

## Fertility and Family Policies in France

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In recent years, France has maintained a relatively high level of fertility in comparison with other European countries. After declining for more than thirty years, the total fertility rate has risen over the last five years, reaching 1.89 in 2000 and 1.90 in 2001. France now has the highest fertility rate among EU countries, the same as that in Ireland, higher than the total fertility rate of Luxembourg (1.78), Finland (1.73) and the Netherlands (1.72). The lowest levels are to be found in Spain, Italy, Greece, Austria, and Germany (respectively, 1.22, 1.25, 1.30, 1.32, and 1.34), significantly lower than the average of all 15 countries of the European Union (1.57). Taking into account the overall fertility rate for the generations born in Europe in 1950 and 1963, France is in second place behind Ireland (*Source: Eurostat, statistiques démographiques*).

How can the position of France be explained within the European context?

I formulate the hypothesis that the level of fertility in France is related to state support for families: namely, that family policy helps to alleviate the direct and indirect costs of children for families. But this is not family policy's only contribution to fertility levels. It also helps to change the gender contract and the gender division of work by facilitating the reconciliation between work and family life. Moreover, family policies are conducive to maintaining family values by creating an environment favourable for children. This is made possible by the legitimacy given to the State to intervene in family matters, and hence the family has been a public policy issue for many years. In effect, France has a system of explicit and institutionalised family policy that implies legal recognition of the family as a social institution playing a major part in the maintenance of social cohesion.

In this paper, the focus is on family policy in France and the way in which it has been restructured over the past decade. Emphasis will be placed on policy support for families and childcare as an explanation for the "fertility paradox", that is, the combination of a "not so bad" fertility rate compared to other European countries, with a high level of economic activity for mothers.

### **1- Historical Background: Family Policy in France**

Family policy in France was institutionalised in 1938 with the introduction of the Family Code. It then became an independent component of public policy in the years following the Second World War. From the beginning of the twentieth century, employers had added specific allowances to salaries in the aim of improving their workers' family life. At the same time, several laws were introduced to protect mothers and children. Motherhood was considered worthy of attention from the state for demographic reasons: that is, to increase the population, mainly for military purposes. Maternity leave was introduced at

the beginning of the 20th century as a social right for working mothers in the public sector and then progressively in several industrial branches (Battagliola, 2000).

### **The Institutionalisation of Family Policy: Demographic Objectives and Solidarity**

Up to the 1960s, French family policy was still influenced by the pro-natalist concerns of the interwar period and explicitly supported the traditional "male breadwinner model"; single-earner families were provided with a "Single Salary Allowance" or a "Housewife's Allowance" (Martin, 1998; Fagnani, 2000a). The aim of this scheme was to confine women to the role of full-time mother and housewife: it was assumed that this would improve the welfare of young children and increase the fertility rate. As a result, the participation of mothers in the labour force remained very low until the mid-1960s.

Family policy took its inspiration from pro-natalist ideas that focused on large families and young children. In line with this concept, family allowances are not given to the first child as this is not considered efficient from a demographic point of view, but after the second child. In addition, the amount of family allowances increase with the number of children in order to encourage large families. In general, large families were highly valued by society. Mothers of numerous children were rewarded for being "good citizens" by giving children to the Nation. The notion of "The Family" was linked to civic values, and motherhood to good citizenship (Knibielher, 1997). Housewives and children were entitled to social rights as dependants of the male breadwinner. The tax system was revised in order to take account of dependent members of the family.

Family policy was also based on the idea that children were a collective investment, and hence that the State had to share the responsibility for, and the costs of, childcare. This is considered to be part of the intergenerational contract: later, children will work and thus pay for the pensions of the elderly. So, the family is not seen as the sole means of support for children, for collective benefits are to be expected in the future. When family policy was institutionalised in the after war period, solidarity was conceptualised mainly as "horizontal" solidarity, *i.e.* between families with children and families without children. The focus was on the costs of children.

