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## The construction of EU's childcare policy through the Open Method of Coordination\*

*Elissaveta Radulova*

University of Maastricht, Netherlands

E-Mail: [e.radulova@politics.unimaas.nl](mailto:e.radulova@politics.unimaas.nl)

**Abstract:** This article elaborates analysis of the normative foundations of the European Union's policy for reconciliation of work and family life, with a specific focus on the shifts produced by the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination in the field of childcare policy. The main objective is to examine how childcare has been conceptualised for the purposes of EU public-policy making throughout the years of European integration (1951-2008) and whether the endorsement of the European Employment Strategy (EES) in 1997 has made an impact on this process. Adopting a constructivist analytical framework and policy frame analysis as main research method, the paper maps out the contemporary policy problematizations related to childcare provision, and traces their presence and dynamic development at the EU level. Based on a keyword search in the database of European Union law Eur-Lex, a dataset of 83 documents (42 pieces of secondary legislation and 41 Presidency Conclusions) is formed. The latter is subsequently examined through qualitative content analysis. The study reveals the normative and cognitive evolution of the policy-making process prior to and after the introduction of EES.

**Keywords:** discourse; policy analysis; EU gender policy; open coordination; European Social Model; policy coordination; political science

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### 1. Introduction

The addition of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to the multitude of steering modes

of the European Union (EU) has sparked heated academic debates regarding its potential impact and the effect it exercises on the policy-making processes at the EU and at the national level (for review see Kröger 2009 this issue). This article sets out to examine the impact of the application of the OMC on the normative and cognitive foundations of childcare policy at the EU level of governance. To that end, it will look in the policy area of employment i.e. it will study the European Employment Strategy (EES), with a particular focus on its fourth pillar (Gender equality) and the subsequent guidelines on reconciliation of work and family life and the 33 per cent Barcelona summit target in the field of childcare provision policy. Following the proposed analytical framework by Borrás and Radaelli the impact of the EES at the EU level could be conceptualised as organizational and ideational (Borrás and Radaelli 2009: 6-7).

The organizational impact concerns innovations and changes introduced in the applied 'governance formula' i.e. formal power endowments and the procedure of actors' interactions. Such innovations are numerous in the governance arena of employment policy. Under the OMC formula not only are the EU institutions differently endowed with power compared to the Community method for example, what is more, the interaction between them and the domestic policy-making institutions is organized on a substantially different basis. These organizational aspects and the novelties therein are extensively analysed in the existing OMC literature (Jacobsson 2002; Overdevest 2002; Porte and Pochet 2002; Radaelli 2003; Zeitlin, Pochet, and Magnusson 2005).

The ideational impact (i.e. the changes instigated by the EES in the policy norms, ideas and ideational repertoires, and in the cognitive schemes that interpret the policy "reality") is far less systematically examined. In the literature there is a broad consensus that – despite the initial rhetoric – the EES and the larger Lisbon agenda are after all mainly a strategy to enhance Europe's competitiveness (Dehousse 2002; Hermans 2005; Radaelli 2003; Rodrigues 2001; Rodrigues). Similarly, in the concrete example of gender equality (pillar IV of the EES) authors observe the focus of the EES on the supply-side of the economy, and on the lack of initiatives to change the behaviour of employers and of men, which is crucial for a lateral treatment of gender inequalities (Rubery 2002: 502). In a similar vein of thought, Lombardo and Meier claim that the notion of gender equality as employed by the European Employment Strategy (EES) does not encompass sufficient feminist reading (Lombardo and Meier 2006). Moreover, Stratigaki even depicts a 'cooptation' of the concept(1) of gender equality (Stratigaki 2004). Nevertheless, despite these general analyses, specific examples, or systematic and methodical studies of the impact of the EES on policy discourses are lacking, not the least due to the methodological difficulties involved (Kröger 2009). Subsequently, the present paper proposes a method to accomplish such a study and illustrates its application in childcare provision policy.

This article, therefore, sets out to discover what the normative and cognitive impact of the EES is, and moreover to probe the widely shared view in gender studies of EU policy that the OMC has brought a narrow interpretation of gender equality replacing the earlier broader one (Lewis 2006; Rossilli 2000; Stratigaki 2004). The concrete research questions that will be considered are:

- Has the arrival of the EES reshuffled the normative foundations of EU policy-making in the field of reconciliation of work and family life and childcare policy in particular? What kind of (normative) set of ideas for appropriate employment policy does the EES promote and support?
- Apart from the well-known procedural novelties (non-binding annual guidelines, iterative cycles of reporting and peer review, policy recommendations dressed in soft law, etc.), has the OMC introduced any shift in the principles and cognitive beliefs underlying the policy process?

