

THE POLITICS OF EU GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES: PROSPECTS FOR CHANGING GENDER EQUALITY PARADIGM AT THE EU

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Research Article

Abstract

Gender equality has long been a central theme of the European social model. Using the example of work - life balance policies, this article aims to identify two successive periods and explore the changing policy paradigm with respect to gender equality at the EU. In so doing, the article draws on two conceptual approaches in terms of theoretical basis: (a) Esping-Andersen's three welfare pillar conceptualisation and (b) genderised and de-genderised distinction. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review and the content analysis of official EU policy texts, the article contends that the EU gender policies have shifted away from serving to change the redistribution of work between men and women, towards improving women's employment opportunities.

Keywords: *De-genderisation, Genderisation, Social Policy, Policy Paradigm, Social Investment Perspective.*

Avrupa Birliği Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği Politikaları: AB'de Değişen Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği Politika Paradigması için Öngörüler

Öz

Toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği uzun zamandır Avrupa sosyal modelinin ve Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) merkezi bir temasıdır. Bu makale, iş-yaşam dengesi politikaları örneğini kullanarak, birbirini takip eden iki dönemi tanımlamayı ve AB'de toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğine ilişkin değişen politika paradigmasını, özellikle Avrupa borç krizlerinin yaşandığı dönem olarak tanımlanan 2010 sonrası döneme odaklanarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunu yaparken, makale teorik temel açısından iki kavramsal yaklaşımdan yararlanmaktadır: (a) Esping-Andersen'in üç refah sütunu

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kavramsallaştırması ve (b) cinsiyetlendirilmiş ve cinsiyetlendirilmemiş ayrımı. Kapsamlı bir literatür taramasına ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği, istihdam ve aile ile ilgili resmi AB politika metinlerinin içerik analizine dayanan makale, AB toplumsal cinsiyet politikalarının, kadın ve erkek arasındaki işin yeniden dağılımını değiştirmeye hizmet etmekten, kadınların istihdam fırsatlarını iyileştirmeye doğru kaydığını iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Cinsiyetlendirme, De-Cinsiyetlendirme, Sosyal Politika, Sosyal Yatırım Perspektifi, Politika Paradigması.*

Introduction

The European Union (EU) was initially formed as a regional organisation with the aim of fostering and increasing economic integration and cooperation among its member states. Yet, in time the EU has come to pay more attention on social affairs including equality between men and women. In other words, in time the EU has come to consider gender equality as a fundamental right. Therefore, the EU has developed a range of gender policies aiming to abolish or at least decrease the inequalities between men and women in different spheres of life such as politics, employment, education and family¹. It was the Maastricht Treaty, which was signed in 1992 included a commitment to providing equality between men and women in terms of labour market opportunities and treatment at the work place². This commitment was then reinforced by the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997, which introduced the term gender mainstreaming. With the introduction of the term gender mainstreaming in 1997, gender equality has come to gain a new dimension at the EU as gender mainstreaming requests gender equality perspective to be incorporated in all policy areas. Since then, gender equality has become an integral component of the EU's social policy model, departing from its historical role as a supplementary policy area³ because the

¹ Johanna Kantola. *Gender and the European Union*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010.

² Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the implementation of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of pregnant workers, women workers who have recently given birth and women who are breast-feeding, Official Journal of the European Communities. November 28, 1992., Accessed November 9, 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:31992L0085>

³ Masselot, Annick, and Eugenia Caracciolo di Torella, *Reconciling work and family life in EU law and policy*, Springer, 2010.

main idea behind gender mainstreaming is to ensure the equality between men and women in all aspects of life and improve women's status within the society by formulating the laws and regulations in a gender sensitive way.

