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## The Cooptation of Gender Concepts in EU Policies: The Case of “Reconciliation of Work and Family”

### Abstract

*The article contends that gender equality policy objectives become part of the main political agenda of the European Union only after their meaning has been transformed to satisfy other policy priorities. A content analysis of relevant official EU acts, from the first European Commission’s social action program (1974) to the Conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (2002) and the fifth EU action program for gender equality (2001–2005), shows how a concept introduced to encourage gender equality in the labor market, the “reconciliation of working and family life,” gradually shifted in meaning from an objective with feminist potential (“sharing family responsibilities between women and men”) to a market-oriented objective (“encouraging flexible forms of employment”) as it became incorporated in the European Employment Strategy of the 1990s. I argue that this process can be characterized as cooptation because the goals of the original proposals are undermined by shifting the meanings of the original concepts to fit into the prevailing political and economic priorities in the EU.*

Reconciliation of work and family is a core concept of gender policy, one that has been widely used within employment policy discourse as a means of tackling unemployment. However, because

reconciling work and family also concerns gendered social relations, it may potentially be used to express feminist challenges to existing gender inequalities in the family and in the labor market. For social policy, the issue raises important questions about the roles of family, state, and market in organizing and/or providing this care work.

In this article, I examine the framing of public policies on gender equality in the European Union by focusing on specific policies aiming at the reconciliation of work and family. I demonstrate how the meanings of the gender equality concepts used and their consequences for policy outcomes shift with economic priorities. As these concepts become part of a different policy frame, they are used to promote policy goals that contradict the original meaning of the concepts. Thus I argue that this shift represents a cooptation of feminist potential inherent in the original discourse.

The European Union, having no authority in family policy, first introduced the concept of reconciling work and family to facilitate equal opportunities for women in the labor market. This is illustrated in EU policy texts by how discussion of work precedes mention of family. This contrasts with the experience of member nations, where policies to support working parents, for example, by providing care leaves, were introduced as part of family policy, particularly in countries that have historically championed the value of motherhood. The labor market, the core referent for EU gender equality policy, is a policy field where economic priorities dominate. Thus it is an arena where gender equality goals may conflict with enhancing economic growth and satisfying market needs.

The common understanding today is that women's disproportionate share of domestic and caring tasks directly relates to discrimination against women in the labor market and subsequent gender inequalities in pay and quality of jobs (Budig and England 2001; Ferree 1991; Gornick et al. 1998). This definition of the "double day" of paid and unpaid work as a social problem is an accomplishment of feminist work in the past decades (García -Ramon and Monk 1996; Hochschild 1989; Williams 2001). The connection between the distribution of care work and gender discrimination and inequality may be challenged through specific public policy, which can express this objective as sharing of family responsibilities, reconciliation of working and family life for both women and men, or even the combination of work and family life. Yet as this article shows, the different terms carry different implications and are given different emphasis by policy makers. *Sharing* is a term associated with equality of women and men, defining a policy objective in the area of gender relations, whereas *reconciliation* is derived from labor market analysis and has a more economic orientation. Although the notion of sharing implies challenges to the

unequal division of labor of women and men in care work in the family, concrete policies to address reconciliation can in fact reproduce and consolidate women's roles and responsibilities as primary care givers.

This study analyzes EU gender equality policy by looking at the policy framing expressed in key texts and debates. I focus on the changing uses and meanings of basic equality concepts during their interaction with other, usually stronger policy priorities and objectives on the EU agenda. I propose that a critical gender analysis—that is, an analysis based on the social awareness of a gender hierarchy that produces discrimination against women and gender inequalities—is constantly infiltrating EU policy-making structures. This percolation into policy is realized through implicit or explicit pressure by members of women's advocacy coalitions in the EU, namely, feminist politicians, civil servants, members of equality-focused structures (committees, units, etc.) and individual researchers who have undertaken research on behalf of the European Union.

As the dominant policy paradigm in European social policy changes, from regulation in the 1970s and 1980s to coordination and monitoring in the mid-1990s, the EU texts analyzed in this article shift from using "sharing" language to embracing "reconciling" as a framework. I argue that the original policy goal, the redistribution of domestic and caring work between women and men, has been obscured, if not abandoned, to accommodate a growing policy priority on the creation of employment. Reconciliation, reformulated to mean improving women's ability to combine paid work and family work in their own lives, eventually became an integral part of the EU employment policy in the late 1990s, but reconciliation now served the goal of legitimating more flexible work conditions rather than changing gender relations within the family.

This is a process of cooptation of gender concepts. By cooptation I mean that the meanings of key concepts initially introduced by feminists and originally grounded in feminist ideas about paid and unpaid work were conceptually transformed by their subordination to different policy priorities, resulting in the loss of their potential for changing gender relations. The analysis of official EU acts, both binding and nonbinding, reveals this process in operation, as these texts are the outcomes of debates over meanings and the consensus reached between various actors. Different phases reflect different policy frames and, therefore, different choices in specific policies and selective uses of existing policy instruments.

To provide context for the analysis of these specific struggles, I begin by discussing the nature of policy making in the EU and the particular characteristics of EU policies on gender equality. I then

chronologically trace this process of cooptation in documents like the Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of Workers (1989) and the Directive on Parental Leave (1996). I conclude with a discussion of the implications of understanding policy discourse as a form of power, which affects the potential for achievement of feminist goals by infiltration into EU gender equality policy.

