

Mothers, Welfare and Labour Market Activation

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Abstract

Within the EU policy framework paid work is seen as the key to participation and social inclusion and as a route out of poverty. At policy level, there is an endorsement of the adult worker model, with a particular focus on increasing the labour force participation of mothers. This paper examines the framework that directs and informs transitions between welfare and paid work for mothers in low-income families. The paper considers the ambiguity concerning the new norm of working parenthood on the one hand and moral expectations of parental responsibility on the other. Care emerges as a central issue and it is recognised that mothers' decisions are mediated primarily by childcare responsibilities and secondly by employment opportunities. The paper considers the nature of employment that women returners enter and the pathway constraints around employment as a route out of poverty. It goes on to examine childcare policy and provision and highlights the need for a set of interrelated support frameworks for mothers in low-income families. The research considers that welfare-to-work policies need to be reframed in a paradigm which includes choice, security and well-being in work and care for mothers, fathers and children.

Key Words: Mothers; Care; Employment

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Introduction

The European welfare discourse is one in which activation through paid work is seen as the key to participation and social inclusion. It is argued that there is a need to 'reconnect' the workless with the labour market. There is an assumption that this form of social inclusion is relatively easy to achieve. Included in this category are diverse groups such as the unemployed, those on sickness benefit, women caring at home including those with unemployed partners and women parenting alone. The move from welfare dependency coincides with what some analysts describe as the residualisation of social rights, the growing use of targeting and encouraging personal responsibility through paid work.

This paper analyses transition issues for mothers dependent on welfare in Ireland. The research goes behind the scenes to examine public discourses on welfare-to-work. Care emerges as a central issue in mothers' lives. Labour market activation policies are both shaping and challenging existing structures of care. Firstly, the research points to the complexity of mothers' decisions around caring and the prioritising of caring over financial gain in the labour market. Secondly, the research shows that care is relegated to a diminished role in the social domain as economic strategies and the adult worker model move centre stage. The Government frames childcare in an 'economistic' mode: as the responsibility of women and as a labour market equality strategy to move women into paid work.

Thirdly, activation policies do not take cognisance of the differential outcomes and the pathway constraints for low-income mothers. The old poverty relief model provided a range of secondary benefits to families on welfare that have not been extended to those at work. Earning your way out of poverty is not as easy as it seems. The research evidence points to continuity rather than change as the defining feature of the position of women relative to that of men in employment and in the unequal division of labour in the home.

Research Methodology

The research methodology involved both an extensive literature review in the following areas and interviews with persons from relevant interest groups and organisations.

1. An international review of welfare-to-work research, with a particular focus on mothers' decision-making processes and work choices for low-income families
2. An analysis of current childcare in Ireland, with a focus on the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) and trends in childcare
3. In-depth interviews with key personnel from relevant organisations including: The Planning Unit, DSFA, the INOU, OPEN, the LES, Childcare Coordinator Partnership Area, and community childcare manager.

The research presented here aims to highlight key transition issues for mothers in low-income households, drawing on an in-depth analysis of relevant research and policy documents and supplemented by in-depth interviews from persons in key organisations.

Constructing Family Models

While mothers' valuable role in the home is enshrined in the Irish Constitution, mothers in Ireland are under increasing pressure to centre stage the adult worker identity in their lives. Prior to EU equality legislation, the male breadwinner model in Ireland was underwritten in welfare and tax provision, while the unique role of mothers in the home continues to be endorsed by the Constitution. Recognising the valuable role of women in the home and the contribution to the common good, Article 41.1.2 of the Constitution states: 'The State shall therefore endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.' Pfau-Effinger (2004) argues that family models become dominant as a result of socio-cultural and structural constructions around the family, gender relations and childhood. Underwriting this are notions about how the family should carry out its caring tasks in relation to other social institutions.

In this context there is an attempt to reconstruct the lifecourse around the adult worker model, particularly for parents on welfare. The heightened sense of financial pressure including the escalating cost of housing and the paring back of welfare programmes that gave low-income families choices has accelerated the building up of a public ideology around the adult worker model which should be pursued by all responsible adult citizens. Irwin (1999) argues that there is a change in the division of labour in household financial resourcing which is as important for low-income families as for other social groups. The decline in the availability of 'full wage' jobs and the employment of women as well as men is increasingly necessary to household resourcing. Evidence in the Irish context shows that the low-paid work that mother 'returners' engage in challenges the popular notion that family poverty is a result of weak attachment to the labour market.

In post-war Britain and Ireland the breadwinner model of welfare was responsible for shaping welfare and labour policy. In Ireland there was an assumption that women would stay at home to care for children and other dependent people while men were expected to be the wage earners. Significant changes in the relation of men and women to the household economy became apparent from the 1970s onwards. Rising levels of unemployment challenged men's roles as the family breadwinners. However, the increasing participation of women in the labour market has been matched only by a marginal increase in men's participation in unpaid labour in the home.

The Adult Worker Model

Within the EU policy framework, individualisation is cast in terms of self-sufficiency and independence, and coupled to the market activation of all individuals. Women's labour market activity is centre stage in this policy discourse. How to integrate women into an individualised worker model is the challenge faced by EU member states (Hobson 2003). However, it is evident that the dual career household is not the norm and that in many EU countries the norm is more likely to be the one-and-a-half earner household.

We are now witnessing the public endorsement of the universal breadwinner or adult worker model. Pascall and Lewis (2004) note that while the male breadwinner model of western Europe and the dual worker model of Central and Eastern Europe have been undermined they have not been replaced by new gender models. Individualisation is a key trend in personal and public life and challenges the structures that supported care in state and family. The links that joined men to women, cash to care, income to carers have all been fractured (Pascall and Lewis 2004).