### **State Support for Working Mothers and the Development of Childcare Facilities: the 1980s**

From the 1970s onwards, however, dramatic changes were introduced to family policy in order to adapt to the changes in family structures, and to the increase in working mothers. The level of the "Single Salary Allowance" was progressively reduced and restricted to low-income families, and completely abolished by 1978. Faced with an acute labour shortage and a growing demand for qualified women to occupy jobs in the tertiary sector (education, health, social services, administration, and banking), the French government began to set up community-funded day care centres in an attempt to attract women into

the work force (Norvez, 1990). At the same time, this rise in the participation of married women in the labour force stimulated a demand by couples for the expansion of public day care facilities and other social services. The demand was actively supported by both the women's movement, which strongly emphasised issues of equality in the labour market, and by the main trade unions. These factors gave a strong impetus to changes in family policy, which then began to incorporate the model of the "working mother". The transfer of a growing proportion of unpaid private care-giving responsibility to paid public provision progressively took place. At the beginning of the 1980s, in particular, under Socialist governments, funding allocated by both local authorities and the National Family Allowance Fund (*Caisse nationale des allocations familiales, CNAF*) for the construction of day care centres (*crèches and garderies*) was substantially increased. This coincided with, and allowed for, the entry of many mothers with young children into the paid labour force.<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1980s, the number of childcare places in *crèches* has increased regularly –by 6,400 places on average per year from 1981 to 1996 – to reach a total of 201,000 in 1999<sup>2</sup> (*crèches collectives*<sup>3</sup> and *crèches familiales*<sup>4</sup>). In 2002, roughly 9% of children under the age of three were cared for in public collective day care ("*crèches*"). Others were cared for either by mothers (48%) or by registered childminders or home helps (18%). The remainder (roughly 25%) either attended pre-school facilities or were cared for by a relative or neighbour or by a non-registered childminder.

State intervention in childcare is still linked to the concept of the state as a protector of childhood and a guarantor of equal opportunities for children. This concept of childhood and the rearing of children is rooted in the principles of the Third Republic (Rollet-Echallier, 1990). Children are seen as part of the nation; they are a "common good" and the wealth of the nation, which, in return, has obligations towards them. Therefore, childcare came to be considered as a state responsibility and a public issue, and has progressively become an important area of family policy. This is viewed in terms of state support for families to help them cover their childcare expenses and reconcile their family and working lives.

In the 1980s, family policy was characterised by neutrality with respect

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<sup>1</sup> The labour force participation rate of women aged 25 to 49 living with a partner, with one child aged 16 or under, increased from 42.5% in 1962 to 70.0% in 1982 and to 79.7% in 1990. For women with two children, these rates were 26.1%, 59.4% and 74.5% respectively (Recensements de la population, INSEE).

<sup>2</sup> In addition, '*halte-garderies*' (68,000 places at the end of 1999) take children occasionally, or for few hours every day. They were set up to provide supplementary childcare.

<sup>3</sup> *Crèches collectives* are publicly subsidised day care centres where children under three years old are cared for by trained staff. They are supervised by the *Protection maternelle et infantile*, a statutory service responsible for the health care of children under six years old, and with supervisory responsibility for all public and private child care provision.

<sup>4</sup> *Crèches familiales* organise childcare by registered childminders who are paid by the local authority and monitored by qualified state child care personnel.

to family structures, and to a woman's decision to work outside the home or to be a full-time mother. The political rhetoric was "freedom of choice". Pro-natalist objectives became less and less explicit.

Whilst new benefits were introduced to respond to the demand for childcare, new allowances, all means-tested, were also introduced to account for rising poverty and social exclusion among families. As a result the benefit system has become more complex and State action less coherent. Moreover, family policy has become increasingly linked to social and employment policy.

### **Towards a "Family/Social" Policy: 1997-2002**

In 1997 the new government announced a "new family policy", inspired by notions of social justice and gender equality (Büttner et al., 2002). "Freedom of choice" was no longer part of family policy rhetoric, as overall European policy recommended an increase in employment rates in every country. Hence, mothers were encouraged to work and to stay in employment. Childcare support became a priority on the political agenda. Emphasis was placed not only on the indirect cost of having children, but also on values: norms of education for children and early socialisation, values attached to paid work and to family life and gender equality. In France the concept of early and collective socialisation of children is well received. Public opinion still supports the notion of public services as evidence of state responsibility in education, health, and the well-being of children. Moreover, consideration of the work-life balance by different policy sectors represents an attempt to alter current values in order to construct a more "children-friendly" and less work-oriented environment for both men and women.

The objectives underlying State support for families have thus changed: social objectives have been introduced where unemployment and poverty have increased. As a result an increasing number of benefits are means-tested and paid to low and medium-income families. Redistribution has become more vertical, between high and low income households. The pro-natalist objective is still present in the pattern of benefits but is less explicit than in the past. There is a consensus between public opinion and the political arena on the part played by childcare provision and facilities on the decision of couples to have more children. An increase in the fertility rate is expected to result from state support for childcare and from "good" quality provision. The government bases its objectives on opinion surveys, which all converge on the ideal number of children that individuals declare they would like, a number always higher than the number of children they actually have. Access to childcare facilities is the argument given for the limiting the number of children. Consequently, the government emphasises childcare and the work-life balance, with the hoped-for impact on the fertility rate.