In order to ensure the equality between men and women and tackle gender-based discrimination, the EU has introduced various initiatives and roadmaps, prepared numerous strategies, drafted legislations and formulated a range of goals and targets. In other words, particularly, starting from the mid-1990s, gender equality policies increasingly began to appear in EU social policy documents both in the form of 'hard' law and 'soft' policy instruments. In other words, certain initiatives, such as treaties, directives, and rules from the European Court of Justice, carry legal obligations, requiring Member States to incorporate them into their national legislative frameworks. On the other hand, there are also quasi-legal instruments, including guidelines, roadmaps, and recommendations, which lack legal binding force⁴.

EU's efforts on making gender equality a reality includes a wide range of topics. First of all, since women have always been over-represented in low paid jobs⁵ and still continue to earn almost 13% less than men across Europe⁶, the EU aims to close the gender pay gap. Guaranteeing the equal pay for equal work has been on EU's policy agenda since the Treaty of Rome, which was signed in 1957⁷. Since the Treaty of Rome, EU documents have been taking actions towards fighting against pay discrimination⁸. Second, as another most persistent form of gender inequality is violence against women, the EU has paid a salient attention to combatting both domestic violence and violence against women. In this regard the EU has both signed and required its member states to sign the Council of Europe

⁴ Bulmer, Simon J., and Claudio M. Radaelli. *The Europeanisation of national policy?*. No. p0042. Queens University Belfast, 2004; Kantola, *Gender and the European Union*; Ulrike Liebert. *Gendering Europeanisation: patterns and dynamics*. Peter Lang Publishing. 2003.

⁵ Jane Lewis. "Work/family reconciliation, equal opportunities and social policies: the interpretation of policy trajectories at the EU level and the meaning of gender equality." *Journal of European public policy* 13, no. 3 (2006): 420-437.

⁶ Sophie Jacquot. "European Union gender equality policies since 1957." *EHNE. Digital Encyclopedia of European History* (2020).

⁷ Jacquot, European Union gender equality policies since 1957.

⁸ Dalila Ghailani. "Gender equality, from the Treaty of Rome to the quota debate: between myth and reality." *Social developments in the European Union* (2013): 161-190.

Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which is known as the Istanbul Convention⁹. Third, given that women have been under-represented in decision-making positions, the EU has also taken significant actions in terms of achieving gender balance in decision-making both in politics and labour market. On 27 December 2022, the Commission has passed the new directive on improving the gender balance in company boards¹⁰. The directive asked a large number of companies across the EU to reach gender balance in their executive board members by 30 June 2026. Finally, especially with the rapid and significant increase in women's employment rates across Europe, the EU certainly acknowledged the significance of work - life balance and introduced a wide range of initiatives with respect to work and family life reconciliation¹¹.

Although each area is as important as the other, this article focuses on the EU work - life balance policies as work - life balance by nature appears as an ambivalent policy area, which is particularly worth examining. Grebe¹² puts forward '*the problem of incompatibility of paid employment and care work has sporadically been represented as a gender equality problem*'. In a similar manner, Nancy Fraser argues that, the full gender equality will not be able to practice unless the work - life balance problem is solved¹³. Therefore, this article will focus on this specific policy area, because work - life balance measures seem a bit dispersed as they have highly been intertwined with the policy areas of labour market, gender and family. With subtle variations in their content, these laws can demonstrate the promotion of gender equality by reshaping the distribution of household chores between men and women¹⁴. Additionally, they may enhance women's employment prospects

⁹ Kantola, *Gender and the European Union*.

¹⁰ Alberto Alesino, Ignazio Angeloni, and Ludger Schuknecht. "What does the European Union do?." *Public Choice* 123, no. 3-4 (2005): 275-319.

¹¹ Jane Lewis. *Work-family balance, gender and policy*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009; Nazlı Kazanoğlu. *The politics of Europeanisation: work and family life reconciliation policy*. Routledge, 2021.

¹² Cornelius Grebe. *Reconciliation policy in Germany 1998-2008: construing the 'problem' of the incompatibility of paid employment and care work*. Springer Science & Business Media, 2010.

