

Intergenerational solidarity in an ageing environment

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Summary

Intergenerational solidarity is being challenged not only by demographic ageing, but also by the increasing labour market participation of women and by marriage instability. Women, and low-income groups, who bear the brunt of unpaid caring responsibilities are vulnerable to increasing conflicts of loyalty between their work, and other family, commitments and their caring commitments. Intergenerational solidarity may not therefore be sustainable as the main form of caring support for children or the elderly over the longer-term.

There are major differences in countries' levels of support for carers, and thus in the 'caring penalties' paid by women, be it for being mothers, or for caring for a frail elder parent, or both. Women in the south and east of Europe find themselves particularly unsupported by the cultural and institutional arrangements in their countries. Those in the Nordic countries enjoy the most extensive support. Badly-designed care and leave provision arrangements can be very damaging to women's ability to engage in the labour market, and can inhibit men's involvement in care after childbirth. They may also strengthen social class inequalities. Pension reforms which raise the pension age may produce a caring deficit if they are not accompanied by an adequate offer of good quality and affordable services for the frail old as well as for children.

In order to recalibrate the relationship between intergenerational dependence and intergenerational solidarity and to reduce gender and social class inequalities in care giving and receiving, policies should both strengthen individual autonomy and access to resources and support those who take up intergenerational responsibilities, particularly with regard to care. Towards this end, the following appear particularly important :

- The provision of available, accessible and affordable childcare and frail elderly care
- The provision of family-work conciliation instruments beyond parents of small children
- Initiatives to support fathers and sons, to play a greater role in their care
- Family friendly working time policies
- Continuous gender and social class impact assessment of care policies

Ageing is a feature of families and kinship groups as well as of societies

Families and kinship groups are becoming increasingly top-heavy, with grandparents and great grandparents progressively outnumbering grandchildren. Ageing families are also evolving in the context of two other major social changes, which themselves have important ramifications for family and kinship structures. First, the increase in women's labour force

participation has reduced the potential pool of full-time carers for children and the elderly. Second, the increasing instability of partnerships affects kinship structures and relations beyond the partnership itself: relations between parents and children, and relationships between grandparents and grandchildren.

These combined developments have major implications for intergenerational solidarity, and particularly for the sustainability of existing models of caring. 'Upward intergenerational solidarity' – the caring of older generations by younger ones – is often seen as a permanent resource which younger family members will always make available to older ones. However, in the context of these changing labour market patterns and kinship structures, there are substantial and growing strains on its delivery, and sharp inequalities between social groups in their ability to deliver such solidarity. Social, family and labour market policies all need to reflect and respond to these emerging challenges.

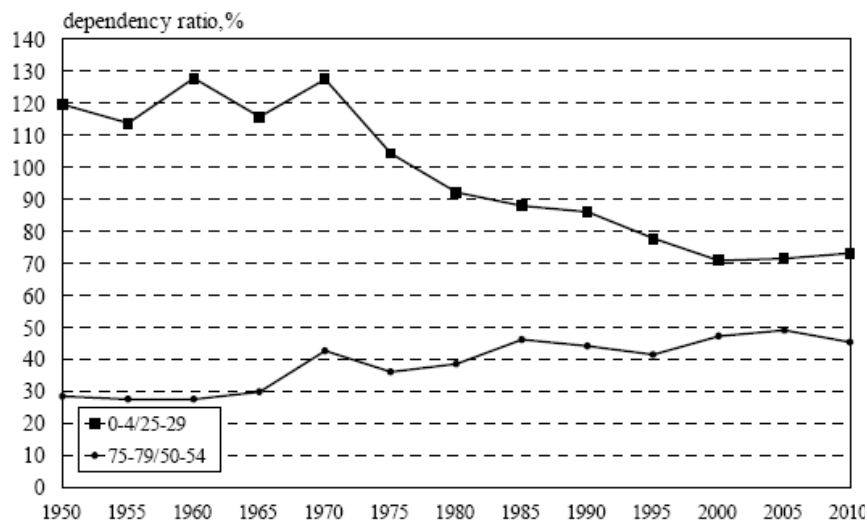
This policy brief reports the results of research performed both at the micro and at the institutional level into the contemporary social and economic dynamics of intergenerational solidarity, and specifically the social and gender patterns of the delivery of family-based elderly care within the EU. It considers some of the implications for gender equality arising from the cultural and institutional arrangements of countries which do not support work-family balance. It then offers conclusions on policy directions which can reduce gender and social class inequalities in the care burden, and 'intergenerational overburdening' generally.