### **2- The "Cost" of Children: State Support for Families**

Family benefits form a complex system due to their increasing number, their varied objectives and the differences in entitlement. Family benefits may be in cash or in kind. There are no less than thirty allowances aimed at supporting

families, reinforcing the complexity of the system.

- **Family allowances** (*allocations familiales*) are the pillar of the system of allowances. They are paid to families to partially compensate for the cost of having children. They are paid to families with at least two children, up to age of 16 (the limit of compulsory schooling). They can be paid for children aged from 16 to 20 when they continue to attend school or university or are on training schemes. The allowances are set annually, and rise in relation to the number of children. In 1997, the government attempted to means-test family allowances. This decision gave rise to strong protests from families, trade unions, and family associations, and also from the political right wing, which is strongly attached to the notion of the universality of benefits. As a result, the Prime Minister abandoned the project and proposed to limit tax deductions for high-income families. The objective underlying this decision was to introduce more social equality in family benefits and to stress vertical rather than horizontal redistribution. Furthermore, in addition to normal family allowances, specific allowances were aimed at compensating for the cost of children with handicaps, and for children living in lone parent families. An allowance is also paid to families each year to compensate for the costs pertaining to the new school year. These specific allowances are means-tested.
- **Children in poor families:** Two public transfer payments are aimed at supporting the most needy families: the RMI (*Revenu minimum d'insertion*) and the API (*Allocation de parent isolé*). The RMI is a minimum income, a welfare supplement paid to lower-income families. RMI recipients are required to follow a training scheme or to take a job if offered one. The API is a lone-parent allowance introduced in 1976 to guarantee lone parents a minimum monthly income. The API is a means-tested allowance paid for one year, and is renewable until the child is three years old.
- **Housing allowances** have an important place in state support for families. Housing allowances have been restructured several times.
- **Childcare allowances** are paid to families to increase the compatibility between work and family life. They affect families with children under three years old, and were introduced in the package of family measures in the 1980s. A parental leave allowance (APE) is paid to compensate for loss of income during parental leave. This is not a replacement wage, as in Sweden and Nordic countries, but a fixed-rate allowance paid until the child is three years old which may be paid to either the mother or the father. In fact very few fathers are in receipt of it. Two other allowances, the AGED (*allocation de garde d'enfant à domicile*) and AFEAMA (*aide aux familles pour l'emploi d'une assistante maternelle agréée*) were also introduced in the 1980s to alleviate the cost of childcare when parents employ a childminder or a nanny in their home.

The above are, then, the principal family allowances that aim to compensate families for the cost of having children. The system of family benefits is becoming highly complex as new allowances have been introduced and the entitlement conditions are increasingly diverse. When a large number of

allowances are means-tested, family policy loses its autonomy as a policy sector and becomes more or less part of social policy (Commaille and Martin, 1998). But family policy cannot simply be reduced to a system of allowances: not only does the actual cost of having children matter, but also the time dedicated to childcare should be taken into account. And, the right to care is recognised in Labour law.

### **3- Caring Rights of Families**

The French welfare state can be described as family-friendly in the sense that the rights of families to care for their members are recognised and supported. This acknowledges that care is both a state and a family responsibility (Hantrais et Letablier, 1996). Policy-makers have accepted this responsibility on the part of the state. The right of families to provide care for children and relatives has thus been written into labour regulations and the tax and social security systems.

#### **Caring Rights in Labour Law**

The majority of the rights relating to care which have been incorporated into the Labour Code concern the time off work allowed to employees when they are parents or when they have to care for a disabled person or elderly relative. Hence, maternity leave, paternity leave, and leave to care for a sick child can be seen as a fundamental right of families to care for their relatives.

