WALKING THE TIGHTROPE, CARRYING THE BABY: WORK-FAMILY BALANCE FROM THE CHILD’S POINT OF VIEW
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1. INTRODUCTION

Yet again governments have conspired to dabble into the politics of housework only this time the raison d’être underlying this intervention is work life balance. To take an example, within the EU, which is principally a union founded for economic reasons, there is consistent promotion of women’s participation in the labour market. This is cited in the name of gender equality and equal opportunities. Most, if not all, women and men would agree that access to the labour market should be unencumbered by gender constraints and that it is a good thing for states to make this issue a priority. I certainly have no wish to raise a polemic just for the sake of argument! What I do wish to do is to raise awareness relating to the effect such measures have on children.

Much has been written on work life balance/ work family balance, call it what you will. Studies have been carried out relating to the effects of long work hours on personal and physical well being and the impact on relationships. Research has been conducted into the impact of work on women as mothers and to a lesser extent on men as fathers BUT little attention has been paid to how working conditions indirectly and directly affect children. The repercussions on unseen members of the family do not seem to figure in policy, notwithstanding lip service to their inclusion at other levels.

If family includes children this is hard to understand. Reconciling family and work is important to all its members. Those who do not work themselves are just as essential to understanding the dynamic. Encouraging fuller participation of all adults in the labour market comes at a price. If couples are to continue to have children – and falling birth rates are another issue in this complicated area\textsuperscript{1} – states must provide real support at all levels.

In this presentation I propose to take a look at the issue of work family balance from the mother’s, father’s and child’s perspectives in turn, presenting

\textsuperscript{1} In 1960 fertility in almost all member states laid above the replacement level of 2.1 with a high margin while in 2003 the rate had almost everywhere dropped well below replacement levels. Aging is having an important effect on the age structure of the European population so that by 2050 there are expected to be 66 million persons aged 54-64 and only 48 million aged 15-24. The decline in the total population of the EU-25 is expected by 2025 and it will be preceded by a decline in the population of working age starting in 2011. Info from Annex 2 to EU Green Paper on Confronting Demographic Change COM(2005)94 final, Brussels, 16.03.2005

\textsuperscript{2} A study in the US has found that 49% of high achieving women are childless compared with only 19% of their male colleagues (Hewlett 2000)
a brief overview of current research in this field. I will then turn to state responses in child care and the motivating factors behind state enthusiasm to encourage female participation in the work force. Finally I hope to show how children are affected by such strategies, notwithstanding the law which is structured to protect their best interests.

2. OVERVIEW

Within the EU, a Green paper is currently under discussion relating to “Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations”. It opens with a declaration that “Europeans would like to have more children. But they are discouraged from doing so by all kinds of problems that limit their freedom of choice…”

One of the series of questions which the Green Paper poses, in its search for concrete feedback, asks: How can parents, in particular young parents, be encouraged to enter the labour market, have the career that they want and the number of children they want? It also warns of a different response by young people: “Young employed people may want to spend more time with their children and work more at another time in their life. These demographic changes may therefore lead to a new, more adaptable and flexible organisation of working time.”

The fact that young people are taken the option to prioritise so differently and to place family time above work must tell us something. Perhaps it is strongly indicating certain resentment by persons who themselves grew up in an environment where family time was at a premium and always gave way to work commitments. The reasons for this stance are complicated and must include psychological, economic and social constraints together with scant legal protection and even more sparse monitoring.

The advent of legislation to promote more family friendly working time is a welcome innovation. However the laws are not applicable to all without exception and in a number of countries, directives to protect the worker and to

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3 EU Green Paper on Demographic Change, op. cit.
4 McKeown K. and Sweeney J. Family Wellbeing and Family Policy- A Review of Research on Benefits and Costs, Ireland, 2001, footnote 5 on page 8 citing Fukuyama: For example Sweden spent ten times as much as Italy or Spain to encourage its citizens to have children and between 1983 and the early 1990s it managed to raise fertility back to almost replacement levels. But the rate began to collapse again in the mid 1990s and by 1998 was back down to 1.5
5 Ibid. Item concluding queries to 1.1.
6 Ibid. Item 2.2
7 In Malta minimum standards require that women are entitled to 13+1 weeks maternity leave, 3 months parental leave and 15 hours leave per year for urgent family matters on full pay. Many employers supplement these conditions and in government service parents are entitled to work for reduced hours, take 1 year parental leave for each child and are offered the option of a one time career break for up to 3 years without pay and/ or 12 months family responsibilities leave again without pay. Statistics show that men are reluctant to make use of these entitlements.
enhance family time are perceived as a real threat to economic viability and to a decrease in spending power which is seriously unwelcome.