### Unpacking Eu Gender Equality Policy Discourse

Research on EU policy making has demonstrated the special character of its social policies, which developed primarily as part of the process of market-building according to the scope of competence described in the Treaties (Leibfried and Pierson 1995, 1996; Hantrais 2000a). Major public policy approaches, such as the policy coalitions framework developed by Sabatier (1988, 1991, 1998) and the policy streams developed by Kingdon (1984) are appropriate for analyzing EU policy making (John 1998; Richardson 1996). Both propose multidimensional frameworks that seek to compass the complexity created by an unusually large number of actors as well as multiple policy processes, constituencies, levels of decision making, and institutions. Among them the European Commission (EC) holds the most important authority to set the agenda. In its continuous interaction with member states the EC has extended the scope of its competence and has addressed many quality-of-life issues that traditional social policies have neglected, for instance, consumer protection (Majone 1993). Research on the policy process in the EU has shown that the EC often packages particular issues to maximize the likelihood of their positive reception by national governments. This behavior is called purposeful opportunism and facilitates policy shifts by reducing attachment to specific goals (Cram 1997). In general, this renders the European policy-making environment unpredictable and inconsistent; uncertainty characterizes the relation between EU institutions and various social actors (Mazey and Richardson 1995).

Social integration processes, no less than political and economic integration, are currently shaped by a set of conflicting policy frames between national states and the EU. The social integration of the EU becomes an even more challenging task in view of the ongoing enlargement to include 10 more member states from Eastern and Central Europe by 2004. The goals of social integration process have shifted from harmonization to convergence (Threlfall 2003). This means in practice that there are fewer regulatory binding instruments, such as Council of the European Communities (Council) directives. Instead, the EC is actively involved in coordinating policy action between the member states by setting targets and issuing

recommendations to member states through the open method of coordination, a new governance instrument applied primarily in the fields of economic and employment policies (Trubek and Mosher 2003; Zeitlin 2003).

Within EU policy, gender equality has an equivocal position as an objective. In the form of “equal pay for equal work,” gender equality was introduced in the social chapter of the Treaty of Rome of the European Economic Community (Art. 119) in 1957, although this concern about equal pay then reflected merely economic objectives, namely, the reduction of competition between member states. Throughout the further history of EU gender equality policies, this inherent double identity of gender equality policy as both economic and social invited ambiguity in outcome, limitations of potential reach and reluctance in implementation. In addition to this dual identity, as Ostner and Lewis (1995) point out, the second eye of the needle through which EU gender equality policy had to pass was achieving implementation in member states. The same EU directives and regulations will be interpreted and implemented differently, depending on the specific national policy cultures, gender regimes, understandings of concepts, strategies, and particular policy tools of the now 15 member states (Ostner and Lewis 1995). Moreover, national reception of EU initiatives depends also on public perceived legitimacy of the EU, diffusion of egalitarian values, and multilevel action coordination (Liebert 2002). Not surprisingly perhaps, implementation of gender equality policies in member states has been uneven at best.

The fragile position of gender equality in the EU allowed for significant advances in line with feminist ideas, while at the same time its internal incoherence left gaping openings for abuse, shifts in meanings, and cooptation of concepts. Various women’s advocacy coalitions, made up of administrative officials, interest groups, politicians and researchers from various countries, and women’s movement activists, all of whom represented a range of feminist perspectives, attempted to move their agenda forward. The strategies and pressure tactics they used were crucial in maximizing potential and limiting risks in the final outcome, as Hoskyns (1996) showed in her exploration of the haphazard project of EU public policy for gender equality. Studying the origins, issues, policies, and processes from the Treaty of Rome to the 1990s, Hoskyns’s analysis of the interaction between European and national administrations, women’s nongovernmental organizations, civil servants, experts, activists, and women decision makers illuminated both the conflicts and the patterns of cooperation and influence that characterize them. Moreover, as Hubert (1998, 2001) demonstrated, feminist input in the EU

extended beyond women's participation, as the women's emancipation process and European integration developed as two parallel intertwined projects, which shape identities and foster economic, political, and social change in similar, cooperative, and pragmatic ways. Examples of policy outcomes resulting from effective coordination of action in multilevel decision making include the direct application of Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome in the 1970s, following pressure by the feminist movement (Hoskyns 1996; Hubert 1998); the gender equality provisions in the Treaty of Amsterdam, following the European Women's Lobby mobilization (Helfferich and Kolb 2000); and the successful implementation of the third action program following a strong alliance for equality among staff and politicians in the EC and the European Parliament (Stratigaki 2000).

EU gender equality policy has been analyzed from multiple perspectives, reflecting the multifaceted dimension of gender relations (Beveridge and Shaw 2002; Dijkstra and Platenga 1997; Rossilli 2000). In economic terms, women's employment patterns throughout the EU have been extensively studied, with such studies usually initiated and funded by the EC in the framework of action programs for equal opportunities. Comprehensive reports covering all member states were prepared by an expert group on Gender and Employment, which has been operating continuously since the early 1980s (Meulders *et al.* 1993, 1994; Rubery and Fagan 1998; Rubery *et al.* 1999). From a public policy studies perspective, the interaction between European and national agendas on equality is the significant issue in examining how European institutions, decision makers, and social actors/interest groups come to dominate over national administrations (Mazey 1998). Political representation of women in EU institutions and trade unions has been also extensively studied through research funded by the EC (Cockburn 1995; European Expert Network 1997; Leijenaar 1997; Vogel-Polsky *et al.* 1994).