- **Maternity leave:** Every pregnant working woman is entitled to sixteen weeks' maternity leave (six before the expected date of delivery and ten after). This can be extended to 26 weeks in the case of the birth of a third child, of multiple births, of health problems due to pregnancy (two additional weeks before the delivery and four weeks after), or where there are health problems in the new-born child. Redundancy during maternity leave is strictly forbidden. In addition, employees cannot be fired during the four weeks following the leave and return to work after the completion of maternity leave is also guaranteed. Maternity leave is financed by the health insurance system, so women employees receive their earnings while on leave.
- **Paternity leave:** Since January 2002, fathers have been eligible for two weeks' paid leave following the birth of a child<sup>5</sup>. Leave is paid for by social security as a replacement wage<sup>6</sup>. This right to care is written into the Labour Code, as is maternity leave.
- **Parental leave:** After maternity leave or adoption, parents have the right to

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<sup>5</sup> Fathers already had the right to take three days off work after the birth of a child. These three days are paid for by the employer. Paternity leave adds eleven days to the three days covered by health insurance.

<sup>6</sup> The arrangements for payment for paternity leave differ in the public and private sectors. Employees in the public sector receive 100% of their former salary, while employees in the private sector receive less because an upper limit is set. In some cases, employers can add a supplement for employees who lose part of their income. The problem where this system is concerned is that fathers with the highest earnings do not take leave. Such differences between the public and private sectors are common in France.

take parental leave, or to work part-time (not less than sixteen hours per week) if they have been working for the same employer for at least one year. This parental leave is linked to employment rights. It is not paid. However, parents may apply for a parental leave allowance, which can be granted under specific conditions related to previous employment and the number of children. The duration of parental leave is one year but this may be extended twice until the child is three years old. One more year can be granted in the case of illness or disability (Fagnani, 2000b).

- **Leave to care for a sick child:** Every employee has the right to take unpaid leave to care for his/her sick child under the age of sixteen. Legally, periods of leave may not exceed three days (or five days in specific cases), but this is a minimum and, in fact, most collective agreements have special arrangements. In the public sector, employees are allowed to take up to fourteen days a year off to care for a sick child.
- **Parental leave to care for a child with a serious illness** (*congé de présence parentale en cas de maladie grave de l'enfant*): In cases of serious disability or illness of a child under sixteen, every employee with at least one year's employment with the same employer is entitled to paid leave to care for her/his child, or to work part-time. The level of the allowance depends on the period worked for the employer and on the family structure. A similar period of leave is allowed to employees who have to care for a relative at the end of their life, a child or relative living in the same house or apartment (*congé d'accompagnement d'une personne en fin de vie*).

### **Caring Rights in Pension Schemes**

Pension schemes use different methods of accounting for caring duties. In the past only women were in receipt of these family benefits, but a decision by the European Court of Justice in response to a claim from a French widowed civil servant who had raised his children recognised that these rights must accrue to any person who has spent time caring (Lanquetin et al., 2002). The rules are currently being reviewed in order to take into account this decision of the European Court of Justice. Family benefits can now no longer be derived simply from motherhood, but are to be recognition of all caring duties.

Whatever the reasons for these rights, they are to be found in all pension schemes and represent a considerable amount of money. Six different ways of taking caring rights into account can be distinguished according to their objectives or their impact: early retirement for mothers without any reduction in their pension; an increase in the level of mothers' pensions related to staying at home to care for children; an increase in the pension of the breadwinner according to the number of dependent persons (non-working wife and children); an increase in the pensions of both parents as a reward for their care work; ensuring a particular standard of living for widows, especially for women without personal social insurance; and ensuring a minimum income for retired people.

## **Tax Schemes for Expenditure on Children**

Tax schemes for married couples (*quotient conjugal*) and for families (*quotient familial*) is a feature of the tax system in France. Both schemes allow a progressive reduction in taxable income according to a unit scheme that allocates units according to family size and composition. Each parent is allocated one unit and each children a half-unit. In lone-parent families, the first child is allocated one full unit, the others a half-unit. Families with three or more children are given an additional half-unit. The total income is divided by the number of units. The objective of the system is to relieve the financial burden on families, in particular large and lone-parent families.

The existence of family allowances in addition to this recognition of the right to care for families explains why the French State is qualified as a "family-friendly" welfare state. However, state support for families is not only in cash, but is also in kind, particularly with regard to childcare facilities.

## **4- Childcare Policy**

The historical background has explained why childcare has been a major item on the political agenda for France. A broad consensus is still found among social and economic actors as to the responsibility of the state towards children, and towards social care in general. Some commentators advocate a general public childcare service, but this concept is not on the political agenda, and the development of collective childcare facilities was not in the programme of the government that came to power in 2002.