¹³ Nancy Fraser. "Heterosexism, misrecognition, and capitalism: A response to Judith Butler." *Social text* 52/53 (1997): 279-289.

¹⁴ It is very important to note that domestic work refers to any kind of house work including childcare, elderly care, washing the dishes or the clothes, sweeping and cleaning. However, it is childcare, which retains women from advancing in their

by alleviating familial responsibilities, thereby contributing to economic growth¹⁵. Using the example of work - life balance policies, this article aims to identify two successive periods and explore the changing policy paradigm with respect to gender equality in the EU with a particular focus on the post-2015 period, which is identified as the times of the interrelated crises of migration, security and climate change through the lens of genderisation/de-genderisation distinction. Here, the term genderised denotes the policies that reproduces the gender roles whereas de-genderised refers to policies that would eliminate the existing gender roles. In an attempt to delve into the shift in policy paradigms within this particular domain, this article is structured in three sections. The first section introduces the theoretical framework that grounds the article. The second section delves into the EU, scrutinizing the evolving rationale guiding work-life balance policy-making, accompanied by an overview of EU legislation on work-life balance. Ultimately, the article concludes by illustrating the factors contributing to this shift in policy paradigms. Empirical data for this article has been gathered through an exhaustive content analysis of official EU policy documents related to gender equality, employment, and family.

I. Conceptual framework

In order to examine the changing policy paradigm with respect to gender equality at the EU, this article draws on two conceptual approaches in terms of theoretical basis: (a) '*three welfare pillars*' conceptualisation developed by Esping-Andersen and (b) the distinction of genderised and de-genderised policies. Esping-Andersen, in his influential work "*Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*", formulated welfare regimes based on the concept of de-commodification¹⁶. De-commodification referred to the ways in which welfare is produced and distributed. In other words, while formulating his typology of welfare regimes, Esping-Andersen categorized welfare states

career most. Therefore, in this article domestic work is mostly used to denote caring tasks.

¹⁵ Simon Duncan. "Policy discourses on 'reconciling work and life' in the EU." *Social Policy and Society* 1, no. 4 (2002): 305-314; Lewis, *Work-family balance, gender and policy*; Amy G. Mazur. *Theorizing feminist policy*. OUP Oxford, 2002; Maria Stratigaki. "The cooptation of gender concepts in EU policies: The case of "reconciliation of work and family"." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 11, no. 1 (2004): 30-56.

¹⁶ Gøsta Esping-Andersen, "The three political economies of the welfare state." *International journal of sociology* 20, no. 3 1990: 92-123.

based on the distribution of welfare responsibilities among the family, the market, and the state. He argued that welfare states consist of three interrelated pillars: families, the state, and the market. According to Esping-Andersen, these three welfare pillars work in tandem to deliver social welfare¹⁷. Individuals can obtain welfare services including childcare, elderly care, pensions as well as healthcare from any of them. Although the welfare regime typology has long been associated with Esping-Andersen's work within the comparative welfare state analysis literature, he has also faced criticism from various perspectives, particularly from feminist scholars, for omitting the consideration of care provisions in his typology and placing a greater emphasis on the interaction between the market and the state¹⁸. Feminist scholars¹⁹ developed the concept de-familisation as an alternative to Esping-Andersen's concept of decommodification, which lacks the care arrangements from the welfare state analysis.

Esping-Andersen has recognized these criticisms, leading him to incorporate the concepts of de-familialization and familialization into his study while revisiting his welfare typology²⁰. Theoretically, a familialistic regime referred to the welfare regimes, wherein families are seen to be responsible for individuals' welfares and on the contrary, a de-familialistic welfare regime referred to those in which social policies are able to diminish

¹⁷ Esping-Andersen, *The Three Political Economies of the Welfare State*. 92-123.