The European perspective is one in which paid work is seen as the key to participation and social inclusion. This is a discourse of 'active' welfare states,

with a goal of reconnecting the workless with the labour market in contrast to the old 'dependency-promoting welfare states' (Lister 2002). Paid work is elevated to a citizenship obligation; unpaid work including voluntary, community and caring work is devalued (Lister 2002). The Irish Government is committed to achieving the EU target of a 60 per cent female employment rate by 2010. In addition, the Government is committed to developing strategies to expand the labour force. Women returners, in particular those who have been outside the labour market as mothers and carers, are seen as a potential group on which to capitalise (DJELR 2001).

The Moral Economy of Mothering

Motherhood generates varying levels of dependency in the form of care and nurturing over the lifecourse of a woman. Kennedy (2002) notes that when mothers are in the public domain they are seen as one-dimensional, either as carers or earners. She presents a three-dimensional model of motherhood – carer, earner, and 'lifegiver'. This conceptualisation provides a framework for understanding the multi-dimensional aspects of motherhood. Mothers are increasingly being commodified and policy promotes alternative kinds of motherhood based on marital status (Mahon 1998, 2004). There is a polarisation of women in the home who feel undervalued and women in the paid labour market. The social construction of motherhood by the state expresses a preference for formal employment over informal care and this diminishes the importance of care. Ideologically mothers' role as carers is underwritten by the Irish Constitution. The state recognises that it has to tread a careful path due to Constitutional restraints. It has opted to substantially increase child benefit rather than provide a childcare benefit and, for pension purposes, has introduced a home carers tax allowance which gives credit for a number of years to mothers who are caring full-time.

The predecessor of the current One Parent Family Payment (OPFP) including the Lone Parents Allowance (LPA) gave value to the work of mothers without a breadwinner by paying welfare for their role as carers. In contrast married

women caring full-time continue to have reduced citizenship rights to welfare based on their male partner's breadwinning status. The male breadwinner model of welfare still treats and pays a woman a lower adult dependant rate if she is living with a male partner. EU equality legislation on social security allows the woman to claim half of the payment but a couple is still paid at a lower rate than two individuals. In the case of lone mothers they will lose out financially if they wish to live with a partner. More recently welfare discourse problematises lone mothers as welfare dependent and has framed labour market activation as a solution (Mahon 2004). The OPFP, introduced in 1997, merged a number of lone-parent payments as part of a labour market strategy. At the time it included a generous earnings disregard to act as an 'employment support policy' for lone parents, but this has not been index-linked since.

Research carried out in Britain concurs with Sevenhuijsen (1998) that people make decisions about their moral economies, including how parenting might be combined with paid work, with reference to moral and socially negotiated views about what behaviour is right and proper, and this may vary between social groups, neighbourhoods and welfare states (Duncan et al 2003). The adult worker model assumes that people act as rational economic beings in taking individualistic cost-benefit type decisions about how to maximise personal gain. Paid work is assumed to be the optimum means of doing this. Duncan et al (2003) refer to this as the 'rationality mistake'. In particular, people do not view care just as a barrier to paid work. Rather they feel morally obliged to care, and often wish to do so. When it comes to dependent children, there may be strong gendered moral requirements to give priority to and take responsibility for children's needs.

Duncan et al's (2003) study is based on interviews with a sample of 56 mothers who were in couple relationships and had children under 11 years. The research study on partnering, parenting and employment focused on six different groups of mothers, varying in terms of class, ethnicity, sexuality and geographic location. When the findings are compared to a previous study of

lone mothers carried out by the authors, the research found that the presence or absence of partners had little influence on how motherhood and work should be combined. Middle-class mothers tended more towards the 'primarily worker' position, while most of the working-class mothers held a 'primarily mother' position. Further, only a minority of mothers view themselves as 'primarily workers' in combining motherhood and paid work.

All the mothers viewed their employment decisions in relation to their responsibilities to their children. They were directed by an ethic of care as much as, or more than, an ethic of work or self-development (Williams 2004). Central to this is the mother/worker identity. Being a good mother is also influenced by social networks, class, ethnicity and culture as well as by local conditions and customs. It is evident that what directed women's decisions was the affective quality of care for their children over and above the possibility of financial betterment (Duncan et al 2003)

In a small-scale study of low-income working families Dean (2001) found moral dilemmas and ideological pressures around Government policy which sought to promote the labour force participation of low-income parents, especially mothers. The trend is towards the increasing acceptance of the norm of working parenthood across Europe, '... although the unequal distribution of responsibility for childcare between men and women and the lack of affordable formal childcare provision means it is a change that bears with particular salience upon mothers' (2001, p. 269). Dean's study found that for some mothers current policies are fuelling moral dilemmas and promoting difficult life-course transitions. There is ambiguity concerning the new norm of working parenthood on the one hand and moral expectations of parental responsibility on the other. It is a perceived lack of choice that sharpens this dilemma: '... the concurrent pressure upon parents to engage with the labour market remains relentless. Parents in general and mothers in particular are required to negotiate their moral priorities and social responsibilities in a complex ideological climate' (Dean 2001, p. 279).

The Adult Worker Model: Ideal and Reality

When the significant increase in women's participation in paid work is examined, the growth in part-time employment reflects choices around care as an integral social practice and continuity in the unequal gendered division of labour in the home. Irwin (1999), drawing on empirical research, argues that despite significant changes in the rate of women's employment the emergent consensus is that continuity rather than change is the defining feature of women's position relative to that of men in both employment and the family. While women with young children have increased their employment rates across the social spectrum, the majority of these employees are in low-paid, part-time jobs.