State responsibility towards childcare takes different forms. Not only family policy but also employment policies have played a part in childcare provision since the 1980s when unemployment was a major preoccupation for the government (Fagnani, 1998a). The wide diversity of state support can be explained by the combination of these two policy areas. The result is a wide variety of care arrangements.

## **Crèches and Nursery Schools**

Since the early 1980s, the number of childcare places in collective public day care centres (*crèches*) has increased constantly. The CNAF through the Family Allowance Funds (*Caisses d'allocations familiales, CAF*) contributes to the development and running costs of *crèches*, through *contrats-enfance* which are designed both to help and encourage local authorities to construct and finance some of the running costs of these facilities. However, since 1994 the increase in funds allocated to *crèches* appears limited when compared to the much higher funding allocated to childcare carried out by individuals (childminders or nannies at home) or to the parental leave allowance (APE).

In 2000 and once again in 2001, against the background of a growing demand for childcare provision and under pressure from the women's movement and some family associations, the Ministry of Family Affairs decided to increase substantially the number of places in *crèches*: a budget of 228 million euros was devoted to public childcare facilities.

France is also strongly committed to almost universal enrolment of



children under the age of six<sup>7</sup> in nursery schools (*écoles maternelles*) which are run by the Ministry of Education. Open for 35 hours a week, nursery schools are routinely closed on Wednesdays, but are supplemented by a half-day session on Saturdays. All of these schools have canteen facilities. By the age of two, 36% (260,000 children) attend nursery school, and the figure is nearly 99% for children aged three to six. Nursery schools are free of charge, but parents have to pay for lunches and for care out of school hours which is usually organised by local authorities and subsidised by family policy funding. Parents pay according to their income. Activities subsidised by this funding are also provided for older children after school hours, on Wednesdays, and during holidays.

### **The Development of Individualised and Subsidised Childcare Arrangements**

In 1994, the government decided to increase childcare allowances and to give tax concessions to help families meet the costs of individualised childcare arrangements, such as registered childminders or nannies in the child's home. This was seen as a way of exploiting the job-creating potential of the childcare sector in order to fight unemployment and to meet the demand for flexible childcare arrangements (Fagnani, 1998b).

This policy took different forms:

The "*Allowance for Childcare in the Home*" (*allocation de garde d'enfant à domicile*, AGED): Families are eligible if both parents (or the lone parent) are economically active. The employee cannot be paid less than the official minimum wage. This allowance currently covers part of the social security contributions that must be paid by a family for a person employed in their home to care for their child or children. The allowance is income-related and varies according to the age of the youngest child (up to the age of six). As is the case for households that make use of a "service-employment-voucher" (*chèque-emploi-service*) to employ a family carer, a home help, or a cleaner, recipients of the AGED can deduct 50% of the actual cost of care from their income tax, up to a specified limit. Not surprisingly, upper-middle-income and high-income families represent the majority of recipients as only those with a level of income high enough to be taxed can benefit from tax deductions, and this childcare arrangement, irrespective of family income, costs more than a childminder outside the home or a crèche. Although the benefits attached to this allowance had been limited by the socialist government, they are to be reassessed by the new government which has been in power since 2002.

The "*Allowance for Employing an Approved Childminder*" (AFEAMA): this allowance covers the social security contributions paid by the employer of the registered childminder. An additional financial contribution, related to income, is also given to families. This allowance may be combined with a small tax deduction. The number of recipients has increased regularly since 1994, reaching 546,000 by December 2000, compared to 219,000 in 1993. As a result

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<sup>7</sup> In France, compulsory school attendance begins at the age of six.

of the shortfall in places in *crèches* and also because it is more flexible, this childcare arrangement has become the most frequently used by dual-earner (and lone-parent) families with at least one child under three, who opt for "formal childcare".

Also, the government used the same 1994 Family Law to attempt to decrease the unemployment rate. Measures encouraged economically active mothers with a second child to opt to stay at home after the period of maternity leave by providing them with a flat-rate benefit (APE) on the condition that they stop working or seeking work, or work only on a part-time basis. The APE was originally created in the early 1980s but the take-up was low. Under that scheme, only parents with at least three children were eligible for the allowance. After the conditions for eligibility had been revised in 1994, the number of recipients increased dramatically and the activity rate of mothers with two children fell. This benefit is provided until the child reaches the age of three. Currently, parents are eligible when they have a second child if they have been working for at least two years out of the five preceding the birth. The scheme is very successful among low-paid or poorly qualified mothers.