¹⁸ Mary Daly and Mary E. Daly. *The gender division of welfare: the impact of the British and German welfare states*. Cambridge University Press, 2000; Jane Lewis. "Gender and the development of welfare regimes." *Journal of European social policy* 2, no. 3 1992: 159-173; Julia S. O'connor. "Gender, class and citizenship in the comparative analysis of welfare state regimes: theoretical and methodological issues." *British Journal of Sociology* 1993: 501-518; Ann Shola Orloff. "Gender and the social rights of citizenship: The comparative analysis of gender relations and welfare states." *American sociological review* 1993: 303-328.

¹⁹ Ruth Lister, 'She has other duties'-women, citizenship and social security." *Social Security and Social Change: New Challenges to the Beveridge Model*, Eds. Sally Baldwin and Jane Falkingham: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1994; E. McLaughlin, and C. Glendinning. *"Paying for care in Europe: Is there a feminist approach? Family Policy and the Welfare of Women"*. L. Hantrais and S. Morgan. Longborough 1994.

²⁰ Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Social foundations of post-industrial economies*. OUP Oxford, 1999.

individuals' welfare dependence on kinship and family by transferring this responsibility either to the state or to the market²¹.

Although concepts of familialisation and de-familialisation have satisfied feminist scholars' desire to incorporate the care arrangements into welfare state analysis, these terms were used in a broader comparison of welfare regimes not in exploration of policy-paradigms. Moreover, these terms were also seen to be too ambiguous and ambivalent. Steven Saxonberg states that these terms have been used by different scholars in different ways in order to obtain different results²². Therefore, while discussing the policy paradigm change in EU gender policies, this article appeals to the concepts of genderised and de-genderised. The term genderised is used to denote the policies that reproduces the gender roles whereas de-genderised refers to policies that would eliminate the existing gender roles²³. Within the realm of work - life balance, de-genderised policies would include parental leaves that encourage fathers to take relatively more leaves so that childcare would no longer remain as the responsibility of mothers and childcare policies that would encourage the state or at least the market to provide a relatively large number of childcare policies for both children aged below and over three²⁴. The next section of the article applies this genderised and de-genderised distinction to EU work - life balance policies and discusses the changing policy paradigm with respect to gender equality at the EU from this perspective.

II. Discussion

In the final quarter of the twentieth century, a notable surge in women pursuing higher education, the structural evolution of the labour market, a widening gap between prices and income, coupled with the growing economic imperative for dual-income households, has not only led to a transformation in the prevailing family model but has also impacted existing

²¹ Esping-Andersen, *Social foundations of post-industrial economies*; Sigrid Leitner. "Varieties of familialism: The caring function of the family in comparative perspective." *European societies* 5, no. 4 2003: 353-375.

²² Steven Saxonberg. "From defamilialization to degenderization: Toward a new welfare typology 1." *Social Policy & Administration* 47, no. 1 2013: 26-49.

²³ Saxonberg, *From defamilialization to degenderization: Toward a new welfare typology*. 26-49.

²⁴ Leitner, *Varieties of familialism: The caring function of the family in comparative perspective*. 353-375; Saxonberg, *From defamilialization to degenderization: Toward a new welfare typology*. 26-49.

gender roles²⁵. Consequently, the conventional male breadwinner family model, wherein women were expected to dedicate their lives to family obligations, acting essentially as '*domestic servants*²⁶,' while men pursued lifelong employment, has gradually waned in social prevalence. Instead, other family models, such as the adult earner family model or, at the very least, the one and a half earner family model, have gained prominence. These alternative models anticipate women being involved in both domestic work and employment. While these changes were anticipated to enhance women's societal standing by granting them economic independence, they have not only intensified pre-existing social disparities but have also given rise to new ones, as women find themselves grappling with the dual responsibilities of work and family life. Given the main aim of social policy-making is to provide human well-being and social equality, formerly neglected work - life balance has turned into one of the most pressing policy and political subjects across Europe but especially at the EU²⁷.