In order to examine the ideational effects of the EES on the framing of reconciliation policies throughout the EU, the content of the concept of childcare is studied. The underlying assumption is that changes in the conceptualization of childcare are indicative for changes in the normative and cognitive assumptions of the policy-making process itself (see [section 2](#) for

elaboration of this argument). This paper therefore maps out the policy problematizations related to childcare throughout the period of European integration (1951-2008) based on a study of secondary legislation derived from Eur-Lex database of EU law. This allows for a thorough examination of the policy background in which the EES is embedded and of the general ideational dynamics of the policy-making process prior to and after the introduction of the OMC in the field of employment.

The article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the analytical framework and the method of the study – policy frame analysis. Section three maps out the main contemporary policy frames related to childcare as derived from national public policy debates. In section four the presence and dynamic development of these frames is traced in EU policy-making through qualitative content analysis. Finally, section five discusses the findings of the study and draws several conclusions.

## 2. Analytical framework of the study <sup>↑</sup>

In this study a constructivist analytical framework is applied. Since constructivism is a broad “church” (Christiansen, Jorgensen, and Wiener 1999; Moses and Knutsen 2007: 190-191), it has to be specified that in this study under a constructivist research perspective is envisioned the approach that combines anti-foundational ontology with constructivist epistemology and interpretative methodology in the study of social phenomena. From this perspective, politics and policy-making take quite a different shape than the conventional view. Power remains the central object of interest and study, but the struggle for power is not anymore conceived of as a contest of actors, interest groups, party platforms or candidate lists, but rather as a battle of alternative worldviews, a struggle for the establishment of a dominant meaning about social issues, as well as about the ability to define what is socially significant. In turn, policy making is not about provision of the optimal public policy given certain constellation of public problems but about the contingent choice of possible (but not unique) problematizations of social reality. This constructivist conception of public policy-making is in sharp contrast with the traditional (rationalist) one in that it shifts the focus from the choice of an optimal solution to ‘existing public problems’ through the application of cost-benefit analysis, toward the production of meaning in policy-making, and the construction of public problems. Any description of an issue or a ‘problem’ is an interpretation, and interpretations involve judgement and choices (Bacchi 1999: 1). Furthermore, the objects of study are no longer public ‘problems’ but articulated (i.e. possible but not unique) problematizations (Foucault 1984: 257, 256).

Given this background, a constructivist study of a supranational policy-making process (e.g. the EES) needs to firstly illuminate the particular problematizations of social conditions and phenomena the supranational process suggests, thus forwarding (even legitimizing) certain policy solutions over others. The role of the policy analyst then is to expose these dominant interpretations and their alternatives. A prominent method to do that is policy frame analysis (Yanow 2000). The first step in this method is the identification of the policy frames present in the studied policy area. But what is a policy frame exactly? And how could one recognise a frame in policy documents?

A frame is a selected representation of a social phenomenon. Similarly to a picture frame it represents a social issue in a certain light and within certain borders. Frames direct attention toward some elements while simultaneously diverting attention from other elements, “they highlight and contain at the same time that they exclude” (Yanow 2000: 11). According to Rein and Schoen a policy frame “is a perspective from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted on” (Rein and Schoen 1993: 146). Contending policy frames entail not just different policy visions – different language, understandings, and perceptions – and potentially different courses of action, but also different values and different meanings (Yanow 2000: 12). Therefore, policy frames could be defined as performing three main functions. They name (point out) a social condition as problematic based on and from the perspective of certain normative belief system, offer an explanation

about the problem and the relevant phenomena and propose a policy action/ non-action. In other words, a policy frame comprises the following four dimensions:

1. Normative dimension – pertains to the function of the frame to judge and attach values to social reality;
2. Constitutive dimension – pertains to the function of the frame to name and thus constitute the public problem;
3. Cognitive dimension – pertains to the function of the frame to narrate about what has led to the problem, i.e. to present social reality in terms of cause-effect relations and
4. Policy dimension – pertains to the function of the frame to outline a course of public actions that would remedy the problem.

Sound public policies are based on a policy frame that implicitly or explicitly displays all the four dimensions described above. Subsequently, the deconstruction of the constitutive, normative, cognitive and policy underpinnings of governmental programmes, actions and measures becomes the primary activity of the policy analyst. This study is also concerned with the deconstruction of policy frames, and will perform frame analysis on secondary legislation related to childcare policy. The main objective is to examine how childcare has been conceptualised for the purposes of EU public policy making throughout the years of European integration (1951-2008) and whether the endorsement of the EES in 1997 has made an impact on this process. By mapping out the policy problems to which childcare has been linked throughout the process of European integration, it will become possible to analyse whether the EES has produced an impact on the conceptualization of childcare for policy purposes, and thus on the entire process of EU policy making in the field of reconciliation policies.