Compared to other European countries, except the Nordic ones, the situation regarding childcare is quite good in France, although there are not enough collective public childcare facilities. Every year, public opinion and social actors in general claim for a consistent increase in the public supply of childcare. Since several years, it has been a major issue for the "*conférence de la famille*", that is the moment when the Prime Minister announces the new program for the coming year. The quality of childcare is also an important issue and is fairly good: services are not viewed only as childcare but have an educational objective. So, the improvement of the carers' skills remains a central issue for public policies. However, one difficulty encountered now is in the organisation of childcare, and especially in a context of increasing flexibility of working time. There is an increasing demand from parents for more flexible hours of opening of "*crèches*"<sup>8</sup> so they are more adjusted to their working hours, and particularly in a country where part-time work is not so widespread than in other European countries such as Germany, the Netherlands or the UK. So, one difficulty is in co-ordinating children's routines with those of their parents. The question of the work-family balance has appeared on the political agenda over the last decade. The emphasis has been on the reduction of working time and on the sharing of parental responsibilities, based on the principle of increasing equality that underlies public policies.

## **5- Restructuring Family Policy: from Explicit Demographic Goals to a Reconciliation of Work and Family Life**

In the mid-1990s, the new Socialist government initiated a "new family policy" based on new principles of public action: more social equality in family

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<sup>8</sup> The "*crèches*" usually open from 8 or 8h30 AM to 6h or 6h30 PM. Some of them are experiencing longer opening hours, and give their priority to children whom parents have non standard hours of work in hospitals, post office, in the police or in public transport.

support, a focus on parents' responsibility rather than on family values, an improvement in gender equality and equal opportunities between men and women. Care arrangements and social integration became a key focus for family policy, which appeared to have lost part of its autonomy as a specific policy field (Thélot et Villac, 1998). In fact, family policy is increasingly linked to other fields of public policy: employment, working time, and social issues. Urban and city planning policy is also involved through programmes concerned with time management in cities.

The restructuring of childcare support was a major component of this new family policy. The need to reduce unemployment required a response to the demand for an increase in childcare provision, as more and more mothers were in paid work and tended to remain in employment when they had children. In addition, the Socialist government expected to improve social integration by promoting employment, not only for the unemployed but also for women. Whereas in the 1980s, family policy attempted to promote the idea of giving mothers a free choice between caring for their children at home or staying in paid work, this notion disappeared during the late 1990s. One of the objectives of family policy was clearly to facilitate the integration of women into the labour market by offering childcare facilities to parents.

### **Changing Family Models: from the Male Breadwinner Model to Dual-earner Families**

One of the results of the development of childcare facilities was the increase the level of employment of mothers. In 2001, 81% of mothers with one child and 69% of mothers with two children were in the labour force. However, children continue to have an impact on the rate of economic activity of mothers, as shown in Table 1. Not only the number of children but also the age of the children has an effect. Almost 82% of mothers with two children aged over six are in the labour force, but if the second child is under three, less than 55% are in this situation.

In France, women, as well as men, have a short working life. Entry into the labour market is often postponed and the age of retirement is lower than in most other European countries. The counterpart is that most women are in the labour force at the same time as they are mothers of young children. This configuration puts particular pressure on policies aimed at balancing work and family life.

**Table 1: Activity rates for married or cohabiting mothers according to the number of children under eighteen years old (2000)**

	Activity rate (%)
<b>No child under 18</b>	45.5
<b>One child</b>	
6 - 17	81.0
3 - 5	84.1
Aged under 3	79.2
<b>Two children</b>	
Youngest aged 6 - 17	81.7
Youngest aged 3 - 5	73.7
Youngest aged under 3	54.7
<b>Three or more children</b>	
Youngest aged 6 - 17	64.2
Youngest aged 3 - 5	52.4
Youngest aged under 3	32.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>57.0</b>

*Source:* Enquête emploi de mars 2000, INSEE.

At the same time as more mothers have been entering and remaining in paid work, both family structures and gender structures within families have changed. France, along with the United Kingdom, Portugal, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium and Denmark, is among those countries within the European Union where the proportion of dual-earner families is the highest (Franco and Winqvist, 2002; no data for Sweden). But, working time regimes differ within EU member states. In France, more than 70% of dual-earner families are composed of two full-time workers.

Nevertheless part-time work increased steadily in the 1980s and 1990s. Currently, 16 % of the labour force works part time: 5.5% of men and 32% of women. As in other EU member states, part-time work is gendered. However, 42% of women working part time declare that they do not do so voluntarily. They would prefer to work longer hours if the jobs were available.