Similarly, Duncan et al (2003) note that recent time-use studies in Britain about the domestic division of labour among couples show that for the majority of couples, paid work, household work and childcare continue to be unequally divided. Even when men spend significant time on childcare and domestic work, it is women who usually plan and take responsibility for it. 'Women's participation in the paid labour market has not been matched by a corresponding increase in men's participation in unpaid caring work' (NWC 2002, p. 13).

A comparative study of 400 men and women with dependent children in Ireland, France, Italy and Denmark on work-life balance issues (Fine-Davis et al 2002) found that in all four countries mothers carried out significantly more of the domestic and childcare tasks in the home than fathers did. The primary input of men in the home is in the area of childcare and primarily playing with children. Further, men perceive that they are giving more help in the home than women think the men are giving. The more that men contributed to domestic and childcare, the more women expressed well-being.

Daly and Clavero (2002) examine employment trends across a number of European countries. From the experience of Scandinavia, it seems that when the policy package offers women a high degree of choice they choose to be in the labour market. One example is Sweden, yet more than half of all employed Swedish mothers are in part-time work. In Germany and in the Netherlands moderate levels of provision are associated with moderate levels of maternal employment. However, a considerable proportion of these work part-time and in the Netherlands 90 per cent are part-time. Dean (2001) notes that women's employment is still far more likely than men's to be part-time, temporary and poorly paid. In the UK, it is suggested, the norm is more likely to be the 'one-and-a-half earner household'.

The importance of part-time work for mothers is generally considered to be one way of dealing with the incompatible demands of job and family obligations. A survey undertaken on the needs of new mothers in the workplace indicated that several women found the dual burden of work and motherhood to be too difficult to sustain on a full-time basis and they were therefore withdrawing from the workplace (NWCI 2002). According to the NWCI (National Women's Council of Ireland) report, caring is still crucial in determining what sort of decisions a woman will make about employment. The two groups who are least likely to be in paid employment are women with children and older women.

Table1

Ireland: employment rate of persons aged 20-44 by family status

Family Status	% of 20-44 age group	
	Men	Women
No children	94.4	87.2
Youngest child aged 0-3	90.1	52.4
Youngest child aged 4-5	91.9	54.3
Youngest child aged 6 or over	91.5	63.6
Total	91.7	62.5

Source: CSO, QNHS (2004)

The most recent figures for Ireland demonstrate that motherhood is a primary determinant of labour force participation. There is an important difference between the employment rate of women aged 20-44 with no children, at 87.2 per cent in 2004, compared to 52.4 per cent for women with the youngest child under 3 years (Table 1). The two largest categories of economic status for women in 2004 was 'at work' (46 per cent) and 'looking after home/family' (34 per cent) (CSO 2004). According to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR 2003), what is significant is the growth in part-time employment among women. In the period 1997-2004 the increase in the number of women in full-time and part-time employment is similar, at 30.7 per cent and 32 per cent respectively.

The DJELR report acknowledges the decline in the number of women working part-time who describe themselves as underemployed, a decline from 13,000 to 1,900 in this period, indicating a preference on the part of women for part-time rather than full-time employment. The NWCI (2002) confirms that women are much more likely than men to choose part-time work because it often represents the only feasible means of combining caring work with paid employment.

Earning Your Way Out of Poverty

Under the post-war welfare model, family policy had an anti-poverty focus and additional supports were linked to welfare. Proponents of neo-liberal policies argue that family poverty is as a result of weak attachment to the labour

market (Daly and Clavero 2002). Low-paid women are being pressed to exchange familial dependency for economic exploitation (Dean 2001). The implication of the welfare-to-work approach for family policy is that poor families are expected to earn their way out of poverty. Child poverty is attributed to insufficient labour market participation on the part of parents. The issues of wage levels and the politics of redistribution have become secondary (Ostner 2003). In-work benefit schemes have only a limited effect in promoting labour force participation, primarily because the recipients of in-work benefits seldom move on to higher-paid jobs. Therefore they are not especially effective in lifting families out of poverty (Dean 2001).

It is also the case that classifying the labour market situation for women is problematic not least because many of the labour market concepts are based on male working patterns. Women's participation in the labour market is much more variable over the life cycle. 'Transitions out of and back into the labour market around child rearing, greater involvement in part-time employment, and ongoing responsibility for domestic and caring work when in paid employment can all blur the boundaries between being outside the labour market (economic inactivity), employment and unemployment' (Russell et al 2002, p. 12).

Dean's research (2001) found that the experience of working parenthood is likely to be qualitatively different for poor parents than for better-off parents. In particular 'family-friendly' employment policies are most likely to benefit 'valued', higher-paid employees rather than 'expendable' and therefore lower-paid employees. There is a risk of a growing divide between secure, middle-class families who can afford private subsidised childcare, career breaks and time off when they need it, and poorer working families who will be dependent on unassisted childcare from informal sources of family and friends and receive only minimal concessions from employers. In addition, the pressure exerted by welfare-to-work policies may heighten the sense of insecurity felt by low-income families.

A cross-national study (Daly and Clavero 2002) found that only 55 per cent of women who were employed before the birth of their child had returned to work within three years. The majority of those who returned to work were women who had a stable job before taking up paid leave. The majority of those who had a precarious job before taking the parental allowance were either outside the labour market (30 per cent) or unemployed (25 per cent).