Studies of EU gender politics demonstrate that the existing policy apparatus and equality policies have been directed to increasing women's participation in the labor market without challenging the norm of the full-time male worker because of their close association with employment as a priority (Ostner and Lewis 1995; Duncan 1996). Also, by exclusively targeting the fields of labor market regulation and market competitiveness, EU policies on equal pay have shifted to emphasize "equal employability" (Ostner 2000). This study contributes to this debate in two ways: showing how this shift was facilitated by the specific redefinition of the concept of reconciliation as employability became more of a priority and how this shift worked to the detriment of gender equality.

### The Process of Cooptation of Gender Equality Concepts

Feminist ideas and strategies influenced policy frames on gender equality in the 1980s, creating a favorable environment in the EU for the introduction and development of new gender equality concepts. The concept of the “double day” of paid and unpaid work was documented by the feminist research of the early 1970s and propelled by feminist demands for attention to care work’s contribution to the national economy and to the gender inequality produced by women’s disproportionate burden of care. This concept infiltrated the newly established EU institutions in a political context of increasing membership with social-democratic flavor (for example from Denmark and the United Kingdom) and the continuing activity of the women’s movement throughout Europe. These feminist ideas were picked up into EU policy making, providing opportunities for influencing politics toward a gender equality perspective. Nonetheless, I argue that throughout the long process of EU integration in the 1980s and 1990s, the concepts were often used in a way that did not correspond to the original goals of those who formulated the ideas.

New political priorities, driven by the predominance of the market and conservative politics, as well as men’s preeminence in EU institutions and decision-making processes, produced uses of these concepts that arrested progress without openly contesting their applicability. Because the way these equality concepts and expressions of policy goals were used allowed for multiple opposing interpretations, space was created for rhetoric and empty declarations and even the redirection of policy outcomes in soft law, recommendations, decisions, and other policy instruments. As the meaning of key concepts and terms shifted, the new discourse became part of a more mainstream and powerful set of policy frames than that offered by feminist analysis of gender relations. This is what I call the cooptation of a gender equality concept.

In the cooptation process, the concept itself is not rejected, but its initial meaning is transformed and used in the policy discourse for a different purpose than the original one. Cooptation undermines gender equality in two ways. First, transforming the meanings of a concept allows for a gradual and largely unnoticed deterioration of its policy impact on producing gender equality. In the long run, it can potentially even produce a counter-effect and negative impact. Second, cooptation works against mobilization and pressure by interested parties and individuals by using the original as well as the transformed concept as an alibi. It is difficult to mobilize against a claim that appears to be one’s “own” even if it is no longer used to mean what one intended.

The danger of cooptation of concepts is greater in large organizations, like the EU institutions, where decisions are influenced by a large number of policy actors and policy processes. Cooptation is also more likely when there is a high level of normative legitimacy for the general principle underlying the original policy goal. Today, European politicians of all parties pay lip service to gender equality as a fundamental principle of democracy and social justice. Their personal or political objections to the principle of gender equality are usually implicit or camouflaged. Because policy makers rarely openly oppose gender equality, their intentions are most apparent in how they translate this equality principle into concrete policies.

The actual policies for reconciliation of work and family have been studied with a gender lens on many occasions. Recent research has theorized reconciliation policy (Mazur 2002), investigated the construction of care as a policy problem (Bacchi 1999), compared policy in several countries in Europe (Hantrais 2000b; Hantrais and Letablier 1996; Lewis 1993), and pointed out the risks of specific reconciliation measures (Lewis 1997; Morgan and Zippel 2003). From a feminist perspective, the gender division of labor, the recognition or remuneration of care work, and inequalities for parents in the workplace are at the heart of these concerns. Care was placed in the heart of feminist research on gender and welfare state regimes especially in view of the restructuring of the labor market and the social security systems in almost all European countries (Orloff 1993; Sainsbury 1994, 1996; Wilson 1977). It also directed attention particularly to the issues of single mothers (see critique in Brush 2003). Closely associated with the debate on the organization of care for children, the elderly, and other dependents in relation to the labor market, "reconciliation of work and family" was often associated with social policies aiming at assisting families to manage in an environment of increased insecurity in the labor market (Jenson and Sineau 1998, 2001).

As this research has shown, policies that fall under the rubric of the reconciliation of work and family can take various forms. In the EU concrete policy priorities vary historically across member states and include short- to long-term (paid or unpaid) parental leaves, services such as child care and care for elderly and the disabled, programs for the reentry of mothers into the workforce after maternity and parental leave, and financial benefits (Bettio and Prechal 1998; Deven et al. 1999). These different approaches are the outcome of the diverse interaction between public policy, private sector services, and the bridging role of families between public and private in differently organized welfare societies. Approaches to care differ widely among member states, along with the importance they attribute to

women's equal participation in the labor market and to the gender division of labor. The tendency of nation-states to regard reconciliation only in relation to the well-being of families and children rather than as a means of increasing gender equality was heavily challenged by feminists. The search for measures that will promote gender equality is made difficult by their need to address simultaneously two different feminist concerns: to value unpaid work and to share it more equally between women and men (Lewis 1997).

Feminist researchers have challenged the use of reconciliation as a legal and political concept in the EU, pointing out that it neglects and disregards the gender division of labor (Junter-Loiseau and Tobler, 1999). Indeed, as I will demonstrate, the concept gained a central place in the EU policy agenda only when it was coopted by employment policy discourse, escaping the boundaries of gender-equality policy. The concept was recast from sharing domestic tasks to increasing flexibility in the labor market, thus emphasizing such concerns as encouraging flexible work for unemployed mothers.