Financial constraints are also crucial to the argument. The actual time during which children are physically part of the family and dependent on it is quite brief. However it comes at a time when prospective parents are starting to build up their careers and achieve a commensurate rise in earning power. As child rearing poses serious burdens on finances (and time) as well as decreased opportunities, standards of living of childless couples compare much more favourably when compared with their counterparts who have opted to become parents. Studies have shown that parents expect some sort of drain on their resources but are unprepared for how large the difference is in fact. The need to maintain an income essential for the upbringing of children then motivates longer working hours and the vicious circle or competing work and family time.

The German situation and response may shed a little light on the extent of the challenge. In an attempt to improve access to child care facilities an investment of Euros 1.5 billion has been made into the under 3s sector. In the summer of 2003 the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs launched an initiative called the Alliance for the Family based on the belief that a higher birth rate, higher labour market participation by women and best education and training of children are essential to respond to demographic changes and economic competition. In 2004 local alliances for the family started to be formed and as at December 2004 there were 150 such alliances united in their efforts to strengthen family friendly policies. Time will tell how effective this strategy turns out to be.

Where parents must work outside the home to simply survive or to keep up the life style to which they are accustomed, they have no choice but to seek external child care for their children. In Malta as in a number of other countries, grandparents are still the most favoured support in caring for young children. However with more grandparents in full time remunerated employment, young parents are faced with the burden of paying for child care when their reason for working is often to help support the child. State policy seems to echo this logic and offer little viable alternatives. The set answer seems to be that women should work, regardless of their notions of parenting that men although ideally encouraged to participate in parenting should continue to work full time and for long hours so that child care is the only way out. However, research has also shown that this is not true - childcare is not always the only solution.

A recent study in the Netherlands carried out in depth research on partner interaction and showed that effectiveness of government policy (relating to equal division of tasks or having more children, for example) should be based on the real rather than portrayed image of family. It found that “parents reported that enabling both partners to stay at home during the first years of

8 EU comparative survey into net purchasing power during various stages of the life cycle reported in EU Family Observer, 2000
8 Information from EU Peer Review Session Reconciliation of Work and Family Life, Germany 2004
their children’s lives was more effective than child care arrangements to prevent the huge drop out rate of mothers from the labour market."\(^{10}\) The conclusion was that impact monitoring shows how analysis at the government level is far too technocratic to really understand how families function.

On a far more cynical note, it may also be the case that states have a vested interest in encouraging more persons to join the work force, regardless of the impact this may have on children. It is a reality that unless more people work and pay social security contributions, there will not be enough money to pay for pensions and other social services. Ironically the very people the state endeavours to protect may end up burdening the tax payer as a result of parental stress, marital breakdown, depression and mental ill health, childhood aggression and maladjustment etc.\(^{11}\)

It is interesting to note that in Australia’s most recent report to the United Nations Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a section relating to “balancing work and family” is inserted under heading V relating to Family Environment and Alternative Care. However the state report highlights family friendly conditions in work agreements without ever referring to the impact of such measures on children, choosing instead to focus on assisting “employees to balance their work and family responsibilities effectively through the development of mutually beneficial work practices with employers”.\(^{12}\)

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs held a Consultative Meeting on Mainstreaming the Family Issue \(^{13}\) and used the Copenhagen Programme of Action \(^{14}\) as its basis in emphasising that the family should be helped in its supporting, educating and nurturing roles in contributing to family policy. One notable conclusion cautiously declared that “a family perspective could be a vehicle to incorporate new and emerging issues such as fatherhood or parenting” (my italics).