### **3. Childcare as a public policy solution and childcare related policy frames** ↑

Public support for non-home based childcare is a relatively recent phenomenon in the public policies of Western Europe. Well into the 1980s – and in some cases until much later (see Weishaupt this issue) – most continental countries were designing and applying policy measures to keep mothers at home to care for their children. Sweden was an exception of this policy line as already in 1972 13 per cent of Swedish children were visiting public day-care centres (Bjoernberg 2002), and childcare was used as a policy instrument to reconcile work and family obligations. Until the beginning of the 1970s, however, anywhere out of Scandinavia childcare facilities were mainly considered places for children from “problem” and/or poor families. These were places which a child would visit exceptionally rather than habitually. This rather negative general public image of childcare gradually began to change after the onset of female emancipation in the late 1960s. For example, the British Women’s Liberation Movement claimed 24-hour community-controlled childcare services as one of their Four Demands (Marchbank 1996: 9). Thus, the issue of non-home based childcare and provision of sufficient capacity of daycare facilities entered the public sphere of all West European countries and kept on coming back on the agenda of many governments throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In principle, the Social-Democrats were the main supporters of the enlargement of childcare capacities (for the cases of Austria and Ireland see Weishaupt this issue).

In the public debates since the 1980s, childcare services have been associated with various public policy problems. Rubio (2007) identifies the following public 'problems' that available and affordable childcare facilities could allegedly remedy: gender inequality, decreasing economic growth and/ or competitiveness, low fertility and demographic stagnation, social exclusion and child poverty, and/ or early education (see also Bacchi 1999; Lewis 2006; CEC, 2008). All of these perceived public problems (or rather problematizations) have, at different times and by different political and social actors (e.g. trade unions, political parties, interest groups) been linked to childcare provision as a feasible policy solution. For reasons of space, the article will not deal with all five policy frames. In particular, to the policy frames of social exclusion and early education will not be devoted special section in what follows. The main reason for this choice is that both are not expected in policy documents of the EU level. As

mentioned already, the social exclusion frame is the oldest policy frame with decreasing relevance at the national level. Conversely, the early education frame is relatively new and with increasing relevance in the domestic policy debates, but outside the competences of the EU, so it's not expected often in EU policy documents. Nevertheless, the empirical analysis remained alert for these two policy frames. As will be revealed below, however, none of the two was present in the secondary legislation derived from the Eur-Lex database of European Law. The remaining three frames – gender inequality, decreasing competitiveness and welfare state reform and decreasing demographic growth – will be focal for the ensuing empirical analysis. Therefore, [Table 1](#) and the rest of this section presents them in detail stating their normative, constitutive, cognitive and policy dimensions.

[Table 1](#)

### 3.1. Frame 1: Gender Inequality

If one embraces the normative values of equality among people regardless of gender, equal human rights, right to personal growth and self-improvement and equal rights and responsibilities within the family, the problem of gender inequality is easily discerned. Social reality is viewed as gender-biased from this perspective – more men than women are active in public life, men are more often chosen for representatives in national assemblies, predominantly men sit at the top management seats of big business corporations, men get better pay and have less discontinuous employment careers, etc. Conversely, women are underrepresented in public and corporate top levels, are less present on the labour market (especially once they give birth), and are more often economically dependent on their partners. The cognitive story (cause-effect narrative) is the following: Due to the patriarchal and androcentric organization of society, women are for centuries long restricted to activities within the private sphere, i.e. predominantly perform the domestic (unpaid and hardly valued) work, do not have access to paid work, participation in public life, education, which leads to their dependence and unequal position in relation to men. It is subsequently argued that if women work, they will become financially independent, advance professionally, reach higher stages in their careers, and ultimately decrease the inequality gap. Clearly, in order to enter paid employment women have to be 'freed' from (parts of) the unpaid work they usually perform. The policy solution is seen in daycare facilities for children and/or in the redistribution of tasks at home between the partners. It is crucial to underline the importance of the concept of sharing and redistribution of tasks in this context, because if gender equality policies are understood narrowly (i.e. only in terms of facilitating the access to paid employment) they would not ameliorate the position of women. To the contrary, it might even aggravate it since paid employment without equal sharing of unpaid responsibilities leads to the so-called "double shift". The notion of the "double shift" describes the everyday reality of most women who have careers and raise families - they hold one job for which they are paid, and another one (at home) for which they are not (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Williams 2000). It is therefore crucial to have a broad interpretation of the concept of gender equality (i.e. as equal sharing of paid and unpaid work), if this problem is to be addressed properly. Therefore, in this study the policy frame of gender equality will be considered present in documents only if next to childcare facilities a reference is made to equal sharing of unpaid work.