In addition to responding the changing family forms, in the course of the post-industrial era, with the aim of tackling the ageing population and low economic growth²⁸ increasing global competitiveness²⁹, and alleviating bankruptcy risks among member states³⁰, the EU has adopted the 'social investment perspective' in terms of employment, economic and social policy. This new policy-paradigm was centred on the idea of economic growth through full employment among all citizens, including those with family responsibilities³¹ and thus perceived the work - life balance policies

²⁵ Esping-Andersen, *The Incomplete Revolution: Adapting to Women's New Roles*. Anton Hemerijck, *Changing welfare states*. OUP Oxford, 2012; Lewis, *Work-family balance, gender and policy*.

²⁶ Esping-Andersen, *The Incomplete Revolution: Adapting to Women's New Roles*, 27.

²⁷ Eileen Dreew. "Re-conceptualising families." In *Women, work and the family in Europe*, pp. 29-44. Routledge, 2002.

²⁸ Caroline De la Porte and Kerstin Jacobsson. "Social investment or recommodification? Assessing the employment policies of the EU member states." In *Towards a social investment welfare state?*, pp. 117-150. Policy Press, 2011.

²⁹ Nathalie Morel, Bruno Palier, and Joakim Palme. "Beyond the welfare state as we knew it?." In *Towards a social investment welfare state?*, pp. 1-30. Policy Press, 2011.

³⁰ Bengt-Åke Lundvall and Edward Lorenz. "From the Lisbon strategy to Europe2020" In Nathalie Morel, Bruno Palier och Joakim Palme (ed.) *Towards a social investment welfare state? Ideas, Policies and Challenges*.

³¹ De la Porte and Jacobsson, *Social investment or recommodification? Assessing the employment policies of the EU member states*; Janine Goetschy. "The

as the key instruments. As a result, particularly since the mid-1990s, work - life balance has become an inseparable part of the EU social policy model³². Ferree highlights the significance attributed to work - life balance by arguing, 'it is not a side issue, instead, a rudimentary European value'³³. Concomitantly, over the last three to four decades, work - life balance policies have increasingly begun to appear in EU policy documents³⁴. However, a closer examination of EU work - life balance policies indicates a paradigm shift in time from combatting the traditional gender roles through alleviating the unequal division of labour within the households by distributing the domestic work equally between men and women towards³⁵ encouraging women to be more active within the labour market through transferring their disproportionate domestic workload either to the state or at least to the market³⁶. Within this context, this article identifies two successive periods with respect to meaning that has been attributed to work - life balance at the EU.

European employment strategy: Genesis and development." *European journal of industrial relations* 5, no. 2 1999: 117-137.

³² Caracciolo di Torella and Masselot, *Reconciling work and family life in EU law and policy*; Kantola, *Gender and the European Union*.; Lewis, *Work-family balance, gender and policy*; Stratigaki, *The cooptation of gender concepts in EU policies: The case of 'reconciliation of work and family'*. 30-56.

³³ Myra Marx Ferree. "Framing equality: The politics of race, class, gender in the US, Germany, and the expanding European Union." *Gender politics in the expanding European Union: Mobilization, inclusion, exclusion* 2008: 237-256.

³⁴ Caracciolo di Torella and Masselot, *Reconciling work and family life in EU law and policy*; Drew, E. *Re-conceptualising families*; Susanne Fahlen. "Facets of work-life balance across Europe: How the interplay of institutional contexts, work arrangements and individual resources affect capabilities for having a family, and for being involved in family life." PhD diss., Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2012; Linda Hantrais. "Family policy matters." *Responding to family change in Europe* 2004; Lewis, *Work/family reconciliation, equal opportunities and social policies: the interpretation of policy trajectories at the EU level and the meaning of gender equality*. 420-437; Lewis, *Work-family balance, gender and policy*; Grace James. "Forgotten children: work-family reconciliation in the EU." *Journal of social welfare and family law* 34, no. 3 2012: 363-379; Stratigaki, *The cooptation of gender concepts in EU policies: The case of 'reconciliation of work and family'*. pp. 30-56.

