

Pro-egalitarian family policy on the supranational European level – an answer to the fertility decline in ageing welfare societies?

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Reflections on the fertility decline and the ageing of European welfare societies are not new on the supranational European agenda but now since the turn of the millenium they have started to become more visible and more virulent. In these discussions economic, demographic and equality oriented arguments are mutually connected. From the demographic perspective a central aim is to heighten the fertility rate. One central strategy to reach this aim is the development of a pro-egalitarian family policy that is oriented to more gender equality (cf. Gauthier 1996). The European Commission makes very clear that gender equality contributes to solve the problems caused by demographic changes and makes possible to heighten the fertility rate.

The political strategy of gender mainstreaming, that has been part of all political strategies in the European Union since the Treaty of Amsterdam, is seen as a strategy that has to be considered in all political attempts to handle the demographic changed, especially the causes and the consequences of the fertility decline.

Gender mainstreaming also plays a central role in attempts to develop a supranational European family policy. Political strategies to put gender equality into action were put on the European agenda when the EU was founded. The development of a European family policy, however, may sound strange because of family policy in the European Union still is a policy topic in national responsibility. A closer look to the political history of the European Union shows that on the supranational European level attempts to develop a common European family policy have started in the 1980s, under the labels of labour market and gender equality policies.

At this time in some EU-member states pro-natalist family policies were put into action. Their aim was to heighten the fertility rate. However, at this time the European Commission feared that these policies could contribute to push women

away from the labour market and so be counterproductive to the other aim to integrate more women in the labour market. As Ross concludes: „Pro-natalism, of course, could provide arguments for measures to remove women from the labour force altogether, and this prospect provided another reason for institutions that were constitutionally committed to equal opportunities to develop new ways of arguing the cause. The beginnings of European action in the general area of family and childcare policy issues thus coincided with the economic crises.“ (Ross 2001: 185)

On the European level currently the development of a common supranational family policy plays an important role. A main topic in these ongoing discussions is the problem of reconciling work and family that in European politics still is mainly presented as a problem of women. But gender equality politics on the European level also takes the problem of the gendered division of labour in public and private spheres into account and addresses as well men as fathers. According to official papers of the Commission of the European Union this gendered division of labour should be changed to enable women to work and to become and be mothers. So changes in gender relations to bring more gender equality in public and private spheres forward are supposed to heighten women's participation in the labour market (as the Lisbon-Agenda requests) and to heighten the fertility rate as well.

Of course the European Commission and the European Council know about the different models of family policies in the European Union and that this political issue belongs to the political areas in national responsibility. However, they are convinced that better possibilities to reconcile work, family and private life contribute to economic advantages of all EU-member states and thereby contribute to fulfil the aims of the Lisbon-Agenda. On the other hand the Lisbon-Agenda is supposed to offer a framework for the modernisation of national family policies with regard to gender equality and to reconciling work, family and private life.

In my paper I will discuss with regard to the supranational European level how European gender equality policies and the development of a common family policy are interwoven as part of the supranational European strategy to cope with the causes and consequences of demographic change in ageing European welfare societies. My paper is based on the results of a qualitative content analysis of the main documents by the European Commission and the European Council that deal with demographic change and gender equality. This study is a part of my post-doctoral thesis in sociology that will be published in 2012.