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF 2004) acknowledges that the claim by successive Irish Governments that work is the route out of poverty is not necessarily true in all cases. Research by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI 2002) shows that nearly 17 per cent of households living in poverty are headed by employees while the incidence of poverty has doubled among those at work since 1994. The European Anti-Poverty Network estimates that across the EU some 11.4 million people who are in employment are facing poverty.

Irwin's (1999) argument that continuity in economic disadvantage is the characteristic for women in paid work is confirmed by research carried out by Russell et al (2002) on women returners to work in Ireland. This research shows that the higher the education levels the higher the transition rates into better-paid jobs. There is a higher transition rate amongst mothers with third-level qualifications and this reflects two underlying processes: an ability to secure a worthwhile wage and possession of marketable skills. Those with the least qualifications were the least likely to enter education, training or employment schemes. As formal education requirements operate for many of these programmes, access to basic courses and further progression to specific skills training are an important policy issue for these groups of women. The research provides data on the nature and type of work of women returners that challenges the 'work as a route out of poverty' discourse. In 1999 30.4 per cent of returners were earning less than the national minimum wage.

Russell *et al* (2002) found that the proportion of women returners entering personal service jobs increased from just under 50 per cent in 1995 to 64 per cent in 1999. The most common occupations are shop assistant, waitressing and other catering work, domestic work and cleaning. These jobs tend to be unskilled and low paid and often represent a continuation of the unpaid work done in the home. '... while part-time employment offers more flexibility for women with caring responsibilities, it does so at a price. Many part-time positions are low-paid' (NWC 2002, p. 15).

It is also evident that mothers negotiate the mother/worker identity around childcare and home responsibilities. Russell *et al* (2002) found that the majority of women returners take up part-time work. On average 71 per cent enter part-time employment each year. Significantly, in 1999, 88 per cent of returners were working part-time (only 1 per cent said they could not find full-time work) and the main reason for this was childcare and domestic responsibilities, '... these part-time hours cannot be seen as purely voluntary' (2002, 114). Russell *et al* (2002) note that just under half of those working part-time chose this option because of their continuing responsibility for childcare and domestic work

Moral Ambiguity and the Norm of the Working Mother

The new norm of the working parent on the one hand and the moral expectation of parental responsibility on the other is underlaid with moral ambiguity. 'There is ... a world of difference between the experience of those women who re-enter career jobs, and those that seek to supplement their family income by taking low-paid and often precarious jobs at the periphery of the labour market' (Dean 2001, pp 283-4). The life-course transition that is negotiated mainly by mothers between home and work presents moral dilemmas. The public consultation fora on families in Ireland (Daly/DSFA 2004) expresses this well: 'It was pointed out that the current thrust of government policy, to encourage if not push mothers into employment, can create a lot of difficulties for mothers, ... Ambivalence, it seems, is the lot of

many mothers. Many mothers feel torn between children and work' (2004, p. 34).

Some of this ambiguity is expressed as a lack of choice about the transition that mothers negotiate and the meaning of parental obligation (Dean and Shah 2002). According to Dean (2001), the current pressure directed not only at lone parents but also at the partners of the unemployed to engage with the labour market remains relentless. Respondents in this research confirmed that there was a perceived lack of choice and pressure for those on welfare to embrace the work ethic and engage in paid work. Parents, and in particular mothers, are required to negotiate their moral priorities and social responsibilities in a public discourse of rights and responsibilities.

Recent research carried out in Ireland on low-income families (Daly and Leonard 2002) confirms that decisions on work are negotiated around caring responsibilities and shaped by gaps in policy provision including the lack of family-friendly employment legislation and the fear of loss of secondary benefits (medical card, the effect on partner's social welfare and an increase in local authority rent). The negotiation of decisions on work for women centred on the welfare of their children, the cost of childcare and the difficulty of finding work with flexible hours that would allow them to carry out their caring responsibilities. The majority of women who worked were in part-time employment. The key barriers to finding work were identified as a lack of local work opportunities, the problem of finding flexible employment, especially for women, and a lack of skills.

Despite the polarisation of different types of mothers in public discourse, for lone mothers the transition from welfare to work produces the same moral dilemmas. Parenting alone may magnify these dilemmas, including the emotional cost of negotiating paid work and parenting alone, feelings of guilt, pressure from children and juggling both roles.

Research on poverty in Ireland shows lone parents to be among the main groups who are vulnerable to poverty. Recent data indicate that 42.1 per cent of these households are below the poverty line (CPA 2005). A study carried out by OPEN (2004), an umbrella group for lone parents, shows financial security and the welfare of children as key issues. Childcare is a dominant issue, especially the cost of full-time care, with some relying on informal childcare arrangements including family, friends and neighbours.

Welfare-to-Work Programmes

While the old models of welfare and care have been diminished and fractured they have not been replaced by new gender models (Pascall and Lewis 2004). Contradictions arise when an adult worker model is imposed on a male breadwinner and dependency promoting poverty relief model. A package of benefits introduced in Ireland for long-term welfare recipients in the 1980s and 1990s, aimed at relieving poverty and protecting families from the worst effects of poverty and high levels of unemployment, may make it unattractive to move from welfare to low-paid work. The introduction of neo-liberal policies across Europe has sought to cut back on these packages and to promote independence and responsibility through paid work.

The present research shows that the choices of low-income families are still both defined and confined by these protection measures. A recent report on child poverty by the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA 2005) supports this view and indicates that Ireland, comparatively, has the highest replacement rate for lone parents across 22 countries. For couples with children there are lower replacement rates which means there is more of an incentive to work and lose potential social welfare benefits; 'Government policy in Ireland, therefore, encourages lone parents to stay at home and raise their children rather than work' (CPA 2005, p. 62). This is at odds with many other European countries which provide more modest income supports but subsidise childcare and other services for lone parents.