The changing dynamics of intergenerational solidarity.

In contemporary welfare states, financial support flows downwards between generations, while care support flows from the middle both to the older and the younger generations. The older cohorts have been the beneficiaries of post-war economic development and of the expansion of the welfare state. Having accumulated assets and with access to relatively generous pensions, they are able to transfer financial resources to younger generations. The 'young elderly' are also able to deliver care across the generations, i.e. to grandchildren and frail parents. Actually, the absolute and relative increase of old members within family networks is increasing both the extent and intensity of their care requirements, necessitating increased 'upward' intergenerational solidarity. Studies show that it is particularly the middle generation of women - those in their fifties and early sixties – that is experiencing this dual demand on their availability to care. Caught between the care demands of the young and the old, they have been labelled "the sandwich generation".

The figure below shows how, while the care demands on younger adults have decreased since the 1950s, due to decreasing fertility rates, they have increased for older adults - those over fifty years old – due to increases in the life expectancy of the old. As a result, conflicts between the demands of paid work and family care, and problems in balancing the two, are an increasingly permanent feature of women's adult lives.

The decreasing rates of dependency of children to young adults and the increasing rates of dependency of the elderly to middle-aged adults, Europe, 1950-2010



Source: Puur, A., Sakkeus, L., Schenk, N., and Põldma, A. *Family constellations in Europe*, Estonian Interuniversity Population Research Centre, 'Multilinks' project report, 2010, available at (http://www.multilinks-project.eu/uploads/papers/0000/0019/Family_constellations_in_EuropeWP3_final.pdf).

Inequalities and penalties among carers

In European families, women still bear the main responsibility for the care of both children and the elderly, and this double burden is increasing with the increasingly ageing population. This affects both women's financial autonomy and their position in the labour market. As far as childcare is concerned, they pay a motherhood penalty: in wages, career progression, pension income, and labour market status. There may also be a penalty attached to their role in caring for the elderly; the lack of clear evidence for this is probably partly due to the fact that many older women caring for an elderly person are currently out of the labour force. However, this is very likely to change in the near future, as more women enter the labour market and retire later.

There are country differences in the care penalty which are shaped by cultural and institutional arrangements. In countries such as those in southern Europe, which are unsupportive of working motherhood, women are often forced to leave the labour market on maternity. In these countries, working mothers are also more likely to incur a higher wage penalty and to be disadvantaged in their labour market position.

Poorly-designed social and family policies, specifically, for the provision of childcare services and parental leave arrangements, exacerbate gender inequalities in care and in the labour market. Maternity leave provision which is too short makes it difficult for mothers to return to work at all, particularly if there is a lack of affordable and good quality child care, while over-long leave arrangements can contribute to the motherhood penalty by keeping mothers out of the labour market and so out of personal progression pathways. Since these risks differ across social classes, inequalities among women in the possibility to conciliate paid work and motherhood are greater where policies are less generous towards working mothers. With regard to gender inequalities in child care, little or no paid paternity leave discourages fathers from stopping work. Fathers' behaviour seems to be particularly governed by the parental leave provision they can access (the level of compensation, presence of a take it or leave it father's quota, and the possibility of taking the leave part-time and over a long period). This affects not only their propensity to take it, but also their likelihood of assuming continuing responsibility for childcare after returning to the labour market.