### Methodology

I address the process by which such cooptation of the concept reconciliation of working and family life has happened through a content analysis of official EU policy texts concerned with gender equality, family, and employment. These documents include (1) binding instruments (directives and regulations) and (2) nonbinding soft law measures and other acts (recommendations, resolutions, action programs, white and green papers, guidelines, etc.). The EU acts were collected through EU text database SCAD, CELEX, and EC services in Brussels. Their time span extends from 1974 to the first semester of 2002. They include Directives, Conclusions, Recommendations, Communications, Action Programs, Charters, Resolutions, and other relevant documents in English.

Texts are one part of policy outcomes, which also include decisions on the allocation of human and financial resources for the implementation, monitoring and follow-up of policies, and then actually doing such work. EU acts are produced by different European institutions according to involved procedures as prescribed in the treaties of the EU. They are often subject to a long consultation period among relevant decision makers at both national and EU level, representatives of civil society, and (occasionally) individual citizens. Although they are not the only part of the process that could be studied, these official texts are the main source of documentation for the cooptation of concepts and changing of policy goals for several reasons.

First, they are themselves policy outcomes, produced only after tortuous processes of negotiation among policy makers within and outside the European institutions. They reflect the point of convergence, an average position at a particular historical time and political environment, by crystallizing the consensus achieved and showing which policy frame prevailed over which other. Changes in the “average” expressed in a text can reveal the shift in the balance of power among policy-relevant actors and/or the priority they give to certain interests.

Second, EU acts have multiple purposes and will be used in future policy negotiations. The texts present the goals of a policy, they describe the means of implementation, and they reveal the commitments of the respective institutions. More important, they also serve as materials for further policy work by member states, interested parties, nongovernmental organizations, coalitions, and lobbies. Texts, however, are often deliberately ambiguous, particularly in cases where agreement was reached with difficulty and through skilled verbal acrobatics. In such texts, those services, agencies, and parties with conflicting interests are appeased as they find their positions supported in one or another part of the document.

The purpose of this analysis of policy texts is to interpret their underlying meanings and reveal the impact of the proposed measures for gender equality, in particular their impact on patterns of the gender division of paid and unpaid work. Analysis focuses on not only what was included in the text but also what was excluded yet considered to be significant for the full understanding of the concept. I compare the texts before and after their adoption, because most text proposals also have an official status, as is the frequent case of EC Proposals to the Council of Ministers. The texts analyzed carry differing significance for actual policy: Council Directives are proposed by the EC and have to be transposed to the national legislation within a certain time limit. Community action programs are neither binding nor invested with substantial funding; they are primarily indicative of emerging future perspectives. White papers are mainly orientation documents for policy makers, and green papers are primarily discussion papers for large constituencies. Council Recommendations are not binding for member states but enjoy high political status. European Council Conclusions are texts with the highest profile, reflecting political agreements between heads of member states.

### Sharing and Reconciling of Equal Opportunities Policies in the EU

“Reconciliation” is the dominant language today in EU discussions of work and family life. It appeared for the first time in the

Community Social Action Programme of 1974 (Council of the European Communities 1974) as an objective parallel to a separate equality objective. Aimed at improving employment, the Community would “ensure that the family responsibilities of all concerned may be reconciled with their job aspirations.” This term would remain in obscurity in this Community text for at least 15 years, only reappearing again in 1989 in the new context of family policy (Commission of the European Communities 1989). The idea of reconciling work and family, however, was being developed elsewhere and with different language.

In 1975, in the preamble to the UN Declaration at the World Conference on Women in Mexico, a more equality-driven concept was introduced, that of “sharing of family responsibilities between women and men” (United Nations 1975). The idea of sharing in UN texts echoed the debate emerging in the 1970s on the role of housework and domestic responsibilities in gender equality, stemming from the feminist movement after 1968. Extensive theorizing on the gender division of unpaid work intensified, with often contradictory policy implications, even regarding the demand for wages for housework (Gavron 1966; Lopata 1971; Oakley 1974; Dalla Costa and James 1973). The so-called domestic labor debate produced a large number of articles in the *New Left Review* and other political and academic journals examining the role of housework for capitalism and women’s liberation (see review in Ferree 1983).

In this favorable environment for gender policies, the idea of sharing paid work and family work more equally arose in EU documents as providing a potential for challenging the gender-based division of labor. An explicit connection between gender equality in work and family responsibilities appeared in 1982, in the First Medium-Term Community Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women (1982–1985) (Commission of the European Communities 1982). As a step forward from the existing three EC Directives on equal pay and equal treatment, the First Program stressed the importance of an equal sharing of parental responsibilities for the improvement of living and working conditions as being a precondition for the achievement of equal treatment (action 7). This program also enlarged the scope of where sharing mattered to include decision making (action 15). Sharing was the predominant concept expressed in this program, and equal treatment the predominant argument for it.

