr. Fagnani frequently organises or takes part in seminars and workshops on European welfare systems. From 1990 to 1994, she was the person responsible for the research programme funded by the Caisse Nationale d'Allocations Familiales –

CNAF (the National Family Allowance Fund). As an Expert Member of the "European Observatory on National Family Policies" (1994-1997), she had, among other things, to analyse systems of transfers (income tax and family benefits) as far as families were concerned. She has conducted many comparative research projects, funded by the European Commission, in collaboration with European colleagues. In these projects she has investigated, in particular, the interactions between family policy, female employment and labour markets. She has recently made a comparative analysis of family policies in Germany and France and highlighted their impact on their respective fertility level and mothers' employment patterns. She also recently conducted, in collaboration with M. T. Letablier, a study of the impact of the 35-hour work law on the strategies elaborated by young working parents. She is currently the French partner of the European team "Transitions," which is conducting cross-national comparative research funded by the European Commission on the demographic patterns and professional behaviour of people aged 25-39.

#### PROF. DINO GIOVANNINI

Dino Giovannini is Professor of Social Psychology, Department of Social, Cognitive and Quantitative Sciences, Faculty of Communication Science at the University of Modena & Reggio Emilia (Italy), and was the Italian partner of the cross-cultural project, "Fathers and Mothers: Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance". Within Social psychology he primarily has focused on the following research areas: social interaction and communication; communicative competence and techniques of communication; emotional involvement; social comparison, social identity, intergroup and interethnic relations; involvement of fathers in children's care and dilemmas of reconciliation between family and work in the parental couple.

During the period 1992-1994 he was the Director of a large research study on "Fathers, mothers and sharing of responsibilities in caring for children" that was funded by the 'Emilia-Romagna' Region. Subsequently, Professor Giovannini continued to conduct research on the various aspects of parental couples' labour, with particular reference to the reciprocal representations of husbands-wives/fathers-mothers regarding childcare, housework, and outside work.

He was the first President of the Executive Committee of the Italian Society of Psychology - Social Psychology Section (1996-99), as well as a member of the Executive Committee in the same Section from January 1999 to December 2001. He was President of the School for Social Workers at the University of Trento (1994-97). He is currently a member of the Committee Course for Primary School Teachers, University of Modena & Reggio Emilia.

## PROF. LIS HØJGAARD

Lis Højgaard is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, and was the Danish partner of the cross-cultural project, "Fathers and Mothers: Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance" Prof. Højgaard's major areas of research include research into Gender and Organizational Culture, where she conducts empirical research on workplace culture and gender differentiation, in terms of leadership positions in politics, business and among civil servants and analysis of the gendering of higher education and research. She has also done a study on workplace culture and the gender gap in wages in the private sector and researched the reconciliation of work and family in a number of Danish companies. She is currently the Director of a 5-year research project, "Gender in the Academic Organization," financed by the Danish Research Councils, which is an analysis of gender differences in the scientific community in Denmark. Her own sub-project is an analysis of gender construction in scientific knowledge production.

She has been a member of The Danish National Social Science Research Council since 1998 and on the Board of the Council from 2001. She is Head of the Board of the Danish Academy for Research on Migration (AMID).

## HILARY CLARKE

Hilary Clarke was formerly Research Officer in the Research Unit, Centre for Gender and Women's Studies, Trinity College, and part of the Irish research team on the project, "Fathers and Mothers: Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance." She read Psychology and Philosophy at the University of Leeds, and holds a Masters degree in Women's Studies from Trinity College, Dublin, where her thesis was, "A Comparison of Irish and Swedish Girls' Attitudes towards Men and Women's Work and Family Roles". Ms. Clarke was co-author of the Final Report, "Fathers and Mothers: Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance" to the European Commission and the Irish Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and also co-authored the *Conference Proceedings* relating to the study.

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