The Community Employment (CE) programme, introduced by the state as a labour market strategy during the recession of the 1980s and early 1990s and targeted at the unemployed and lone mothers to aid their transition from welfare to the paid labour market, has been particularly controversial. The move to market-based solutions is evident in the state's attempts to pare down the programme after the advent of the Celtic Tiger. This has been hotly contested by community groups who see their benefits in disadvantaged communities.

As a social employment programme, the CE provides payment marginally above welfare rates for people to work in key community services with children, youth and older people. Many community groups have called for minimum wage rates and for the scheme to be placed on a statutory basis because of the valuable work the scheme undertakes in low-income communities. This is acknowledged by the recent NESF report (2005) on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) which also states that the employment of CE workers in ECCE settings and in childcare should be replaced by a social economy type model that supports essential services in the community. Following a strong public outcry from many community groups, the cutbacks in CE have been halted but places are reduced from the original 50,000 to approximately 25,000.

The respondents in the current research felt that CE has been a big success because it is local and part-time and there is no loss of secondary benefits (housing, medical benefits). The OPEN research (2004) found that the CE programme is highly beneficial for lone parents and it is acknowledged by NESF as the most significant employment programme to date (2001). It is unique in giving low-income mothers choice and voice in carrying out their caring commitments and participating in the labour market. Mothers who participate in the scheme are broadly positive towards it as it addresses their need to balance work and caring responsibilities and allows them retain important medical and housing benefits and work additional hours without penalty.

From a service point of view the scheme is regarded by some as exploitative in that the work being carried by CE workers is essential to running many services in the community and should be valued accordingly. However, as an anti-poverty measure it is good and for some respondents the CE framework could possibly offer solutions. One of the drawbacks is the low progression rate of, for example, lone parents, into employment or other training initiatives (NESF 2001).

Care Work

'Government policy remains contradictory between its interest in encouraging more women into the workforce and the assumption that women will respond to all of society's caring needs on an unpaid basis' (NWCI 2002, p. 8). Public policy should trust the moral capacities of individuals and thus respect care as a practice of democratic citizenship. People frame their responsibilities in actual social practices around 'the moral dilemmas that go with conflicting responsibilities of care for 'self, other and the relation between them' (Sevenhuijsen 2002, p.133). When we acknowledge the significance of care as a human practice we should critically assess group privileges and patterns of exclusion in these respects. In contrast, in public ideology access to paid work is constructed as the primary dimension of social inclusion (Sevenhuijsen 2002).

The importance of family care in Ireland for working mothers may indicate a concern above and beyond the financial and reveal something about the complex domain around which mothers negotiate decisions in relation to care and work. The Government frames success in its childcare policy in a financial context, as if childcare can be unproblematically commodified into the private market in the same way as housing or health. However, a review of childcare use presents a different story and reflects the way people make decisions around care as a social practice. This research shows that mothers in low-income families construct lifecourse choices and make moral decisions around care for their children. They tend to opt for part-time local work, part-

time paid care and pre-school programmes and welfare-to-work employment schemes which enable them to retain important housing and medical benefits.

The centrality of care as part of daily social practice is reiterated in, for example, the Irish Government's recent countrywide public consultation fora (Daly/DSFA 2004). 'Family support is not reducible to questions about childcare or getting women back to work. It is about giving adults and children the choice and chance to have the best life they can' (2004, p. 5). Participants, critical of the economic solutions to childcare proposed by the state, expressed disquiet about the downgrading of caring in response to the economic imperatives of the Celtic Tiger: 'In current times, competitiveness is almost a national slogan and economic independence has never been more highly prized as people are urged to become self-sufficient and productive as workers. Values associated with family – such as caring, kinship and altruism – seem somehow at odds with the dominant economic thrust of policy' (DSCFA 2004, p. 26). As the adult worker model becomes the increased focus of Government, there is a devaluing of care (Williams 2004).

Childcare as a Labour Market Equality Strategy

A review of the current Government's Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) leaves no doubt as to why people feel their values are being undermined and superseded by the needs of the economy. Under the EOCP, childcare is framed as a labour market equality strategy. This is due principally to the activation model being promoted by the EU which is channelling funding for childcare as part of an equality strategy. Gender equality is now a fundamental principle of EU activity. The reconciliation of work and family life and gender mainstreaming became enshrined in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty. However, the EOCP has a very different impact in a country like Ireland which has a minimum of existing publicly subsidised childcare in comparison to Nordic countries. According to a review of the EOCP by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR 2003):

'The focus on childcare linked to economic activity has been criticised on occasion but this criticism comes from a lack of understanding that the EU supports require the programme to be linked to the social policy aspirations of the EU which focus, *inter alia*, on employment as a key to social development' (DJELR 2003, para 7.1.4 p. 51).

Further, member states have to put in place specific ratios of childcare places by targets set for the end of 2010 at the Barcelona summit. For example, early education places must be provided for 90 per cent of children between 3 years and the school-going age (6 years in Ireland).

The EOCP initially funded a number of pilot projects from 1998. The DJELR, in its review of the EOCP, confirms that the principal aim of EOCP 2000-2006 is 'to facilitate parents to participate in employment, training and education through the provision of quality childcare supports' (2003, p. 47). While the state may have had to frame childcare as part of a labour market equality issue, it did have some choice as to how it could best use this funding. In the main its focus is the provision of capital grants to increase the supply of childcare in the private sector. In addition EOCP makes a contribution towards the staffing costs of childcare facilities in areas of disadvantage.