### **The Development of Social Care Services**

The increase in women's participation in paid work has been mirrored by a rise in state support for care for families, resulting in the development of social care services. The childcare and eldercare tasks formerly carried out by women within the family have now been transferred to other bodies such as the public sector, the market, non-profit organisations, or alternatively to women employed by families as childminders, paid domestic help, or home carers for elderly dependent persons. The care service sector is becoming one of the most prosperous, at least as far as employment is concerned. It is expected to continue to grow in response to the needs of families. Women thus continue to perform care activities, but as paid workers.

In the mid-90s, when economic growth was poor and job opportunities were limited, care work was seen as a jobs reservoir (Fouquet, 2001). There were high expectations that the development of social care services would be a way of reducing unemployment. Most of these care jobs were subsidised by the state, either by allowing tax deductions, or by lowering social contributions.

Childminding and family help are among the occupations that have created the largest number of jobs since the 1980s (+106%). Since 1994, annual expenditure devoted to childcare arrangements – in particular to approved childminders and nannies in the home – has increased considerably.

Policies encouraging paid care outside the family have had some positive impact on the inclusion of women in the labour force, particularly non-qualified immigrant women whose activity rate has increased rapidly. Also, shifting informal unpaid care to paid care entitles the carers to social rights, and affects those carers who were previously employed in the informal economy. This makes care work visible, economically and socially. As a result, it is possible to increase both the quality of care and the qualifications of the carers.

### **Changing Family Policy Objectives, Changing Values**

As mentioned above, the demographic objectives linked to family policy have become less explicit over the last fifteen years. The demographic argument is no longer well received in public opinion, as shown in surveys (Crédoc, Letablier et al., 2002). Furthermore, the changing role of women and the values of autonomy and equality have become more important than the values of motherhood. The change in governments has also altered the slant of policy objectives: by tradition, the Socialist Party is feminist-orientated and more individualistic than the pro-family political movements.

Family policy objectives have thus shifted: whereas compensation for the direct cost of having children remains a key issue for family policy, state support has shifted towards compensating indirect costs in different ways. Emphasis has been put on measures that facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life, in response to the rising number of women in the labour market. The demographic argument has become implicit and does not have the same focus. Encouraging fertility is no longer linked to withdrawing women from the labour market, but rather to keeping them in employment by giving support for childcare. The maintenance of the fertility rate can be explained by the consistency of state support for families to help reconcile work and family life, a policy that recognises that children are not only a cost but also an investment for the whole of society. This idea is very much part of the French republican and lay tradition, which considers that responsibility towards children has to be shared between the State and families (Letablier and Jönsson, 2002).

However, the pro-natalist argument still continues to shape State support for families:

- Family allowances are not given to the first child but begin with the second, although allowances are said to be universal. In this case, “universal” means to all families and not to all children. But there are claims that family allowances should be restructured in order to treat all children equally. The

notion of the rights of children has lately emerged in public opinion, as it can be observed from surveys on attitudes towards family policy (Letablier et al., 2002).

- The monetary value of the family allowance increases proportionately to the number of children; but the norm is now a family with no more than two children. However the issues are now less about large families than about lone-parent families, which are more likely to be living in conditions of poverty.

But the key issue in the restructuring is probably the interaction between family policy and other policy areas. As priority is given to the reconciliation of work and family life, working time and gender equality also appear on the political agenda.

### **Working Time Policy: a New Challenge for Family Caring**

The laws reducing working time from 39 to 35 hours a week were also expected to improve the work–family balance and also to improve equality between men and women. Although the key objective of the law was to create jobs by encouraging work-sharing, other objectives were to increase the flexibility of work by modernising and restructuring the way it was organised, and to increase the time devoted to the family or to leisure and other social activities.

One of the results of the two laws reducing working time (passed in 1998 and 2000) has been the emergence of new patterns of male and female paid work and arrangements for care. Both men and women tend to be in employment, mostly full time, but they work shorter hours than in most EU countries. In addition, the working time gap between men and women is decreasing and also as a result of the laws the average weekly working time for full-time workers is declining, while part-time workers have been increasing their working hours. Therefore, while the average hours worked by full-time workers fell to 38.3 hours per week in the late 1990s, the average number of hours worked by part-timers continued to rise to around 23.3 hours a week. Thus, a further impact of the laws is a reduction in the number of part-timers, reinforcing the model of a family with two full-time earners.