Two further developments appear to be obstructing a better gender balance in the provision of household income and intergenerational care. First, labour market insecurity is reducing

family formation and fertility, and rendering employees more vulnerable to the demands of work. Research developed within EQUALSOC shows that this creates strain-based conflicts particularly for men. Second, and at the same time, work intensification has increased in all European countries since the early 1990s, affecting all social groups, including better-educated workers in highly qualified jobs, for whom gender equality is often an important social value.

As far as care of the elderly is concerned, the economic position of the family – all other things equal - is a key determinant of the level of demands to which (predominantly female) family members are exposed. The lower the socioeconomic class of both the daughter and the elderly parent, the higher the daughter's involvement in the care of her parent. This relationship between socioeconomic class and the family care burden has less salience, however, in countries where the elderly are entitled to social care irrespective of their financial and family resources. So, for example, in southern and eastern European countries, access to non-family care for the frail elderly is very unequally distributed between social groups, since it is provided mostly only through the market. Here, low-income children of low-income dependent parents, particularly daughters and daughters-in-law, are left with a large share of care work, which can entail possible conflicts of loyalty over their other family relationships. Forms of "payments for care" (to the person needing care or, more rarely, to the family carers themselves), substituting for direct state-provided service provision, may increase the extent of care provided by female family members in low-income groups. It may also boost the informal (and migrant) care labour market.

Finally, as far as the receipt of care is concerned, divorced men are particularly affected by weak intergenerational solidarity and lack of elderly care. Since divorce often weakens fathers' contact and exchanges with their children over the years, divorced fathers, when they grow old, are particularly vulnerable to relative isolation and may lose access to the care support networks which reside in their former families.

A better balance of intergenerational solidarity and personal autonomy

Intergenerational solidarity is an important social resource for individuals and families, ensuring that parents and grandparents care for children, whilst in their turn, daughters (and to a lesser extent, sons) provide care for their family members in their older age. However, over-reliance by public authorities on such intergenerational solidarity also exploits and reinforces gender and social class inequalities.

Social policies could and in some country do recalibrate this relationship between dependence and solidarity. Childbearing, for example, indicates a willingness to take long-standing responsibility for a younger generation, but it often has negative consequences, for women's financial autonomy and career prospects. These negative consequences may be reduced, or eliminated, and the wish to have a(nother) child may be supported by policies aiming at : a) supporting women's financial independence and their equal opportunities in the labour market; b) promoting more equally shared childcare responsibilities between fathers and mothers; c) supporting more family friendly working times and organization; d) providing affordable and good quality childcare also in view of supporting equal opportunities among children. Similarly, the willingness to support a frail elderly parent may be strengthened by the improved availability of professional care which lifts the major burden from them. Furthermore, the provision of professional care would reduce social inequalities in the appropriateness of the care received.

In this perspective, the following items of the social policy palette seem particularly efficacious in The social policies proposed below would reducing intergenerational dependence and social inequalities, whilst at the same time nurturing intergenerational solidarity.

- Available, accessible and affordable childcare is central to the continued and enhanced labour market engagement of women, without a simultaneous reduction in fertility. This in turn is vital if the Europe 2020 objective of raising the overall female employment rate to 75% is to be achieved. It is vital also to the reduction of social inequalities in the children's developmental chances.
- Elderly care should also be provided on this basis, in order to ensure that adequate care is received irrespective of financial means or density of family networks and strength of intergenerational solidarity.
- Working time policies and leave arrangements cannot remain focused predominantly on the needs of parents with small children. Shorter and flexible working hours and family leaves should be available to women and men in a wider range of personal and domestic circumstances.
- Measures for fathers to play a greater role in childcare, and sons in elderly care, need to be developed. Policies in the Nordic countries have led the way in improving the attitudes and practices of men with respect to childcare. Similar initiatives have been later developed in other, but not all, EU countries. Equally measures such as carers' leave provision should be promoted and widened to encourage men's involvement in the care of their elderly relatives.
- The design of care policies should always be evaluated for their impact on both gender and social class dimensions of equality.