The NSPCC recently published the results of a project carried out in 2003 where through a number of qualitative studies, businesses are shown that child-friendly and family-friendly policies are attainable and desirable. The emphasis in the project was in showing that small and medium sized businesses could also benefit from introducing more flexible working arrangements. The raison d’être of the study was the conviction that employers’ policies have an impact on family life and the capacity of parents to look after their children. In turn, such policies and practices would help remove some of the stress that comes from balancing demands of home and work thereby positively affecting the environment children grow up in. Recent standpoints on corporate social responsibility are reflected in this quality of

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\(^{10}\) Cuyvers P and Kiely G., The Family Roller -Coaster Ride, page 8, in EU Family Observer, 2001

\(^{11}\) CRC/C/129/Add.4 29 December 2004, Articles 201-212.

\(^{12}\) New York, December 2003

\(^{13}\) Particularly Chapter Four entitled Social Integration
work. An unequivocal statement apportioning responsibility to employers for the society children live in would be very welcome.\textsuperscript{15}

2. THE MOTHER

Malta has one of the lowest female employment rates in the EU\textsuperscript{16} and women’s employment is concentrated in specific sectors and levels of occupation with many women better academically qualified than their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{17} However challenges of organising caring responsibilities and paid employment cause so much stress for dual earner families that many couples resolve this conflict by relinquishing a second income and moving to the single breadwinner model. This means that on the birth of the first or second child, the majority of Maltese women, either by choice or through lack of it, quit their jobs to take on caring responsibilities.\textsuperscript{18} This traditional arrangement constrains women in terms of job satisfaction and financial independence.\textsuperscript{19,20}

However inactivity from the labour market carries negative effects. Statistics show that such inactivity brings with it a greater risk of poverty for women (19\%) than for men (10\%). When surveyed by the Employment and Training Corporation, 44.8\% of inactive women said they would be willing to work while 50.9\% stated the opposite citing personal or family responsibilities as the reason.\textsuperscript{21}

When age difference is analysed, unemployed women below the age of 35 represent 79.6\% of all unemployed women and only 8.1\% of single mothers hold down full-time employment in contrast to 35.6\% of single fathers. Lack of child care is common to all these statistics, even though state commitment to the provision of child care services has been constant and openly declared over the past years.\textsuperscript{22} A Technical Committee on Child day Care was set up in 2002 with the remit to develop and implement a national child day care policy and to draw up regulations and standards for child day care services.

\textsuperscript{15} NSPCC, Getting It Right – Improving Work-life balance for your Business, 2003
\textsuperscript{16} National Statistics Office, as at December 2004, cites it at 32.7\% while the Lisbon target is 60\% by 2010.
\textsuperscript{17} Labour Force Survey 2002-2003
\textsuperscript{18} Farrugia R., Comment Paper by National Expert to the EU Peer Review in the Field of Social Inclusion Policies on Reconciliation of Work and Family Life, Germany 2004
\textsuperscript{19} Malta Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) Annual Report 2004
\textsuperscript{20} It is interesting but hardly consoling to note that this pattern is repeated in the majority of states in Europe and elsewhere in the world.
\textsuperscript{21} 2001, Labour Force Survey
\textsuperscript{22} Commitment to draw up legislation by June 2005 has not yet been honoured - page 15 National Action Plan on Poverty and Social Exclusion published by the Ministry for Family and Social Solidarity
In 2005 the World Economic Forum carried out its first study to assess the size of the gender gap in 58 countries.\(^{23}\) Malta ended up in 43rd place (above Italy 45 and Greece 50) even though for health it ranked in 24\(^{th}\) place and for educational attainment in 16\(^{th}\). New Zealand which ranked overall 6\(^{th}\) for example came in at 47\(^{th}\) place relating to economic opportunity and the US 17\(^{th}\) with 46\(^{th}\) place for economic opportunity and 42\(^{nd}\) for health. The UK came in 8\(^{th}\) overall but scored at 41\(^{st}\) for economic opportunity and 28\(^{th}\) for health. The Nordic countries took all top five places with Sweden in first place.

Women may choose to forgo having any children at all in view of the complicated obstacle that beset them, particularly when they have made substantial achievements in their career path. One survey of Yale Law women graduates shows the growing numbers of women attorneys (25-35\%) but only a small number of women who are partners in firms (5-15\%) highlighting the importance of what they term “family-friendly” and “female-friendly” practices in the profession.\(^{24}\)

Among German women born in 1960 more than one quarter have no children while the situation in France, Spain and Norway shows that this only applies in relation to one woman out of ten.\(^{25}\) Well educated German women are identified as most likely to postpone motherhood because of the difficulties to combine a career with family life until an age when it becomes increasingly difficult to have children.\(^{26}\) Many of them remain childless.\(^{27}\)

An additional consideration towards the enhancement for women’s participation in the labour force is the struggle towards eliminating child poverty. In Germany roughly one third of all children of single or lone mothers in particular are found to depend on social assistance and live below the poverty line so that work is invariably the only solution to resolve the vicious circle\(^{28}\). In Malta, the poverty risk arising from unemployment appears to be greater for men (57\%) than for women (31\%) although children at risk of poverty is 21\% but this is not proven as directly related to unemployment.