The Second Medium Term Community Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women (1986–1990) (Commission of the European Communities 1986) also made a close connection between combating discrimination against women in the labor market and sharing of family and occupational responsibilities. It called sharing “a *sine qua*

*non* for the promotion of true equality at work” (Commission of the European Communities 1986, 8). The “sharing of family and occupational responsibilities” chapter of the program proposed a series of actions in the areas of parental leave and social infrastructure, including day care and reorganization of working time. Specific difficulties for single parents and migrant women were also identified. The Council of the European Communities (1986), through its resolution, supported the program but inverted the rank of the objectives. “Occupational” responsibilities became “career” responsibilities, and reorganization of working time now came before creating social infrastructure, which was also limited to provision “for groups or persons who particularly need them.”

The reorganization of work time and work patterns proposed in the Council Resolution (1986) covered not only flexible working hours but also leave rights spread over a long period and compensation for arduous work in the form of more free time. A concern that reorganization of working time could increase inequalities was expressed when the EC committed itself “in its work on the reorganization of working time to continue to keep in mind the promotion of equal opportunities” (Commission of the European Communities 1986,16). A similar concern for the potential dangers of part time work in entrenching job segregation was expressed by arguing in favor of a “balanced development of part time work” (Commission of the European Communities 1986,15).

These modifications in the wording and ranking of policy concerns presaged future trends in the expression of policy objectives. In the EU texts produced in the mid-1990s, expression of any need for improvement of infrastructure became very limited and the underlying meaning of reorganization of working time now included not only flexible time arrangements but also flexible working conditions, including homework. My comparison of the First and Second Programs suggests that the EU gender equality potential had already narrowed as the implicit objective shifted from improving the quality of life and sharing all social life (decision-making posts included) more equally between women and men to combining work and family and sharing child care by increasing parental leaves, relevant infrastructure, and flexible working time for working mothers. Although the focus had already moved to policies targeting specific women who needed help combining both work and family, the ambiguity about whether this focus would help or impede the policy goal of gender equality was still explicitly expressed in the text.

The trend toward focusing on combining work and family accelerated with the appearance of *reconciliation* in the Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers issued in 1989, one year

before the end of the Second Action Program. The Workers Charter, a nonbinding official document, enjoyed high political reputation and respect, because it was the first attempt to create a social identity for the EU according to Jacques Delors's vision. Furthermore, a special chapter was devoted to equal treatment for men and women as a distinct social objective. This chapter states that "measures should also be developed to enable men and women to reconcile their occupational and family obligations" (Commission of the European Communities 1990a, 17). Note that on entering this mainstream social policy text, "sharing" became "reconciling" and "responsibilities" became "obligations." The term *reconciliation* was "borrowed" from a nonspecific equality text, an EC communication on family policies issued some months before the Workers Charter (Commission of the European Communities 1989). The Workers' Charter, which was welcomed by the social partners and policy makers in Europe, caused a significant shift in the focus of equality policy by using this term. The replacement of *sharing* between women and men with the term *reconciliation* downplayed the latent conflict between the interests of women and men and further suggested that help to meet these "obligations" would be in women's interest and potentially in men's as well. The term subtly shifted the policy goal from one of achieving balance between women's and men's roles to creating a balance between the occupational and family obligations of each man and woman, who are different and discursively independent members of families. Even if both men and women succeeded in their individual reconciliations, nothing in the language now suggested that this has to be done on an equal basis between them, which means the goal no longer involves challenging the conventional gender division of labor.

In 1990, the Third Community Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (1991–1995) (Commission of the European Communities 1990b) continued the tradition of equality-specific texts connecting reconciliation with women's discrimination in the labor market. It adopted the term *reconciliation*, stressed the importance of insufficient childcare provision as a "barrier to the occupational integration of women with children on the labor market" (13) and made a weak reference to men's benefit from such measures. The new Community Initiative NOW (New Opportunities for Women), which aimed at promoting opportunities for women in the field of employment and vocational training, was included in this program.

The NOW Initiative was important because it devoted extensive financial resources to the gender equality projects in member states. The implementation of the projects took place according to criteria

set up and closely controlled and monitored by the EC. Development of child care facilities was the first supplementary measure proposed for vocational training schemes, underscoring that support for infrastructure, operating costs, and improvement of quality of such services could be included (and funded) in the project. Association of child care with vocational training schemes (a labor market concern) was the only way to allow allocation of funding for child care by the European Social Fund, the financial instrument of the initiative.

The direct reference to child care in the Third Equality Programme was then heavily stressed in the EC proposal for a Council Recommendation on child care (European Commission 1991). In this non-binding instrument, the Council of the European Communities (1992) accepted all major proposals from the Commission, highlighting the importance of quantity and quality of child care provisions as well as the importance of special leaves for employed parents, the environment, the structure and organization of work, and men's participation in child care responsibilities. The official recognition that policy areas external to employment and the workplace, such as child care, had an impact on the labor market was a significant step toward the expansion of the scope of EU gender equality policy in new policy areas. The Council Recommendation had an additional positive impact because it highlighted the interrelation between the private and public spheres and presented an understanding of inequalities in the labor market that saw them as directly connected with gendered labor in the household and with family life.