In terms of the reconciliation of work and family life, the reduction of working time has had a positive impact, according to the views of parents of young children: 60% of parents with a child under six claim to be satisfied with the reduction in their working time<sup>9</sup> (Fagnani and Letablier, 2002). Parents who say they are satisfied with the effect of the law on the work–family balance more often than others benefit from good working conditions, a family-friendly employer and good human resources management in their organisation. Also, more frequently than the dissatisfied group, they have regular working times and standard hours. Fathers, as well mothers, claim to spend more time with their children, particularly when the reduction in working time is calculated on a

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<sup>9</sup> The survey was conducted in 2000 on a sample of 3,216 parents with a child under six, in different regions in France.

weekly basis. Thus, fathers appear to spend more time with their children, and to share part of parental responsibilities.

Where the issue of the reconciliation of work and family life is concerned, the impact of the laws can be evaluated in terms of the time spend with children by both parents, and in this respect, the result is positive for a majority of parents with young children. But the outcome can also be a change in the values of working and parenting. So, the reduction of working time (by law) appears also to be an attempt to change the values associated to a male culture of working long hours.

### **Sharing Parental Responsibility**

Although women's participation in the labour force is increasing and dual-earner families are tending to become the norm, women continue to perform the majority of domestic and parental tasks in the home. Time budget surveys show that men spend half as much time as women on domestic tasks and one third on caring for children. So, caring for children at home is still a female activity (Algava, 2002). Thus the involvement of women in paid work has not resulted in a corresponding level of involvement by men in unpaid work, although the time spent by men on domestic tasks has slightly increased.

Although the right to care is incorporated into social policies in order to promote gender equality at work, the gender culture, in terms of norms and values, continues to guide social practices, particularly in maintaining a gender-based division of labour in the home. The burden on women is heavy, especially for those in low-income families or lone mothers who cannot delegate part of their domestic tasks.

During the 1990s, the French government attempted to improve the sharing of parental responsibilities so that men and women could contribute more equally to paid and unpaid work. Emphasis is now on parental rather than on maternal responsibilities. Paternity leave was created in 2002 with the view that, by involving fathers in parental responsibility as soon as a child was born, parental responsibility could be shared more equitably in the future. Furthermore, it was considered that greater equality within the family should be a condition for improving equality within the work sphere.

At this point it is interesting to note that countries in which the male breadwinner model of family is still widespread have lower fertility rates; on the other hand, the Nordic countries and France where this model of family is less prevalent register higher fertility rates.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the difficulty in assessing the impact of family policy on levels of fertility, family policy in France seems to have been successful in creating an environment favourable to children and family life although childcare facilities are still inadequate to cover the demand. By shifting its objectives from supporting the direct cost of having children to supporting the reconciliation of work and family life, family policy has undoubtedly helped to keep the fertility rate at an acceptable level.

The key issue is State support for childcare with regard to young and school-age children. Also, childcare facilities must be available at a cost sustainable for parents. This represents a huge budget for the State, but partnerships can be organised between companies, local authorities and other sectors of society. In this way, companies can take on social responsibility. It should be accepted that childcare is not only a private matter but also a public and corporate issue. Moreover, the quality of childcare provision is important for the well-being of both children and their parents. This implies training schemes for carers and educational principles in the care-giving.

Furthermore, the balance between work and the family is not only a family policy issue, and cannot simply be solved by an increase in subsidised childcare facilities. It is also an issue with wider implications that concern employment policy, working time policy, and urban and city planning policy. Each of these policy areas is implicated: for example, a high unemployment rate among young adults deters them from building a family and they postpone having children; housing shortages also delay the setting-up of a family; and long working hours are not compatible with family life and parental obligations. Therefore, each of these policy sectors should be involved in the creation of a family-friendly environment. The emphasis of policy-making should not only be on childcare provision, but also on time organisation. As mothers are significantly involved in paid work, total parental time dedicated to family obligations should increase, and be shared more equally between parents. Moreover, the opening hours of care facilities need to be adjusted as closely as possible to the working hours of parents. If not, family organisation becomes much too complex. Currently, several local authorities in France, and also in Italy and Germany, have set up time management offices ("*bureaux des temps*") to harmonise working hours, school hours, childcare hours and the opening hours of services.

In conclusion, a rise in the fertility rate could be achieved by policies established in partnership with companies in order to push the work and family balance issue to the top of the political agenda. This also implies a sustained shift in values, reinforcing the view that children are to be considered not only as a cost to families but also as an investment for the whole of society.

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