3. THE FATHER

“84\% of men surveyed by Eurobarometer in 2004 said they had not taken parental leave or did not intend to do so, even when informed of their rights”\(^{29}\). Local studies have shown that although a number of parental leave options

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23 Lopez-Claros A and Zahidi S., World Economic Forum, Women’s Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap, 2005 the study was based on 1.economic participation, 2.economic opportunity, 3.political empowerment, 4.educational achievement and 5.health and well-being.
24 Yale Law Women, 2001
25 Schmidt and Mohn 2004: 189, Eurostat data
26 This also contributes to increased measures taken to enhance fertility by artificial and assisted means at great financial and emotional cost.
28 Goebel, Habich and Krause, 2002 – where the poverty line is 50\% of net income
29 Cited in the EU Green Paper on Demographic Change, op. cit., at page 5, item 1.1.
are on offer, they are only availed of by women as the predominant work culture, particularly in the private sector, continues to consider the ideal worker as free from any attachment and committed solely to work.\textsuperscript{30} Even though more than adequate legislation exists to protect workers from discrimination, the mentality persists in attesting to employers who favour long hours, dedication to service and reliability at all costs.\textsuperscript{31}

Research shows that the father’s share in child rearing is associated with increased affection between the father and young adult, greater social integration on the part of the child etc.\textsuperscript{32} However fathers of young children are especially likely to work long hours with nearly 4 million employees in the UK working more than 48 hours per week, notwithstanding the EU Working Time Directive.\textsuperscript{33}

One of the most direct mechanisms through which long hours may negatively affect family wellbeing, and particularly the well being of children, is through increasing parental stress.\textsuperscript{34} Understandably parents who work long and stressful hours only to come home to demanding and often tired children find it difficult to interact at optimum level. Studies are underway to show that parental stress is also a contributor to child abuse, although it is logically apparent that snappy and irritable parents will have a lower threshold of patience when dealing with an energetic and demanding child eager to spend “quality” time with parent(s).

Furthermore, several studies have shown that it is not only the length of time people work that counts but also when they work. This is to say that weekend work, unpredictable hours and lack of time autonomy all have negative impacts on family time.\textsuperscript{35} Children who have been looking forward to a weekend activity in the company of one or both parents will inevitably feel let down by unexpected work demands. Self-employed persons often get caught up in a double bind as they benefit from more flexible working times (and therefore manage to respond better to emergency situations such as taking time out to care for a sick child) but feel the need to make up for such lost time because of the nature of the business and the drive to succeed.

Indeed, flexible working times are found to be ambivalent within the work life balance scenario. A German study\textsuperscript{36} found 45% of working parents work at

\textsuperscript{30} Borg A., Study on Gender Issues in Employment for the ETC, 2004 where she concludes that recourse to family friendly measures may mean forgoing promotion and is less popular among men.
\textsuperscript{31} Allen and Russel in their work with fathers found that “Men who take up family friendly provisions are less likely to be recommended for rewards (promotion)”, 1999
\textsuperscript{32} Amato and Booth, 1997 and Russell and Bowman, 2000
\textsuperscript{33} This is mainly attributable to the opt-out clause and the situation of self-employed who are outside the scope of the Directive. Some persons are also required to work longer hours as in the case of hospital doctors.
\textsuperscript{36} 2003 study carried out by WSI, Institute for Economic and Social research, Düsseldorf, Germany
least occasionally on a Saturday, 23% on a Sunday and 37% working in the evenings between 6 and 10 pm. In a series of questions put to parents, it was found that working parents both express a preference for working time reductions, although it is unclear whether this would be so if the extra time were remunerated overtime.