An example of such a policy frame is provided by the Commission's Communication of 2006 "A Roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010". Page 5 thereof reads (COM (2006) 92 of 01.03.2006):

#### "2.3. Better reconciliation policies for both women and men

Services and structures are adapting too slowly to a situation where both women and men work. Few men take parental leave or work part-time (7.4% compared to 32.6% for women); women remain the main carers of children and other dependants. Men should be encouraged to take up family responsibilities, in

particular through incentives to take parental and paternity leaves and to share leave entitlements with women.

Key actions

The Commission will

- [...]
- support the achievement of the Barcelona targets on childcare and the development of other care facilities through the Structural Funds and the exchange of good practices”

### 3.2. Frame 2: Economic competitiveness and welfare state reform

Based on the normative foundations of economic efficiency, growth, and material prosperity, European economic performance is often considered to be lagging behind compared with the USA and East Asia. Subsequently, the problems of decreasing competitiveness and inefficient welfare regimes emerge (Sapir 2006: 369-374). The cognitive link between these problems of decreasing economic competitiveness and childcare is female labour market participation. It is namely believed that higher availability of quality childcare facilities would lead to higher levels of female employment (and hence GDP). Moreover, women would not burden anymore the welfare state through benefits of various sorts. The reasoning behind this expectation follows a characteristic rationalist account of costs and benefits. Namely, it is pointed out that economic theory suggests two approaches to understanding the effects of childcare on women’s employment:

1. Value of care work (availability) – childcare arrangements affect the value a woman places on her time at home. Good childcare alternatives reduce the attractiveness/value of full-time care-giving work at home.
2. Childcare costs as a tax on mothers’ wages (affordability) – an increase in childcare costs will have the same effect as lowering of the wages, i.e. it will reduce both the propensity to remain employed and the amount of hours worked. Conversely, the lower the costs, the higher the expected labour market participation of women.

Both approaches predict that improvements in women’s childcare options (greater availability and/or lower costs) will be associated with increases in employment, and this prediction is supported by a large body of empirical research (Connelly 1992; Ribar 1995; Van der Lippe 2001; 2003). Since from this perspective care responsibilities are viewed to constitute a major obstacle to (full) employment the public provision (or subsidy) of affordable childcare is seen as the policy solution.

An example of this policy frame is provided by the Commission’s Report of 2008 “Implementation of the Barcelona objectives concerning childcare facilities for pre-school-age children”. Page 2 thereof states (COM(2008) 638):

“The development of childcare facilities gives parents more freedom to choose how to organise their time and thus better reconcile their working life with family life. This applies in particular to women, who, faced with inadequate childcare options, are more likely than men to have to give up work or to choose working arrangements which prevent them from fully exploiting their talents. The European economy is thus deprived of their productive potential, at a time when it is having to contend with economic and demographic challenges.”

### 3.3. Frame 3: Demographic crisis ↑

This frame has its normative grounds in the values of social preservation, reproduction, and cohesion, as well as economic efficiency. From this angle, low levels of fertility constitute a major problem because societies shrink, older people relatively increase in numbers compared to young people, the labour force stagnates and tensions in the pension system occur. The cognitive story with relevance to childcare here is that nowadays women bare less children and relatively late in their lives (if at all) because of the pursuit of a career, which does not fit well with the care responsibilities for a child. Once a baby comes into a woman's life, most often her career plans are put on hold. That is why, in the European societies, where individualisation processes are booming regardless of gender, less and less women decide to have (several) children. Their choice might be different had more childcare facilities been available argue the policy-makers. Once partially freed from their care responsibilities, and thus able to pursue their career plans, women would bare more children – so the argument goes. The demographic crisis could therefore be partially resolved by the policy solution of rising the number and affordability of childcare facilities. An example of this policy frame is provided by the Commission's Green Paper of 2005 "Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations". Page 5 thereof reads (CEC(2005) 94):

“The low fertility rate is the result of obstacles to private choices: late access to employment, job instability, expensive housing and lack of incentives (family benefits, parental leave, child care, equal pay). Incentives of this kind can have a positive impact on the birth rate and increase employment, especially female employment, as certain countries have shown.”

To summarise, childcare is often presented in national public policy debates as a remedy to three major “problematic” social conditions (Bacchi 1999; Lewis 2006; Lombardo and Meier 2006; Rubio 2007): gender inequality – frame one (F1), decreasing effectiveness of the welfare state and declining national economic competitiveness – frame two (F2) and demographic crisis, in particular low fertility in the context of greying population – frame three (F3). These three policy frames derived from the national policy debates of the member states of the European Union will in the next section be traced in EU secondary legislation. The search in the database of European Law Eur-Lex encompasses the entire period of European Integration from 1951 until the end 2008. The objective of is twofold: On the one hand to examine and compare the dynamics of framing of childcare at the EU level before and after the EES, and on the other hand to establish whether the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination in employment polices has influenced the conceptualisation of childcare, and thus the normative and cognitive foundations of the policy-making process.