³⁵ In order to distribute the domestic work equally between men and women, the EU has introduced a number of soft laws, which encourages fathers to be more active especially in terms of childcare.

³⁶ Kazanoğlu, *The Politics of Europeanisation: Work and Family Life Reconciliation Policy*.

III. 1992-2000: Genderised Work - Life Balance Policies

As mentioned earlier, newly emerged social risks and inequalities across Europe urged work - life balance policy making at the EU. Accordingly, as can be seen in the appendix-1, starting from the early 1990s until the beginning of the 2000s, the EU has introduced three hard, and one soft laws with respect to work – life balance. A comprehensive content analysis of these hard and soft laws explicitly chimes with the logic of genderisation. As we mentioned earlier genderising policies denotes work – life balance measures which promote different gender roles for men and women. More precisely, genderising work – life balance policies would address only to mothers and attribute the domestic work and especially childcare responsibility to mothers rather than encouraging fathers to be an important part of the childcare responsibility. As can be seen in the appendix-1 below, work – life balance measures introduced within the period between 1990 and 2000 reproduce the gender-based division of labour by considering care work as a domain reserved for mothers. Although they aim to provide children's well-being by encouraging one parent to stay at home with the child during the child's optimal mental and physical development process and protect the parent who will stay home from a job dismissal together with generous cash benefits, appointing mothers for this eventually keeps the traditional gender roles alive, which eventually reproduces women's disadvantaged positions within the society. Although genderised work – life balance policies too, aim to help women in terms of work and family life reconciliation, the ways in which they do so do not ease their labour market entrance. Although women's economic independence and promoting equal opportunities for men and women within the labour market are two main components of gender equality, genderised work – life balance measures remain inadequate in providing these to women. While compensating for women's employment gaps resulting from their childbirth and childcare responsibilities is crucial in recognizing the significance of previously overlooked care work, it also presents challenges for women re-entering the labor market. In line with what Bianchi and her colleagues argued the longer women remain outside the labour market the harder for them to be employed as employers would not see them attractive. All in all, even genderised work – life balance policies successfully prevent women to carry the double burden of work and family lives, they continue to consider women as natural care-givers instead of transferring care obligations from familial sphere to public sphere.

IV. 2000 and Onwards: De-genderised Work – Life Balance Policies

The late 1990s and early 2000s chime with the time when the EU has adopted the social investment paradigm. As mentioned earlier, this new paradigm aimed to address challenges related to the aging population and low economic growth³⁷, increasing global competitiveness³⁸, and alleviating bankruptcy risks among member states³⁹ by increasing the employment rates in the member states. In other words, this new policy paradigm requested all citizens, including those with family responsibilities as well to be employed, which has well been reflected into the content of the work – life balance policies. As can be seen in appendix-2 below, despite the paradigm change, the work – life balance policies have continued to enjoy a strong emphasis until the second half of the 2000s. Between 2000 and 2005, the EU has introduced four soft laws with respect to work – life balance. However, starting in 2005 until 2010, work-life balance experienced a decline in the political enthusiasm that it had enjoyed in the preceding decade. This shift was attributed to an intensified campaign against gender ideology and an increased number of conservative rightist Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) advocating for austerity.⁴⁰ However, with the introduction of the EU Parental Leave Directive in 2010, work – life balance policies have reappeared on the EU policy-making agenda. In the meantime, social partners and European social institutions, particularly COFACE and the European Women's Lobby, have made significant efforts to expand work-life balance measures. They declared 2014 as the 'Year of Reconciling Work and Family Life in Europe.'