In public discourse the Government uses the amount of money spent under the EOCP as proof of its success in the area of childcare. The NWCI report on childcare (2005) agrees that Ireland lags behind its European counterparts and that the focus has been on increasing supply to the neglect of the issues of high cost and affordability. In reality childcare has increasingly moved into the domain of the market, grant-aided by EOCP, and with some funding channelled to designated areas of disadvantage. Childcare is constructed unproblematically as any other market-based service, thus fracturing the link between care and family and its importance and place in people's lives.

Dominance of Family Childcare

Respondents in this research indicate that family childcare, mainly unpaid, and sessional care particularly for pre-school children is the preferred choice of low-income parents. The EOCP (DJELR 2003) confirms that unpaid family care is still the dominant form of childcare. It cannot be assumed that family care is undertaken solely for financial reasons. Rather it is also valued in its own right. However, it needs recognition by the state. The majority of children who attend other forms of provision attend sessional services, with the largest category of provision being in the pre-school/playgroup area. In this context some respondents noted that playgroups are a key support mechanism for families and are in need of more funding.

The review of EOCP (DJELR 2003) carried out a census of childcare providers and found that 8.6 per cent of children aged up to 12 years attended centre-based childcare but of these, almost 70 per cent attended a sessional service. It notes that a significant number of the 3-6 year olds are likely to be attending pre-school rather than a childcare service. Respondents in the present research outlined the importance of this as a funded service in disadvantaged communities.

Table 2
Use of Childcare by Parents in Ireland 2002

School	Pre-School	Primary
	% of families using childcare service	% of families using childcare service
Unpaid relative	31.2	46.1
Paid relative	12.0	14.1
Paid carer	29.4	31.9
Group setting	27.1	6.1
Other	7.4	4.3

Source: DJELR 2003

What is striking about the figures in Table 1 is the reliance on unpaid relatives; the percentage of families rises to 46.1 per cent at primary school level. At primary school 60.2 per cent of total families rely on this form of mainly unpaid childcare. Paid carers and group setting are used in equal measure approximately at pre-school level. However, this changes at primary school level, with private childminding increasing slightly and group setting dropping significantly. This reflects both the use of pre-school before school and the lack of availability of after-school services when children go to school.

A further survey commissioned by the DJELR (2003a) of beneficiaries of EOCP grants showed that by far the largest category of provision is the pre-school/playgroup category, with 64 per cent of respondents providing this type of childcare. Creche/nursery were given as 37 per cent and after-school services as 33.9 per cent (2003a, p. 42). In all, 37.4 per cent of facilities offered full-day care. Sessional services have the highest level of usage, with 57 per cent of children availing of these services. Almost two-thirds of all facilities had a waiting list for childcare places.

The DJELR (2003a) cites the labour market status of parents who use the childcare facilities as a measure of the success of the programme in terms of

a labour market intervention and shows the benefits in accordance with the aims of the programme, i.e. 70 per cent of mothers of children included are in employment, education and training. However, only 48 per cent are in employment and of these 60 per cent are in full-time while the remainder are in part-time employment. Twenty-three per cent are working in the home (DJLER 2003a, p. 48).

Community Childcare

The PLANET Childcare Policy Group, representing childcare providers under the area partnership network, provides an insight into the consequences of framing childcare as a labour market equality policy for low-income groups and for families in disadvantaged areas. The EOCP does provide core funding for community childcare in such areas but as a labour market intervention to allow parents access employment and training for employment.

However, PLANET argues that in areas of high long-term unemployment and multiple social problems, childcare provision has to be integrated and resourced as part of a wider community and family support function to support families under stress. It points to the multiple increase in cost to the state in the absence of such structures including family break-up: 'Childcare supports are an essential element of the progression of families to a situation where adults are able to take up training and employment. Moreover, quality childcare services are essential in disadvantaged areas for children to receive developmental support that will prepare them for school' (PLANET, p. 2). PLANET stresses that for the providers of services and their communities, community childcare is not just about accessing employment. In recognition of the core family support role for community childcare it recommends that responsibility for funding support be taken over by the Family Support Agency.

The concerns expressed by PLANET are supported by respondents in this research. Childcare under the EOCP is about women going back to work, an equality measure for women and not for children. Paradoxically though, even

if it is an equality issue it is in many cases not allowing women to work because of the high costs.

Community childcare is in a precarious position subject to regular application for ongoing funding and lacks the security of publicly funded statutory provision. Further, the reliance on another labour market intervention programme in the form of Community Employment/Jobs Initiative to staff facilities is not the appropriate vehicle in the long term to staff community childcare facilities. At present in areas of disadvantage, funding for staffing from the EOCP is not sufficient and additional funding has to be secured from the Health Boards and FÁS. The parents only bear a small part of the cost of the service. Most staff work part-time.

The issue of minimum standards for training in childcare and rates of pay is also highlighted as an important issue. At a local level respondents reported that the demand is more for part-time childcare as women only wish to work part-time and do not wish to lose their secondary benefits. These jobs tend to be low-paid. Respondents in this study felt that the needs of people in disadvantaged communities are not fully acknowledged. The view was strongly expressed that disadvantaged communities need well-resourced services for pre-school children in order to break the cycle of disadvantage.