## 4. Dynamics of childcare policy framing at the EU level ↑

This section reports the results of the policy frame analysis, which was elaborated in order to trace the dynamics of linking policy problems to the policy solution of childcare at EU-level. The main objective was to examine how childcare has been conceptualised for the purposes of EU public policy making throughout the years of European integration and whether the endorsement of the EES in 1997 has made an impact on this process. Based on a keyword search in the database of EU law Eur-Lex (secondary legislation), a dataset of 83 documents was formed (see [Table 2](#) for the steps in the formation of the dataset).

Table 2

First of all, the EES ‘acquis’ entered the dataset, i.e. all EES guidelines and all EES implementation reports (18 in total), as well as all Presidency Conclusions starting from the 1997 Amsterdam summit. Secondly, a search was performed in the Eur-Lex database under different search terms all signifying non-home based childcare (e.g. crèche, child care,

daycare, etc.) From all the hits (i.e. pieces of legislation that include the search term) only the relevant and new(2) documents entered the dataset. For example, the Council Decisions and Council Recommendations related to the EES did not enter twice into the database – they were filtered during the selection of new documents. On the next step a new search term was looked up in Eur-Lex and again only the relevant and new documents entered the dataset. Following this procedure, a dataset of 83 documents was formed. The latter was subsequently examined through qualitative content analysis, whereby the number of references to childcare (or related term) as a policy solution was documented and (wherever possible) each reference was assigned to one of the 3 policy frames discussed in section 3. To accomplish that the immediate context where the reference belonged was studied. If it contained the constitutive and cognitive dimensions of any of the frames described in section 3, then the reference would be counted as indicative of the respective policy frame. Only rarely did the documents refer to the normative dimensions of the policy frames, and that is quite understandable – (political) values, norms or principles are hardly ever explicit in policy documents. That is why the presence of the normative dimension was not considered as necessary for the existence of the policy frame. The frequency of occurrence of each of the three frames in the Presidency Conclusions is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

The relevant rows i.e. the Presidency Conclusions that return hits related to the childcare search terms were integrated into the main document database derived from the Eur-Lex (see Table 4).

Table 4

“Childcare” and its derivatives and synonyms appear 182 times in the 83 documents. Not all of these references are attributable to a policy frame, however. For example, the 1992 Recommendation on Child care is often referred to in other documents, i.e. the term ‘childcare’ is simply mentioned without signifying a policy frame. In the remaining 124 references a full-fledged policy frame – or at least its constitutive and policy dimension – could be discerned. In 52 cases childcare is linked to gender inequality (F1), in 71 cases to competitiveness (F2), and in 1 case to the demographic crisis in Europe (F3). Evidently, childcare as a policy solution has been mainly linked to the public problems of gender inequality and decreasing economic competitiveness, and the ‘demography’ policy frame is almost absent(3) (only 1 reference). Therefore, the analysis in the rest of the article will focus only on the dynamics of representation and interplay between policy frames F1 and F2.

When the ‘careers’ (i.e. presence and frequency of appearance) of the two frames are plotted together on a graph, the following findings emerge (see Figures 1 and 2):

1. F1 is the oldest policy frame in EU secondary legislation. The first reference linking childcare to the problem of gender inequality dates back to 1986. This late appearance is not at all surprising given that in the 12 EU member states of the time public policy measures for childcare only became a prominent issue in the 1980s.
2. F2 only appears 10 years later (in 1996, i.e. two years before the endorsement of the first set of EES guidelines).
3. F1 is dominant until 1999 when it ‘hands over the lead’ to F2.
4. In the period from 1998 to 2002 (i.e. during the first 5 years of EES) the two policy frames co-exist in relative parity (20 references to F1 and 17 references to F2).
5. As from 2002 onwards, F2 clearly dominates over F1 (18 references to F1 and 52 references to F2).

Figure 1

One immediate conclusion that could be drawn is that the EES has exercised a strong effect on the meaning of childcare and the types of policy problems it might potentially remedy as a policy solution. Up to the introduction of the employment OMC, childcare was linked only to

the issue of gender equality, whereas the introduction of the EES coincides with the emergence of F2 in policy documents, i.e. with the linking of childcare to the issue of low female labour market participation and decreasing competitiveness. Furthermore, the findings reveal that three distinct periods in the ‘career’ of childcare could be set apart: up to 1998 (i.e. before the EES) when F1 is dominant, from 1998 to 2002 (i.e. after the introduction of the EES and until the first major reform of the EES guidelines) when F1 and F2 exist in relative parity, and from 2002 onwards when F2 clearly dominates over F1 (see [Figure 2](#)).