These efforts have resulted in EU's re-acknowledgement of the importance and essentialness of the work – life balance policies and they have continued to enjoy the political emphasis from where they left off. Yet, with a considerable paradigm change. Contrary to work – life balance measures of the previous decade, the work – life balance policies introduced in 2000 and onwards have given precedence to the delegation of family

³⁷ De la Porte, and Jacobsson, *Social investment or recommodification? Assessing the employment policies of the EU member states.*

³⁸ Nathalie Morel, Bruno Palier, and Joakim Palme. "Beyond the welfare state as we knew it?." In *Towards a social investment welfare state?*, pp. 1-30. Policy Press, 2011.

³⁹ Lundvall and Lorenz, *From the Lisbon Strategy to EUROPE2020.*

⁴⁰ Borbála Juhász and Enikő Pap. "Backlash in gender equality and women's and girls' rights." 2018.

responsibilities, directing them either towards the state or the market. In so doing, work – life balance policies have come to serve women’s labour market participation and equal redistribution of domestic responsibilities between men and women, which clearly reflect the logic of de-genderisation as they endeavour to eliminate the traditional gender roles in three ways. First of all, shorter maternal leaves would encourage women to return to labour market relatively quicker and this would keep women’s promotion potential as high as men’s. Because when women spend relatively less amount of time out of the labour market, they will not be disconnected from business lives. Because when women spend a comparatively shorter amount of time away from the labor market, they will remain more connected to professional life. Second, requesting parental leave to be taken both by mothers and fathers clearly implies a fight against traditional gender roles as it is breaking the rule that childcare is naturally mothers’ job. Last but not least, setting increased childcare enrolment rate targets also encourage women to be active within the labour market as it explicitly emancipates women from their care duties. All in all, work – life balance policies introduced over the last two decades, clearly chimes with de-genderisation as they serve not only women’s labour market participation but also the equal redistribution of care work. In other words, they do not only aim to increase women’s employment rates but they also aim to increase fathers’ involvement within the domestic work.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the changing policy paradigm with respect to gender equality at the EU with a particular focus on the post-2008 period, which is identified as the times of the severe European debt crises. In the quest for full understanding of the policy paradigm shift within this specific policy area at the EU level, this article relied on feminist critiques of Esping-Andersen’s welfare regime typology. However, contrary to notable feminist social policy scholars, this article has utilised the genderisation and de-genderisation distinction rather than the familialisation and de-familialisation distinction for two key reasons. First, the latter distinction has been used in welfare regime comparisons rather than policy-paradigm explorations and second, they were seen as ambivalent concepts as they remained inadequate in explaining the clear aims of the policies. Within this theoretical framework, by using the EU work - life balance policies as an example to investigate the changing policy paradigm and discuss the EU

gender policy prospects, this article puts forward two key arguments. First, the EU has been committed to providing gender equality since the 1990s, especially with the introduction of the term gender mainstreaming in 1996, the significance attached to gender equality has reached the maximum. Nevertheless, despite a robust emphasis for nearly ten years, the influence of various factors in the latter half of the 2000s has led to the marginalization of work-life balance policies. These factors encompassed the 2008 Euro crisis, the 2009 European debt crisis, and a rise in the number of conservative rightist Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) advocating for austerity. Consequently, work-life balance policies have experienced a decline in the political support they enjoyed in the preceding decade. Yet, with the significant lobbying efforts of the social partners and European social institutions work – life balance policies have reappeared on the EU’s policy-making agenda. Second, in addition to this changing level of significance attributed to work – life balance policy making, the meaning attributed to these policies has also showed great variations over time. While these policies initially serve to tackle the feminist challenges, in time they have come to serve the tackle the low female employment rates. In other words, the meaning attributed to providing gender equality has shifted away from increasing men’s relatively lower involvement in domestic tasks towards increasing women’s capacity to work. In the aftermath of EU adopting the social investment perspective, which revolved around the concept of economic growth through the full employment of all citizens, gender equality policies have evolved to support economic growth by facilitating women's participation in the labour market. Reducing the duration of parental leaves, coupled with increased access to public childcare services and universal enrolment rights, underscores the EU's commitment to eliminating gender roles. This approach aims to integrate more women into the labour market by shifting their family responsibilities to either the state or, at the very least, the market, which marks an alignment with the concept of de-genderisation. Although it is hard to come to a definite conclusion, relying on the comprehensive content analysis of official EU documents, it would not be unjustified to argue that the EU aims to empower women economically by facilitating their engagement in the labour market and alleviating domestic responsibilities. The ultimate goal is to foster economic growth, initially at the national level and subsequently at the supranational level.