The time fathers spend with their children also varies according to the age of the child with most time spent interacting at age 2 and declining steadily thereafter. Other variables include the father’s total work hours which determine childcare time with obvious negative repercussions where long work hours are the norm.\textsuperscript{37} The father’s contribution has been demonstrated to be largest where the mother works part-time and falls back significantly where she also works full-time, since in this case external child care is resorted to.\textsuperscript{38} The financial implications of this result are interesting in that they illustrate that it is often economically ill advised for both parents to work full time and pay for expensive child care.

4. THE CHILD

The EU Green Paper concludes in trying to answer what the role of the EU should be in responding to demographic change and cites a number of essential priorities including the suggestion that

“We must ask two simple questions: What value do we attach to children? Do we want to give families, whatever their structure, their due place in European society?”\textsuperscript{39}

One could pose an additional question to try to establish the motivation for decisions relating to childcare policy: in whose best interests are they taken? A number of states brazenly underpin gender equality policy by promoting child care. Child care is often sold on the basis of being an investment in the child’s future and as part of a package of rights of the child reinforced through both parents providing commodities available through paid work.

Furthermore, while childcare may be affordable and of good quality this does not always mean that it is suitable for each particular child. Although parents’ views relating to care arrangements are important, the child’s response is the key factor in determining best interests. Any parent who has selected child care only to find the child failing to settle or being unhappy at having to go knows that this emotional variable is unaccounted for in government policy and certainly not reflected in terms of time and stress for all concerned.\textsuperscript{40}

A recent study on family well-being has shown that the well-being of children is almost entirely and directly in the hands of their parents through whom

\textsuperscript{37} Gray A., The Long Hours Culture: Its Effects on families and Communities, paper read at conference Work-Life Balance: Across the life-course, Edinburgh University, 2004
\textsuperscript{38} Dex S., Work and Family Life in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century, York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2003
\textsuperscript{39} EU Green Paper on Demographic Change, op. cit., Item 3, page 10
\textsuperscript{40} Aside from other issues as to parental but mainly maternal guilt feelings at placing a child in child care in order to be able to carry out full time work outside the home.
almost all outside influences on their wellbeing are mediated. They also show that mothers exercise a considerably greater influence on the well-being of children than fathers, even in two-parent households, possibly because they spend more time with the children. However it may also be due to the fact that the characteristics of mothers are more influential in setting a climate or atmosphere of the family – both through the parent-child relationship but also through the couple relationship – than the corresponding characteristics of fathers.\footnote{McKeown K., Pratschke J., Haase T. Family Well-Being: What makes a difference?, Ireland, 2003, page 10.}

However work related issues are rarely if ever viewed from the child’s point of view. For instance, leave or vacation is only perceived as a benefit to the worker while it has a direct impact on the wellbeing and care of children. Not only does free time mean that parents and children have more time to interact but it also means that parents are generally in a better mood to spend time together.\footnote{NSPCC, Getting It Right, op. cit.} Unions and states negotiating labour directives need to be more sensitive to the repercussions which changes in work practices and legislation imply for children.

In relation to child care, although schooling provision from age 3 and over is freely available for all, child care provision in the 0-3 age group remains a cause for concern. Child care centres are in short supply and good quality child care is expensive to provide. This is acknowledged as creating a significant imbalance between the cost of childcare provision, the fee charges for the service and the amount which families are ready to pay. It is a matter of concern that children hailing from lower socio-economic backgrounds who would benefit most from accessing stimulating care are the most disadvantaged in this respect.\footnote{Abela A, Farrugia R. et al, Helping Families to Balance Work and Home, National Family Commission policy document published by Ministry for Social Policy, 2004}

Problems persist in the 3+ age range as lack of after school care is significant through its absence. Care during hours before and after school and during holidays is a key issue since most services on offer do not dovetail with parents’ working schedules aggravating the care deficit.\footnote{Farrugia R, Comment Paper re Peer review, Germany 2004, op. cit.}

The changing work commitments of today’s parents impact directly on the child in a number of ways. Flexibility in the child’s schedule has been greatly affected with more rigid time frames to accommodate parental work schedules and more often children’s interests and extracurricular activities. Complicated timetabling is often a standard requisite for the modern family desperately trying to juggle work and family. This affects the child’s wellbeing and either imposes rigid discipline or chaos where parenting stress leads to a breakdown in organisation.