[Figure 2](#)

#### **4.1. Period 1: Dominance of gender equality concerns (until 1998) ↑**

In the period before the introduction of the EES (up to 1998), the policy frame of gender inequality (F1) undoubtedly dominated EU policy making (14 out of 16 references could be attributed to this policy frame). An example of this policy frame is to be found in the 1992 Council recommendation on child care. There are six references to F1 in this policy document. Moreover, it contains all the elements of the gender inequality policy frame.

The normative dimension (based on the values of solidarity, equality, sharing, and equal opportunities) is outlined in article 6 of this Council recommendation:

“Article 6 Sharing of responsibilities

As regards responsibilities arising from the care and upbringing of children, it is recommended that Member States should promote and encourage, with due respect for freedom of the individual, increased participation by men, in order to achieve a more equal sharing of parental responsibilities between men and women and to enable women to have a more effective role in the labour market.”

The constitutive dimension and a cognitive story are outlined in the preamble of the same 1992 Council recommendation:

“Whereas inadequate provision of child-care services at prices affordable to parents and other initiatives to reconcile responsibility for the family and the upbringing of children with the employment, or with the education and training of parents in order to obtain employment constitutes a major barrier to women's access to and more effective participation in the labour market, on equal terms with men, the effective participation of women in all areas of society and the effective use of their talents, skills and abilities in the current demographic situation;”

Finally, the policy dimension is the very *raison d'être* of the document. Other documents where F1 is present in this period are several Council resolutions on equal opportunities or workforce participation of women (see [Table 1](#)).

It is visible from these citations that up to the mid-/late 1990s the dynamics of framing in the EU was favouring the policy frame of gender inequality. It has to be underlined however that this dominant frame was ‘dressed’ in instruments of non-binding nature (resolutions, recommendations, etc.). Moreover, these instruments were not part of a larger policy-making mechanism but had the character of a ‘one-shot’ event. In the following periods analyzed by the study, the legislation is again soft but they are supported by a larger process of steering (the OMC), which arguably increases the potential influence of the policy frame.

#### **4.2. Period 2: Gradual turn to economic competitiveness concerns (1998-2002) ↑**

From 1998 onwards the policy discourse and the respective framing processes change. In this period a new conceptualisation becomes visible in policy documents – childcare is seen as a means of boosting EU's competitiveness by rising the employment rate of women and respectively the GDP growth. Up to 2002 this new conceptualisation co-exists in relative parity with the policy frame of gender inequality (20 references are attributable to F1 and 17 to F2).

An example of framing from this period could be found in the EES guidelines of 1999. Guideline 21 thereof states:

“Reconciling work and family life

Policies on career breaks, parental leave and part-time work, as well as flexible working arrangements which serve the interests of both employers and employees, are of particular importance to women and men. Implementation of the various Directives and social partner agreements in this area should be accelerated and monitored regularly. There must be an adequate provision of good quality care for children and other dependents in order to support women's and men's entry and continued participation in the labour market. An equal sharing of family responsibilities is crucial in this respect. In order to strengthen equal opportunities, Member States and the social partners will:

21. Design, implement and promote family-friendly policies, including affordable, accessible and high quality care services for children and other dependents, as well as parental and other leave schemes.”

Clearly, this guideline is about labour market participation (F2) but nevertheless still mentions “equal sharing” of unpaid work (F1) as crucially important element of a good reconciliation strategy.

Another illustration of the economic competitiveness frame (F2) could be found in the following policy recommendation directed to Ireland in 2001 (Council Recommendation of 19 January 2001 on the implementation of member states' employment policies):

“Ireland should therefore:

1. push ahead with its comprehensive strategy aimed at increasing the proportion of women in employment, removing tax barriers and increasing child care places; and take action with the aim of reducing the gender pay gap...”

From the citations above a gradual turn in the framing of childcare could be discerned (from F1 to F2). Nevertheless, the policy frame of gender inequality (F1) is still very much present in policy documents during this period. After the 5-year review of the EES, however, the normative and cognitive beliefs underlying childcare policy making will decisively take the ‘competitiveness’ direction.

### **4.3. Period 3: Prevalence of economic competitiveness concerns (after 2002) ↑**

From 2002 onwards (with the first major reform of the EES guidelines) the competitiveness frame (F2) clearly dominates and the gender equality one (F1) steps into the background. In this period, there are only 18 references to F1, while 52 are devoted to F2. At that time at the EU-level, rational economic interpretations of public policy problems became dominant not only in the field of childcare (Hermans 2005).

At the beginning of this period, the European Council approves two quantitative targets in the field of childcare to be achieved by the member states until 2010:

“Member states should remove disincentives to female labour participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between the 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.”