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Appendix-1: Work – life balance measures within the EU between 1990 and 2000⁴¹

Directive:	Content:
92/85/EEC Pregnant Workers Directive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 14 weeks maternity leave with a payment or an allowance; ○ Job dismissal protection during the leave; ○ The right to return the same job with the same working conditions (EEC, 1992).
Council Recommendation (1992)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Member States should take and/or progressively encourage initiatives to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children (CEC, 1992:2).
97/81/EC Part time work Directive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Introduce measures facilitating access to part time work for and women in order to ease work and family life reconciliation; ○ Eliminate any kind of discrimination against part time workers and improve their working quality (EC, 1997).
1999/70/EC Fixed term work Directive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Remove any kind of discrimination from the fixed-term contracts; ○ Provide fixed-term workers the opportunity to access corresponding trainings (EC, 1999).

Appendix-2: Work – life balance measures within the EU from 2000s and onwards⁴²

Directive:	Content:
Lisbon Strategy (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Make it easier to reconcile working life and family life, in particular by setting a new benchmark for improved childcare provision. ○ Ease to reconcile working life and family life, in particular via childcare provisions.
Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (2000) Article 33	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Protection against any kind of job dismissal coming from any kind of leave
Barcelona Council (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Member States should provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children below age of three.

⁴¹ EC, 1992; EEC, 1992; EC, 1999.

⁴² Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025; EC, 1996; EC, 1997; EC, 1999; EU, 2015.

Fourth Action Program for Equal Opportunities for Women and men (2004-2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Promote flexible leave provisions for reconciling personal and professional lives. ○ Promote flexible working arrangements for reconciling personal and professional lives.
2010/18/EU Parental Leave Directive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Member and candidate states should provide working parents an individual non-transferable at least 18 weeks of leave in case of child birth and/or adoption until the eighth birthday of the child; ○ Job dismissal protection and the right to return the same job or to an equivalent position ○ The right to request for working hours and/or patterns change for a set period of time according to parents' needs (EU, 2010).
European Commission Strategy for Equality between Women and Men (2010-2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Make further progress in reconciliation of work and family life policy development particularly affordable and high-quality care
Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality (2016-2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Modernise the current EU legal framework in terms of leave arrangements. ○ Modernise the current EU legal framework in terms of flexible working arrangements.
2019/1158/EU Work-Life Balance Directive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Establishes a minimum of 4 months of parental leave. ○ At least 2 out of the 4 months are non-transferable from a parent to another. ○ At least the 2 non-transferable months have to be adequately compensated at a level to be decided in each EU country. ○ Parents have the right to request taking the leave in a flexible way (part-time and in a piecemeal way). ○ Fathers/ second parents have the right to take at least 10 working days of paternity leave around the time of birth of the child. ○ gives all working parents of children up to at least 8 years and all carers a right to request flexible working arrangements. ○ These comprise reduced working hours, flexible working hours and flexibility in place of work.
Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Challenge the gender stereotypes; ○ Close gender gaps in the labour market; ○ Close the gender care gap; ○ Make EU-rules on work-life balance for women and men work in

	<p>practice by ensuring that Member States transpose and implement the rules.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Promote equal uptake of family leaves and flexible working arrangements;○ Improve access to high quality and affordable childcare and other care services by investing in care services.
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