The sustainability of community childcare needs to be guaranteed by placing it on a secure financial footing through exchequer investment. The current EOCP funding has been extended to 2009. PLANET suggests that partnership companies are well placed to offer models for quality frameworks for community childcare which are lacking at present. Acknowledging the importance of care as a social practice, respondents in this research argue that childcare should be seen as part of the integral development of children and not just as a labour market initiative for parents. The present policy guiding EOCP is targeted at women going into paid work and not at children. PLANET calls for an integrated and coordinated approach at local level and points to the importance of developing state support services for future

citizens. Additionally it suggests that one Government department should take responsibility.

Valuing Care Work

The NWCI report (2002) on care work regards caring as a service that is indispensable for the continuation of society. It points to the inherent conflict between an approach 'that seeks to encourage women into employment and yet fails to value care; what is needed is a fundamental reappraisal of the Government's priorities' (NWCI p. 9). Valuing care work as an essential service means Government investment.

If one examines models of best practice in childcare in other EU countries there is a clear emphasis on a child's right to care, public provision of childcare and giving financial support and choice to parents in their role as carers. In Sweden the approach is centred on a child's right to care; every child of 1-6 years has a right to childcare and this was extended to school-age children in 1995. In Finland since 1996 all children under 7 have a right to a place in subsidised childcare provided by their local authority. The policy has the dual aim of supporting parents with their caring responsibilities and promoting the development of children. If parents do not avail of public childcare they can receive a childcare allowance introduced in 1997. This concession is a cash benefit and can be taken in conjunction with childcare leave. In France there are childcare allowances for working parents and a childbearing benefit if either parent chooses to stay at home after the birth of a second child (NCWI 2002).

Drawing on caring policies in other EU countries, the NWCI (2002) proposes that a model should be put in place to facilitate parental choice by providing full-time paid parental leave for either parent until a child is 5 years. Current parental leave is unpaid. A half-time payment should be available for parents of children up to age 11. It further recommends that the government put in place policies that encourage men to assume their caring responsibilities.

There is evidence that gender norms in caring roles are still unchanged, with women responsible for the majority of home and caring work even though they may also be employed outside the home. 'The NWCI argues that the large percentage of women in low-paid, part-time employment is the direct consequence of society's failure to value caring. Since family-friendly policies have yet to be integrated throughout the labour force, many workers are forced to choose low-paid jobs as these are the only options with any degree of flexibility' (NWCI 2002, p. 16). At present workers' caring responsibilities are expected to fit around the needs of the economy and family-friendly policies are viewed as voluntary options for employers. The NWCI recommends that family-friendly options should become statutory, with all employees having an enforceable right to such options.

More recently the NWCI has proposed a publicly subsidised childcare model which would give all children access to childcare. 'The laissez faire approach to childcare adopted by successive Irish Governments has culminated in a largely unregulated, fragmented and costly childcare market which effectively excludes many low, and increasingly middle income households from accessing childcare services, and in turn, quality developmental supports, for their children' (NWCI 2005, p.30). While the report highlights both the need for child-centred care and the provision of equal opportunities to women, its focus is only on a childcare model. The two reports by the NWCI, on care work and on social welfare (NWCI 2002, 2003), highlight the need for innovative approaches at policy level in order to facilitate changes in gendered care and work.

Conclusions

This paper analyses transition issues for mothers dependent on welfare in Ireland. The research goes behind the scenes to examine public discourses on welfare-to-work. The norm of the working parent is promoted in public discourse by the state. While the old models of welfare and care have been diminished and fractured, they have not been replaced by new gender models (Pascall and Lewis 2004). Labour market activation policies are both shaping and challenging existing structures of care. Firstly, care emerges as a central issue in the lives of mothers. The research points to the complexity of mothers' decisions around caring and the prioritising of caring over financial gain in the labour market. There is ambiguity concerning the new norm of working parenthood on the one hand and moral expectations of parental responsibility on the other. The perceived lack of choice sharpens this dilemma for mothers.

Secondly, the research shows that care is relegated to a diminished role in the social domain as economic strategies and the adult worker model move centre stage. The Government frames childcare in an 'economistic' mode: as the responsibility of women and as a labour market equality strategy to move women into paid work. In the present research one of the primary problems outlined with regard to the EOCP (Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme) is precisely its framing in an equality mode rather than a child-centred, family-welfare mode. While the cost of full-time childcare is a prohibitive factor it is not the dominant issue in mothers' decision-making about care and work.

Thirdly, activation policies do not take cognisance of the differential outcomes and the pathway constraints for low-income mothers. The old poverty relief model provided a range of secondary benefits to families on welfare that have not been extended to those at work. The present research shows that the choices of low-income families are still both defined and confined by these protection measures. The high replacement rates for lone parents, for

example, is in part a product of such welfare packages. Irwin (1999) suggests that changes in the relation of men and women to social reproduction are evident in the growing extent of co-resourcing as a mode of household organisation. Importantly, though, Irwin points to evidence that continuity rather than change is the defining feature of women's position relative to that of men in employment and in the unequal division of labour in the home.

Earning your way out of poverty is not as easy as it seems. Research shows that the majority of women returners enter low-paid, part-time employment. The findings of this research point to a preference on the part of low-income mothers for work programmes including Community Employment and part-time local work in order to ensure the maximum retention of important welfare benefits and to balance paid work, care and home responsibilities. It also points to the need for much higher inputs of education and training if pathway constraints are to be addressed in a meaningful way. Low levels of skill and the nature of the available jobs mean that women returners are moving into low-paid work which significantly presents difficulties in moving up the income ladder. In addition, mothers have a double burden if they are in paid employment as they still bear most of the responsibility for childcare and work in the home.