Article 18(3) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically provides that “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to
ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child care services and facilities for which they are eligible.” The intention of the CRC’s drafters seems to have been to provide for public child care services and facilities of working parents but this is subject to the economic situation of States and therefore remains enforceable only for those children living in States where child care is a right.  

The Committee has consistently asked States to make information available relating to childminding services available to families, particularly crèches, nurseries, and after school and holiday facilities for children. Although there is no direct mention of standards of child care within Article 18, this appears to be covered by Article 3 (3) which deals with appropriate standards for institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children.

Decisions taken relating to children should always be motivated by Article 3: “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children.” Under Article 6 children have the right to full and harmonious development and underlying all articles Article 12 proclaims the right of children to express their views and to have their views taken seriously and given due weight.

Some of these views are reflected in research carried out in the USA and Germany. The US study found that the greatest wish for children was to see their parents earn more money, presumably to reduce stress on them. Children are seen to be most negatively affected by their parents’ work life when parents come home from work tired and stressed. Children want their parents to enjoy the work they do and desire their parents to spend more time with them for specific activities. Interestingly, the study found that children with working mothers did not express any desire to have more time with their mother than did children with mothers who were at home full time. However children were in agreement in wanting to see more of their father.

The German research echoes many of the findings of the US study however the issue of strict time schedules is expressly mentioned and resentment expressed when parents work at weekends or late in the evening, at times children consider their own. This is aggravated when work impedes attendance at particular events and celebration of special occasions, such as school fairs, sports days, parents’ evenings and birthdays, Christmas etc. Further reaction emerged in children’s negative comments relating to insensitive rushing of daily rituals such as bath time, story telling, putting to bed etc. caused through work commitments. Finally children demonstrate adverse reaction to lack of routine such as irregular times of return from work.

45 Such as Finland where a place in child care is ensured to each and every child.
46 CRC Article 3(3) “States Parties shall ensure that institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of staff, as well as competent supervision.”
47 Galinsky A., What America’s Children Think about their Working Parents, 1999
48 WSI – Institute for Economic and Social Research, Düsseldorf Germany, 2004
Whether parents are aware of how their children feel about these issues remains uncertain but acknowledging them as worthy of consideration is a start in the right direction.

However it is even more worrying to note the research showing that in a number of cases child care for young children is not just undesirable but detrimental to their development. Children under three years of age seem to be most adversely affected with repercussions on their behaviour, academic success and future well-being. One study even highlights how children who spend long hours in child care from a very young age perform less well at school than their companions who were cared for by their parent(s).

The importance of parental involvement in child care, rather than the extended family structure which many of us are used to in Malta for example, has been found to be fundamental for children. More research shows that children who are cared for by a professional carer in a day centre for limited periods do better at school than children who spend long periods of time being cared for by a grandparent or neighbour with no professional training. All studies agree that prolonged time spent in child care has a detrimental effect on the child’s emotional, academic and social development although a great deal depends on the age of the child and the ratio of child to carer. Where the child is under one year of age, prolonged periods in day care are strongly contraindicated.

5. CONCLUSION

The work ethic of being a full time worker first and a family member last needs to be supplanted by loyalty and commitment to family needs and family life. The dilemma that all carers face when called to make choices of work over family could become a thing of the past where employers genuinely believe that family friendly measures are commendable.

McKeown and Sweeney identify two main strategies to address the issue of family development and public authority response. The first sees no role for public authorities in preferring or promoting one type of family more than another so that the appropriate public stance is passive and accommodates all family types. The second considers that the consequences for society of developments emanating from the family are sufficiently serious in certain instances to justify society taking a more proactive approach such as benefiting certain family functions that have particularly strong social benefits.

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52 Belsky, Development Risk (still) Associated with Early Childcare, 2001
53 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; “It has been shown that employers who offer flexible work arrangements and family support measures benefit through increased candidates for recruitment, better customer service and a consequent edge over competitors”
including stable marital relationships, the bearing of children and good parenting.\textsuperscript{54}

Daly finds that as having children is being compared to a lifestyle choice; those opting out of this choice should not be burdened with subsidising those who do.\textsuperscript{55} In 1999 the United Nations World Development report observed that households rearing children tend generally to lack bargaining power and obtain insufficient public support in recognition of the social importance of the parenting taking place in them. Against this backdrop, the decision to opt out of a parenting role or to delay it as long as possible is hardly surprising.