With this child care recommendation, the long anti-discrimination phase of the equality policy in the labor market came to a close. Reconciliation measures (mainly parental leave and child care) were institutionalized and became an integral part of the EU policy for equal treatment between women and men in the labor market. However, reconciliation on an equal basis could only be achieved if related policies were effectively addressed to both women and men, as official texts and policy makers' rhetoric implied they should be. These EU reconciliation policy measures were exclusively placed within gender equality programs or equality-focused chapters of social policy texts. Even when equal opportunities were between women and men (third and fourth) and not just for women (first and second), these programs and chapters were in practice addressed almost exclusively to women. They included positive action in favor of women, and they initiated studies on women's situation. The unit in charge of the implementation of the programs was initially called the Women's Bureau, and the policy actors involved in committees and program events were primarily women. In this context, it is not surprising that the working time directive adopted in 1993 (Council

of the European Communities 1993), had no reference to the reconciliation objective, which illustrates the de facto isolation of equality policies from other social policies. Men eventually emerged as a target group for reconciliation measures within equality policy, albeit in a marginal and small-scale way, through experts' studies initiated by the Commission Women's Bureau, such as the report "Men as Carers" (European Commission 1993).

#### Coopting "Reconciliation of Work and Family" by EU Employment Policies

In 1993, the concept "reconciliation of working and family life" was explicitly invoked for the first time outside of gender equality and family policy-specific documents. It was used in the context of the emerging concern for developing an EU labor market policy to tackle unemployment and increase growth. The White Paper "Growth, Competitiveness, Employment" (European Commission 1994a) proposed a European perspective for combating unemployment and initiated a debate on the flexibility of the labor market, with a view to combining competitiveness with the creation of employment. Issued two years after the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), in which strict economic criteria for the Economic and Monetary Union were set up, this White Paper represented the last effort of Jacques Delors to limit deregulation to a socially acceptable level.

The White Paper proposed a series of measures for member states to adopt to reduce the social risks of the economic convergence. "Favorable examination of parental leave" as connected to flexibility (European Commission 1994a, 147) and "reconciling family and working life" as related to "individualization of taxation and social security systems" were some of the measures proposed in this context. They were seen also as strengthening equal opportunities for women and men (European Commission 1994a, 150). These references to reconciliation measures suggest that they were being used to support a major policy objective of the paper, namely, reduction of indirect labor costs, which were considered to be an obstacle in economic terms, especially in competing with the United States.

In 1994, the objective of reconciliation became even more explicitly linked to the flexibility of labor in the White Paper on European Social Policy (European Commission 1994b). In a nonequality-focused chapter on "encouraging high labor standards as part of a Competitive Europe" (European Commission 1994b, 30), reconciliation was connected to the emergence of new forms of employment. These forms, it was stated, were desired by management but also by "workers (who) quite often prefer alternative work patterns." Two

EU directives were envisaged in this context, one on part-time work and one on parental leave, together with other issues promoting the reconciliation of professional and family life. In the equality-focused chapter of the paper, reconciling employment and household/family life figures as one of the three main topics along with desegregating the labor market and accelerating the participation of women in decision-making (European Commission 1994b, 41–45).

As other specific equality documents had done, this White Paper also argued in favor of social infrastructure for achieving balance between working and family life and between working and caring time. Its innovation lies in the introduction of economic arguments not only for child care provision but also for desegregation of the labor market. Flexibility was said to offer benefits to be shared between women and men. Policy making was now aimed toward maximizing job opportunities for women by including homework and telework while reducing risks of unemployment and social exclusion. This was a shift in emphasis from increasing gender fairness in the labor market through public policy measures against discrimination to helping women remain in the labor market with flexible jobs and flexible working conditions by the introduction of family-friendly policies. It was not explicitly noted that this could also have negative implications for women's mobilization over their rights. Implicitly, however, women's demands for equal treatment and positive action would be neutralized by their sense of gratitude for flexible time arrangements that would enable them to keep their jobs or find new ones.

The assumed model for women's employment changed as well. Before, women were supposed to aim for full integration in the primary labor market (full-time work, full social benefits, etc.) by competing with men on an equal basis. To advance this goal, public policies should support positive action. Now, women's work was supposed to be integrated in the secondary labor market (flexible, part-time work, reduced social benefits, etc.), in which public policies should aim at facilitating reconciliation for women and thereby help families.

Further integration of reconciliation into EU policies on labor market and work organization occurred after Sweden joined the EU in 1995. The first Swedish director-general (Allan Larsson) served in the highest administrative post of Employment and Social Affairs General-Directorate over the period 1995 to 2000. His commitment to promote "social policy as a productive factor" embraced reconciliation as a concept serving gender equality among other policy objectives. In fact, in Sweden, reconciliation was addressed largely to men through measures like the "father's month" that promoted

compulsory sharing of paid parental leave (Bergqvist and Jungar 2000). Women were already widely practicing reconciliation by participating in large numbers in the labor market, and men were being encouraged to take care of their children as part of the social recognition of children's rights and needs. In this Nordic context, reconciliation and family policies contributed in practice to a more equal sharing of care between women and men and eventually began to challenge the gender division of labor. This was not the case in other settings.

In general terms, women's relatively long-standing high participation in economic, social, and political life had instituted a gender balance in the Nordic countries that reduced risks of regression should policies attempt to advance economic or social priorities that were not compatible with gender equality. In the different gender environment of southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Spain) and the more Christian conservative regimes (Germany, Netherlands), family policies tended to be less compatible with equality objectives, because they primarily aiming at protecting existing family patterns. Southern European societies were characterized by women's low labor force participation rate, strong vertical job segregation, low gender consciousness, and male-dominated attitudes and behaviors in families and the society (Stratigaki and Vaiou 1994; Vaiou and Stratigaki 1997). In these countries, EU reconciliation language and policies encouraged gender-stereotyped roles in family and the labor market. Furthermore, the risk inherent in shifting the original main focus of the EU reconciliation policy objective from supporting equality to protecting the family began to emerge clearly in the merger of equality and family policies under the same administrative unit in the EC in 1997, namely, the Unit Equal opportunities between women and men and issues related to families and children.

