

WORKS AND CARE

# From Reconciliation to the Public Dimension of Daily Life

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This paper reviews existing policies for reconciling our working, personal and family life with the dual aim of highlighting their limitations and justifying the need to consider the public dimension of daily life.

## Reconciliation: the origins of the concept

The etymological origins of the concept of reconciliation come from the Latin word *conciliatio*. The use of the term is closely linked to legislative language and semantically refers to mediation, without imposition, between two opposing spheres (Junter et al., 1999). These etymological and semantic roots were maintained until the end of the 1990s when reconciliation entered the vocabulary of public policies in the European Union. Specifically, policies to reconcile work and personal life first emerged as a result of the Extraordinary European Council Meeting on Employment held in Luxembourg in 1997. The Council summit recognised the need for EU Member States to adopt a new employment strategy that could boost female participation in the labour market. They set a target of getting 60%

of women into paid work by 2010. That target was later increased to 75% by 2020. The political strategy designed to meet these targets was called reconciliation, and it materialised in a set of European directives aimed at providing more parental leave and raising the levels of care provision in everyday life (Borràs et al., 2007).

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The basis of this legislative scenario has been the subject of various criticisms that claim the set of policies introduced over the years hide a productivist logic and gender blindness. Firstly, the approach to reconciliation policies with regard to equal opportunities between men and women has been denounced as misleading. Primarily because the political priority has been to increase female employment rather than review the sexual division of labour (Bettio, 1998; Junter et al., 1999). Secondly, it has been pointed out that legislation and policies have only focused on paid work, contributing, therefore, to the invisibility of other work that is unpaid yet essential for human life (Torns, 2004; Stratigaki, 2004). And thirdly, some argue that the reconciliation policies promoted by the EU are more targeted at alleviating the demographic and labour concerns of the Member States than to the reconciliation needs of the employed population. Along these lines, Maccines (2005) points to the EU's interest in increasing birth rates to offset growing migratory trends. In short, as Saraceno (2006) points out, reconciliation has become a central pillar in European social policies, around which employment, demographic and equal opportunities policies interact.

## Individual approach to a social problem

Aside from policies, the balance of actions instigated by companies shows how human resources departments have often managed reconciliation measures. Common practice emphasises the individual approach to a social problem by strengthening reconciliation as a strategy to combat absenteeism, retain skilled labour and individualise employment relations. Ultimately, therefore, the goal has been increased productivity and competitiveness rather than equal opportunities for men and women (Moreno, 2009).

From a theoretical perspective, reconciliation has emerged as a concept of great heuristic potential that allows us to focus on the age-old problem of gender inequalities in general and the invisibility of domestic and care work in particular. But it seems the political and social abuse of this concept has detracted from its transformative capacity for effective equal opportunities between men and women. This abuse entails a certain institutionalisation of the concept, putting it at risk of becoming an ideologically neutral outcome in its own right, despite its intrinsically subjective interests. The annulment of

political content explains the gender blindness that characterises many of the actions. To put it bluntly, most reconciliation policies designed over the last few years cannot claim to focus on issues that are exclusively “of and for” women. In the words of Stratigaki (2004), the concept has been subjected to a process of co-optation that has corrupted its initial meaning in favour of the flexibility of the labour market and against equal opportunities. The conception of reconciliation imposed doesn’t question the sexual division of labour, contributes to the invisibility of domestic and care tasks and reinforces the social organisation of productivist time thereby removing the possibility of putting people’s lives at the centre of policies. In short, the scope of most reconciliation policies is limited to intervening in the labour market to promote the employability of working mothers. On the contrary, their main focus should be on guiding action in the domestic sphere to encourage men to be more involved in caring for dependent children and adults in the home.

Because the home is identified as a social space, we need to analyse what happens “behind closed doors” to review the social organisation of care work and ensure equal opportunities for men and women. The empirical data shows how, over the last thirty years, the number of women in the labour market has grown. However, we should note that a qualitative improvement has not accompanied the quantitative improvement. Horizontal and vertical segregation, wage discrimination and the persistence of sexual harassment remind us that, even today, not only are there more men in employment but also that they enjoy better working conditions than women. Gender inequalities in the workplace don’t disappear; they are simply transformed. Furthermore, the mass incorporation of women into the labour market hasn’t come hand-in-hand with the mass incorporation of men into the domestic sphere. On the one hand, the number of double-income couples, where both partners are employed, is growing. On the other, however, is the fact that female part-time work or telecommuting often prove to be a false solution to reconciliation issues because their increased flexibility only results in women dedicating more time to domestic tasks and less time to paid work (Borràs et al., 2009; Moreno, 2009).

The mass incorporation of women into the labour market hasn’t come hand-in-hand with the mass incorporation of men into the domestic sphere: women are permanently immersed in a double life that sees them juggle both family and work responsibilities

Data on time usage shows that women are still shouldering most of the responsibility for domestic and care work. They are permanently immersed in a double life that sees them juggle both family and work responsibilities. On the plus side, there has been a marginal increase in the amount of time men dedicate to household chores, which is conditioned by age and level of education. However, these tasks continue to be gender-segregated into masculine and feminine. In relation to care, the time that fathers and mothers spend with their children has increased, although the nature of that time differs according to gender. Fathers tend to enjoy more flexible and playful time with their offspring, while the time mothers spend with them is more structured and regular, and involves more work than

play. Another type of care work in the home is the care of dependent adults. Time spent on this task often represents extra work, is irregular and provides little satisfaction for the person taking it on. In short, the imbalance between the presence and absence of men and women in the workplace and at home explains the need to introduce the public dimension of daily life into the design of public policies.

## The need of reviewing the social organisation of care work

The challenge of recognising everyday life as an unavoidable sphere for action to review the social organisation of care work and rethink equality-focused public policies faces three sociocultural resistances. In the first place, there's individual resistance to allowing the public administration to regulate aspects of life that are considered private. The home represents a symbolic division between public life and private life. It's understood that what goes on inside it is the exclusive domain of the adults who share the domestic space because they have the right to preserve their intimacy and privacy. Secondly, there's a social resistance to recognising the value of domestic and care work. Despite its criticality for the development of life, a lack of social and economic recognition persists. As a result, conflicts related to the organisation and distribution of time and work are perceived and experienced in an individual manner that has de facto social origins. And in third and final place, there is political resistance. In this respect, we need to ask to what extent the person who assumes public responsibility is willing to open the Pandora's box that is the daily conflict around the sexual division of labour.

Including the public dimension of daily life in policymaking will force a review of government priorities and a reconsideration of the set of activities necessary for the reproduction of human life. In this sense, we need to question the collective imagination that feeds the idea of the home as a private space and, on the contrary, consider, in terms of rights and duties, what happens within the domestic sphere. Our accumulated knowledge shows that equal relationships within households are essential for achieving equality between men and women in the public sphere. Society will be fairer when citizens have nothing to hide inside their homes and can preserve their privacy.

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