Already in this citation the narrowing of the concept of reconciliation is visible. While up to 2002 the EES guidelines encouraged labour participation of women, but stressed equal sharing of unpaid work as indispensable part of the reconciliation package (see guideline 21 of 1999 cited above), as of 2002, policy documents are stripped of any “sharing rhetoric” and speak directly and without any deviations about raising ‘female labour participation’. This is a clear indication of the narrowing of the reconciliation concept, and subsequently of the gender equality vision forwarded by the EES.

Another citation from this same period illustrates the point further. In 2005, the reform of the Lisbon strategy (currently referred to as Lisbon II or the Strategy of Growth and Jobs) brought about the merger of the EES guidelines and the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines. Reconciliation and respectively childcare are since then part of the Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs package. Thus, guideline No. 18 of the 2005 Integrated guidelines states:

“Guideline No 18: Promote a lifecycle approach to work through:

- a renewed endeavour to build employment pathways for young people and reduce youth unemployment, as called for in the European Youth Pact,
- resolute action to increase female participation and reduce gender gaps in employment, unemployment and pay,
- better reconciliation of work and private life and the provision of accessible and affordable childcare facilities and care for other dependants,
- [...].”

Similarly to the Barcelona objective, in this 18th guideline again in a very laconic style childcare is advanced as a means to increase labour market participation, revealing the shrinking of the conception of reconciliation in EU policy-making.

With the endorsement of the 2002 EES guidelines the prevalence of economic concerns over gender inequality ones, i.e. the replacement of F1 by F2 as a leading conceptualization of the childcare policy solution is definite. Subsequently, the policy rhetoric abandons the earlier broader notion of reconciliation as sharing of paid and unpaid work. Instead, documents reveal a narrow conception of reconciliation – as only a measure to facilitate combination of work and caring tasks of women in the context of raising their participation rate in the labour market.

## 5. Conclusions

The European Employment Strategy (EES) could be conceptualised as a supranational steering mechanism that installs ideational and organizational mechanisms that aim to influence the normative and cognitive foundations of reconciliation policies in the EU member states by diffusion and iterative repetition of particular visions of appropriate policy. This article focused on the shift in the normative underpinnings of childcare policy at the EU level of governance triggered by the EES. To that end, the evolution of the processes of framing of childcare as a policy solution was traced in secondary EC legislation for the period of European integration. The empirical findings established that prior to the endorsement of the EES in 1998 childcare was a policy solution almost exclusively linked to the problem of

gender inequality. Since the introduction of the Employment OMC, however, the policy discourse changed considerably – the new overarching objective of increasing economic competitiveness installed dominance of rational (economic) interpretations of public problems (and their solutions). Thus, the EES gradually ‘redesigned’ the initial (feminist) reading of what childcare is about, and diffused a much narrower notion of childcare that presents it as a tool that only fosters female labour market participation. The study therefore confirms the expectation that the EES changed substantially the meaning of reconciliation – stripping it of its initial feminist content, and refocusing it toward competitiveness. How can these findings be accounted for?

Among all other conceivable policy measures to the reconciliation dilemma(4) childcare provides the best “fit” to the discourse of full labour market participation. Alternative solutions to the work/care dilemma (e.g. leave schemes, part-time work, fiscal measures/ transfers, welfare allowances) either burden the fiscal pot or leave labour force capacities untapped. It is only childcare that at the same time allows parents to work five days a week, and moreover creates new jobs (in the care sector). This unique ‘fit’ between the demands of the normative environment (activation, raising competitiveness) and the capacity of childcare as a policy solution to match them accounts for the propagation of this policy frame at the EU level via the mechanisms of the OMC in the last 10 years.

Furthermore, an important finding of the study – corroborating the thesis of John Kingdon (2003) – is that certain policy solutions could only achieve public policy agenda status and be implemented once they are packaged sufficiently well with and accorded to dominant paradigms and hegemonic normative discourses (that of economic competitiveness in the case studied here). This was also the conclusion of Jennifer Marchbank who studied childcare provision policy in the UK. She argues that childcare provision only came onto the agenda of the British government once it was linked to the policy problem of economic competitiveness i.e. once the policy frame F2 was articulated (Marchbank 1996). Albeit present in the UK policy discussions since the 1970, childcare has never gained in importance until linked (or coupled in the vocabulary of John Kingdon 2003) with a more prominent policy paradigm(5). Such ‘window of opportunity’ appeared in the mid-/ end 1990s with the onset of third-way politics and the new paradigm of labour activation measures. The normative underpinnings of this new policy paradigm of ‘workfare as welfare’ resonates perfectly with the policy solution of childcare provision (as was explained above). This is how the policy frame linking economic competitiveness and childcare facilities (F2) gains prominence and ultimately takes the lead in the interpretation of what public childcare provision is about.