The second half of the 1990s saw an upgrading of the employment agenda in the EU that was consolidated by the subsequent new articles on employment policies in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997). Despite differences in its meaning and uses within the European Union, the reconciliation objective was gradually included in all major EU policy texts related to work organization and employment that were issued during this period. The Green Paper "Living and Working in the Information Society: People First" (European Commission 1996), highlighted the potential use of information and communication technologies to "improve the balance between family and working life" (European Commission 1996, 25) and the value in terms of equality of opportunity of the new forms of work organization (8). The Green Paper "Partnership for a New Organization of Work" (European Commission 1997) listed among the advantages that flexible working time offered employees choices better suited to

their private or family commitments (European Commission 1997, 12). Career breaks for family matters were framed as measures “to reduce unemployment, improve quality of life and above all, compatibility with private life” (European Commission 1997,17).

In this political context, the Fourth Medium Term Community Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (1996–2000) (Commission of the European Communities 1995) was adopted by the Council (Council Decision 95/593/EC). The program upgraded “combining work with household/family life for women and men” to one of its six separate objectives by highlighting the need to adapt the organization of the European society to changes in families and households. However, in terms of concrete policies there was no real substance, except for a clear emphasis on the forthcoming directive on parental leave. Other action was limited to studies and thinking about child care quality and different forms of care. At least some policy makers seemed embarrassed about the pressure that employment priorities exercised over gender equality goals, when they explicit expressed their “concern that the development of new flexible working arrangements may in practice reinforce existing sex segregation on the labor market and contribute to forming clusters of lower-paid workers” (Commission of the European Communities 1995, 20).

The directive on parental leave was eventually adopted in 1996, a decade after the first Commission proposal for a Council Directive (Commission of the European Communities 1983) and two years after the reaffirmation of its necessity in the White Paper on Social Policy (European Commission 1994b). The original Commission proposal was withdrawn, and the directive was adopted in the form of a framework agreement concluded by the European social partners, namely UNICE (Union of Industrial and Employers’ Confederations of Europe), CEEP (European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation), and ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation) according to the provisions of the Agreement on Social Policy (Council of the European Communities 1996). This delegated to European social partner organizations the authority to conclude agreements, which after endorsement by the Council of Ministers eventually became EU Directives.

The comparison of the two texts reveals the type of negotiations and adjustments that preceded its adoption. The main purpose of the Council Directive in 1996 was stated as the reconciliation of parental and professional responsibilities for working parents, instead of equal treatment for women and men as had been proposed by the Commission in 1983. The duration of the leave remained the same (3 months), but the entitlement was now valid for parents of children up to 8 years

rather than up to 2 years. The nontransferability between father and mother of the parental leave was kept mainly in light of the Scandinavian model. Decisions on pay and social security-related matters, however, were left to national legislation. Both the wording and provisions therefore suggest that the directive was adopted in a political environment of increasing need for flexibility in the labor market rather than a need to reinforce gender equality in the labor market.

It is notable that consensus on parental leave was achieved by the social partners in 1996, where no consensus had been possible by the national governments since 1983. This illustrates that major shifts have indeed occurred in EU social policy. Sadly, by the time it was issued, the directive on parental leave marked considerable improvement only in three member states: Ireland, Luxembourg, and Belgium. Because the United Kingdom had opted out of the Agreement on Social Policy, it was not obliged to comply with the directive. In all other countries, national provisions were generally more advantageous to workers than the ones prescribed in the directive.

The European Employment Strategy (EES) launched after the Treaty of Amsterdam consolidated this trend by introducing measures for reconciliation of work and family life with the aim of strengthening equal opportunities. In the first Commission Guidelines for Member States' Employment Policies for 1998 (Commission of the European Communities 1997), equal opportunities between women and men are one of the four pillars for action along with the promotion of entrepreneurship, workers' employability, and companies' adaptability. Policies related to breaks, parental leaves, and part-time work are considered of "particular importance for women," and child care provision is envisaged as a support measure for women's entry in the labor market (Commission of the European Communities 1997, 7).

An unintentional oversight was committed in drafting this text: no reference was made to men. This oversight revealed the implicit assumption that reconciliation measures are addressed only to women. The Council of Ministers (European Commission 1998) rectified this mistake by adding men to the final text, which fitted better with the overall purpose of the provision to increase flexibility of the labor market for all. The scope of provisions for care infrastructure, the other traditional measure enabling reconciliation, was limited by the Council to cases "where some needs are not met," presumably because it was considered costly and less appropriate for flexibility. More important, it sets up the idea that most needs are already being met without such infrastructure, that is, by conventional family arrangements.

The EES eventually became a major part of the EU agenda and a new policy instrument was developed, the open method of coordination

applicable to policy areas not included in EU areas of legal competence. Monitoring is made through recommendations to individual member states on the basis of yearly national plans. Moreover, EES tailored the priorities of the European Structural Funds (in particular the European Social Fund) for the programming period 2000–2006 (Council Regulations 1269/1999 and 1784/1999). Their policy priorities incorporate the four pillars of the EES, one of which (equal opportunities) involves measures for reconciliation of professional and family life. In particular, countries with low rates of women's employment could now benefit from EU funding (see Braithwaite 2000 for a detailed analysis of gender equality provisions in the EU Structural Funds). Increased (flexible) employment of women thus becomes synonymous with increasing gender equity.