Within the EU it is readily apparent that a number of states have taken the first approach\textsuperscript{56} and the formal institutions have carefully avoided weighting a value to any particular form of family.\textsuperscript{57} However the second approach should not equate with favouring or promoting a particular family type. Family policy in some EU countries has sought to reinforce child friendly measures and high standards of parenting as a desirable value. Against the backdrop of large percentages of children set to experience negative impacts of separation and divorce and within the ambit of the drop in birth rates bringing about shifts in entire societies, it has been argued that this pro-activity should be perceived as a coherent response to supporting a tried and tested formula leading to stability and well being.\textsuperscript{58}

So-called family friendly polices have been shown to be economically desirable\textsuperscript{59} and to present a real cost advantage. They are summarised in four main areas relating to 1. reduction in family-related employee turnover; 2 shortening of duration of parental leave period; 3.lowering of costs associated with reintegration following parental leave; and 4. enhancement of company’s profile as employer. None of the measures consider the effects of curtailing parental leave on children or on parents and concentrate solely on the cost-benefit perspective so crucial to the market economy. They are currently being marketed as a means to encourage employers to entice more women into the work force.\textsuperscript{60}

In the UK results of the second Work-Life Balance Study have shown that requests for part-time work continues to be requested by women returning from maternity leave or where an employee needed to look after the children and stands at 98% of all requests. Interestingly, 79% of employers affirmed that supporting working parents had a positive effect on their workplace

\textsuperscript{54} McKeown K and Sweeney J, op cit, p.15
\textsuperscript{55} Daly M., Families and Family Life in Ireland – Challenges for the Future, Report of Public Consultation Fora, February 2004
\textsuperscript{56} Equal rights in homosexual unions, equal access to labour for single and married parents through enhanced child support mechanisms etc.
\textsuperscript{57} The EU Observatory on Family Matters avoids any definition of family and the EU Network on Childcare insists that diversity in family types is positive and not a problem.
\textsuperscript{58} This seems to have been the underlying reasons for the UK’s 1998 consultation document Supporting Families which led to a “back to basics” fundamentalism.
\textsuperscript{59} Prognos AG :Economic Effects of Family-Friendly Measures, a study commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youths (Eds), Berlin, 2003
\textsuperscript{60} Although officially it is both men and women who stand to gain from the approach
performance with 72% reporting improved employee motivation and commitment.\textsuperscript{61}

Child care is offered as the panacea to women’s reluctance to enter the job market.\textsuperscript{62} Many women have no choice but to continue to work or to return to work because of financial constraints. Even in these cases, states might do well to reconsider the cost to children and families by enforcing this goal. Economic considerations may be easily calculable in the short term but the longer term costs brought about through parental stress, delayed child development at social and academic levels deter what our American friends term “the pursuit of happiness”. Child care criteria must include the wellbeing of the child as the fundamental underlying principle. If this value continues to be disregarded the CRC will have lost its way and our children might fall from the high wire families constantly try to negotiate.

The title chosen for this conference has been “Balancing Interests and Pursuing Priorities”. It is true that in a family, each individual member of the family often competes for the furthering of personal interests and that children often find it difficult to make their voices heard. It is equally true that the family also takes on a persona of its own and when the “good of the family”\textsuperscript{63} overtakes the personal good of its individual members some sort of balance is achievable. Identifying priorities is another issue altogether. Each family must decide what its priorities are to be, although changes in Europe seem to indicate that many materialistic priorities are giving way to more basic values.\textsuperscript{64}

A cartoon recently illustrated grim news informing the British public that 75% of dog owners spend 45 minutes per day in activities with their pets. Working mothers spend 11 minutes of quality time with their children and fathers spend 8 minutes per day with their children. We may never manage to get more than 24 hours out of the day but achieving a work family balance and apportioning more time to children needs to be topmost on the agenda. Otherwise family life continues to be walking the tightrope carrying the baby...


\textsuperscript{62}Although its availability and quality are often inadequate

\textsuperscript{63}The good of the family is a notion introduced into the Maltese Civil Code in 1993 and has been the subject of much recent debate. Chapter 16 of the Laws of Malta, Part I.

\textsuperscript{64}This is exemplified by young fathers choosing to forgo career advancement in order to spend more time with their children. McKeown K. and Sweeney J., op. cit.