Mothers negotiate transitions between welfare and paid work. The priority of the mother identity means balancing the welfare of her children and economic security. 'The gendered view of family life that exists in Ireland ... is the extent to which women are forced to make a difficult choice between earning and caring for their families ... Full-time motherhood is highly valued in Ireland and yet mothers are under pressure to be employed as well' (Daly/DSFA 2004, p. 38).

There is pressure on lone parents and the partners of the unemployed to engage with the labour market. Mothers in particular have to negotiate their moral priorities and social responsibilities in this context. The pressure exerted by welfare-to-work policies may heighten the sense of insecurity felt by low-

income families. It is evident from this research that for low-income mothers/parents, the need for security overrides equality (Kiely 2004). They do not enjoy equality of condition with other socio-economic groups in the labour market.

Respondents in this research noted that parents need public support in carrying out their decisions around caring activities and not the imposition of a model that limits the choices available to do this. At present social policy seems to be reflecting the needs of the economy but not the aspirations of parents and children. In the absence of any comprehensive existing childcare model, this has created many problems for those working in community childcare, in particular the lack of adequate funding. In public debate childcare is regarded as being in crisis as the cost for parents escalates and is sometimes equivalent to a second mortgage. It is still defined by the state in economic terms but by parents in the context of the importance of care as a social practice.

The ethics of care and its place in society needs to be acknowledged and the NWCI (2002) argues that this must be reflected in Government investment that gives equal importance to care work as paid employment. The NWCI report (2002) contains an innovative range of recommendations that could be adapted at a policy level to provide a comprehensive support framework for care and work for parents. The valuing and payment for caring work is further endorsed by the NWCI report on a woman's model for welfare reform (2003). The NWCI report (2002) recognises the interconnectedness of different policies around care and employment and states that no one set of policies on its own will be sufficient to address the importance of care. It recommends that a model should be put in place to facilitate parental choice by providing full-time, paid parental leave for either parent until a child is 5 years old and a half-time payment for parents of children up to age 11.

The report recommends the subsidisation of childcare by the state through a mixed delivery including community-based, public, small-scale, private and

home-based care. In the present study it was suggested that partnership companies are well placed to provide a community childcare framework. The NWCI report recommends that childcare places for families on social welfare, in education and training and those on low incomes should receive additional subsidisation so as to provide low-cost places for those families. It also recommends that family-friendly options should become statutory, with all employees having an enforceable right to such options.

The NWCI report addresses the problem of educational and skills disadvantage experienced by women and recommends that the Government implement the NESF recommendation to establish a mainstream national support programme for women returners. The present research shows that women in low-income households tend to opt for part-time local work – usually low paid – primarily because of care and home responsibilities. The report notes that the barriers for these women include the high cost and low availability of childcare, the lack of updated skills, the difficulty in accessing training and the absence in many workplaces of flexible working hours compatible with family responsibilities. These barriers often combine to create a pattern of downward mobility. Further, the NWCI argues that ‘the large percentage of women in low-paid employment is the direct consequence of society’s failure to value caring’ (NWCI 2002, P. 16).

The proposed increase in Child Benefit is welcome in that it attempts to address the needs of parents in paid work and in the home. However, it has to be seen as part of a more comprehensive package of welfare support for families. The increase in income limits for medical cards is positive but the possibility of introducing other employment-neutral payments is also important, particularly in relation to housing benefit. The lack of individualisation of welfare payments for women living with partners, the needs of women in atypical employment and pension entitlements for women are all addressed by the NWCI report (2003) and should form part of a social welfare reform package. Its recommendations support the NWCI policy on

care, i.e. that the reform of the welfare system should include the recognition and valuing and the payment of caring work performed by women.

Sevenhuijsen (2002) argues for the extension of notions of equality and social rights to include practices of giving and receiving care. Caring practices are now situated in different social domains with diverse lifestyles. Instead of social policies imposing new normative constructions of the family it should be facilitating existing and emerging family practices and caring practices. We need policies that draw on the moral capabilities and responsibilities of citizens. The care ethic is an ongoing social process which at both an individual and social scale contributes to human flourishing. Further research could be undertaken on emerging family practices and caring practices in Ireland in order to provide the best possible support frameworks for parents and future citizens.

Williams (2004) elaborates on what is needed to develop a political ethic of care. It means policies that provide time, space and financial security for people to balance their work and care responsibilities and for children to flourish. More specifically, policies need to focus on practical supports for people to carry out their commitments and they need to respect and recognise the diversity of commitments that people have. Williams argues that what is needed is a political principle about care which is equivalent to that of paid work. Care is as central to the concept of citizenship as paid work. Instead of starting from how to fit care around work, policy-makers need to think much more on how we fit work around our care needs. Local strategies are required which integrate issues of work, time, care, space and welfare services. Further research could be undertaken in evaluating how these strategies can be implemented at a local level, particularly in relation to new work models in the social economy.

Finally, 'the rationality mistake' in Government policy is to assume that mothers on welfare will move into the labour market once the supply of childcare is increased and training supports are offered. This paper shows

that the way mothers make decisions about care is much more complex than this. Their decisions are not only based on moral issues around care but on practical ones including their gendered responsibility for childcare and work in the home and the financial gains and losses. This also confines them to welfare dependency and low-paid work. While gender equality policies aim to support the participation of women in paid work and public life, it requires extensive changes in many areas of public and private life. When care work is given equal value in Government policies, reflecting its importance for society as paid employment, and when there is a policy framework in place that supports changing family practices, giving families real choices, this will present positive opportunities for tackling family poverty.

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