In 2000 at the Lisbon European Council, the heads of member states reiterated their commitment to enhance employment by a tighter monitoring of national employment policies. They decided that the spring European Councils would be assigned to discuss employment and social issues. In Lisbon, in an effort to reduce occupational segregation and facilitate reconciliation, the Council introduced the idea of benchmarking for quality of child care provision (European Council 2000, paragraph 29). Their attempt to highlight the economic aspects of social policy and enhance the framing of social policy as a productive factor was reflected in the invitation to “develop indicators on the provision of care facilities for children and other dependents” (paragraph 9). Furthermore, replacing “family life” with “personal” life in reference to the reconciliation concept removed its connotation of traditionality (paragraph 26). Reconciliation appears as an element contributing to a good working environment for all and is facilitated by flexible work organization (paragraph 26). Specific child care targets also were set in 2002 at Barcelona European Council (2001): “Member states should provide childcare to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age” by 2010 (paragraph 32).

A Fifth Action Programme for gender equality was adopted in 2000 (European Commission 2001) despite internal pressure by EC management to discontinue equality-focused action programs in the light of the wide implementation of gender mainstreaming. This small victory depended in part on internal political support. In 1999, the replacement of male Irish conservative Pádraig Flynn by a Greek female politician, Anna Diamantopoulou, as commissioner in charge of employment and social affairs, including gender equality, created a more auspicious political environment for this program. The new commissioner appointed the former general secretary of the European

Women's Lobby, Barbara Helfferich, to her cabinet and charged her with the preparation of the program.

In the program references to reconciliation are few and carefully formulated in favor of gender equality. Under the economic objective, reconciliation is used for setting up benchmarking for childcare provision in the context of the EES (European Commission 2001,17). Under the objective of social rights, reconciliation is connected with protection systems, which "do not take into account that women predominantly carry the burden of having to reconcile family and professional life" (European Commission 2001, 21). However, no operational objective or action included in the program referred to measures of reconciliation. Yet again, after these proposals went on to the Council, the program emphasis shifted away from concern with sharing. In the Council Decision related to the program, "reconciliation" was once again associated only with fighting unemployment (European Commission 2001,10). The gender equality context that had originally driven it was lost.

### Conclusion

This study has analyzed the use of family-work balance as a concept for aims other than the gender equality goals for which it was initially introduced in the European policy agenda. The sharing of family and domestic tasks between women and men was intended to improve equality in the labor market. As a policy goal it went beyond equal treatment legislation and positive action in the work place. It offered the opportunity to recast thinking about inequality in the labor market by pointing out the importance of the private sphere and household life in the working of the labor market and in the production of workplace inequalities. In this context, men's low involvement in family and domestic tasks could be potentially challenged and redistribution of paid and unpaid work between women and men actually became a tacit policy goal.

Despite this initial success, sharing of family and domestic tasks was redefined as reconciliation of work and family life. As such, it was widely integrated in the context of employment policies focusing on increasing women's capacity to work (their employability) in the new flexible working time and working conditions. This left the existing gender division of labor within families out of consideration and thus failed to challenge stereotyped gender relations.

The process of cooptation of the gender equality concept through the growing dominance of economic priorities in framing this issue, exemplifies how the outcome of conflicting policy frames in the EU is

shaped, as well as how policy opportunities and barriers are evolving throughout the project of European integration. In the case studied here, the employment policy goal involving flexibility of the labor market eventually prevailed over gender equality objectives for framing reconciliation, resulting in coopting the concept. This cooptation transformed and corrupted its meaning.

In the EU's *sui generis* structure of policy making, this cooptation was facilitated by the multilevel forces and interests in play. The pressure to coopt reconciliation language was fostered by the EU's legitimization through tight coordination of employment policies, by the improvement of the EU position in the world economy through flexibilization of the labor market, and by the facilitation of restructuring of welfare states by increasing total labor force participation rates. As policy discourse embraced these goals, it highjacked the language of reconciliation and thwarted its potential for advancing feminist goals of sharing both labor and decision making more equally between women and men.

Analyzing the cooptation of concepts in the formal EU policy texts, as I have done here, contributes to identifying how and when implicit and silent shifts of policy goals take place, because these texts crystallize the difficult-to-achieve consensus of a wide range of national and EU political priorities, personalities, interest groups, and social movements. Changes may occur over long periods of time and may move both forward and backward as this consensus adapts to changes in policy environments, political coalitions, and social relations. Choices of specific words reveal policy changes, shape policy makers' expectations, and accommodate political interests. By reading between the lines of EU acts with a gender-sensitive lens, one can revive debates and imagine the round-table discussions in EU meeting rooms, buildings, and corridors between men in gray suits and a few women in colorful jackets. Scrutinizing words for their contextual meanings helps one see the different national, political, gender, and cultural backgrounds of the people deciding on gender equality issues, revealing their explicit arguments and implicit wishes. Final texts have to accommodate all these gender interests, satisfy as many parties as possible, appear attractive to the (primarily male) decision makers in the states, and (hopefully) address the women's constituency. How they do so is a key to understanding the process of their creation.

Words matter. Words should be understood in 11 official languages, as well as in 15 different national gender traditions. Cooptation of gender concepts becomes, therefore, all too likely. Alas, the concept of gender equality can be easily shrunk to the use of "he" and "she" in the EU official acts.

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