As demonstrated by the current study this was also the process that unfolded at the EU level of governance. Initially, the EU secondary legislation conceptualizes childcare as a tool to combat gender inequality, but with the emergence of the EES this feminist reading was replaced (within 5 years only) by the new interpretation of childcare as an instrument to activate untapped (female) labour market potential. The concrete process that accomplished this normative shift was the European Employment Strategy. The mechanisms of the Employment OMC – annual guidelines, Commission monitoring reports and policy recommendations – redrafted the meaning of childcare as a public policy solution. This is how the EES ‘refurbished’ and re-launched the career of the childcare policy solution due to the normative match of the former with the master discourse on competitiveness and the employment discourse of activation. Along the way, the initial (feminist) “load” of the term childcare stepped into the background.

This article demonstrated that the EES has ‘advanced the career’ of the childcare policy solution due to the normative match of the former with the master discourse on competitiveness and the employment discourse of activation. Moreover, the very meaning of childcare as a public policy solution was redrafted. As revealed by the policy frame analysis, until the endorsement of the EES, childcare was considered solely a policy solution directed to resolve gender inequality. As of 1998, the EES guidelines gradually ‘redesigned’ this meaning, and diffused a notion of childcare that presents it as a tool to boost female labour market participation. From 2002 onwards, this conceptualization of the policy problem (F2) became

the dominant frame at least at the EU level of governance. Whether this has further on become the case in the member states is an empirical question – object to future research agenda (but see Weishaupt this issue). One thing is certain, since the introduction of OMC, EU member states are much more exposed to a narrow interpretation of gender equality. What is more, they are at present institutionally and procedurally “chained” to it via the application of the OMC in the field of employment policies.

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## Endnotes

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(1) By cooptation is meant that “concepts initially developed by feminists are transformed and subordinated to different policy priorities thus losing their potential to change gender relations” (Stratigaki 2004: 32).

(2) By relevant is meant that only these documents were examined that were significant for the study of childcare as a policy measure. There is, for example, great use of the word “childcare” in legislation related to the Single Market and in toy safety regulations. Such use of the term was not relevant for the study, therefore the respective hits were filtered out and did not enter the dataset. Moreover, a track was kept of the new to the dataset documents. For example, from the 25 relevant documents yielded by the search term “childcare” 14 were already present in the dataset because they appear in ‘the EES acquis’. Therefore, only the remaining 9 documents entered the dataset.

(3) Absent are also the other contemporary policy frames that could be found in domestic policy-making processes: social inclusion (prominent in the UK), early education (the Netherlands), and integration of migrant children (prominent in Germany and Austria).

(4) Policies facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life have been very topical in all member states of the EU in the last decade. In brief, reconciliation policy is about the possible mix of solutions to the work/care dilemma i.e. about facilitating parents in combining paid work and family responsibilities. Typically, such policies include legislation and policy instruments that regulate:

- leave schemes (maternity, paternity and parental leave),
- part-time work and (flexible) working hours,
- provision of childcare facilities,
- allowances and fiscal incentives.

Despite the absence of direct transfer of competences in the above mentioned areas, throughout the 50 years of European integration, the European level of governance managed to elaborate a distinct policy mix (see Hantrais 2000). Leave schemes and part-time work arrangements are steered by ‘traditional’ policy instruments – Directives (although the method for their adoption is not the most typical legislative procedure (co-decision) but the Social Dialogue). Provision of childcare facilities is since the endorsement of the European Employment Strategy (in 1997) a very prominent element of the EU reconciliation policy mix.

(5) Marchbank observes, namely, that out of the 4 demands of the British Women' Liberation Movement only 3 have found their adequate place and ‘solution’ in public policy making and/or legislation: abortion, equal opportunities and equal education, equal pay (Marchbank 1996). Childcare did not make it to the agenda until 1996. Marchbank argues that this is due to the fact that no other major public goal has been ‘linked’ to the issue i.e. childcare was never framed in a way that it intersects the path of other major public policy discourses.

## List of Figures and Tables

**Table 1: Policy frames related to childcare provision in the EU**

<b>Frames</b>	<b>Gender inequality - F1</b>	<b>Decreasing economic competitiveness and welfare state reform - F2</b>	<b>Demography (fertility, greying population) - F3</b>
<b>Normative dimension (values, moral beliefs) -What sort of values underlie one's perception of social reality?</b>	Human rights, equality among people regardless of gender, right to personal growth and self-improvement, equal rights and responsibilities within the family, sharing	Economic efficiency and growth, material wellbeing, efficient collective provision of welfare.	Social reproduction and cohesion, economic efficiency
<b>Constitutive dimension (need for public intervention) - What is the problem?</b>	Women are oppressed, genders are unequal, unpaid work is not considered valuable and is hardly ever equally shared between the sexes	Economic growth is slow, the relative (global) competitive position of Europe is not strong enough. The Welfare state needs restructuring in direction of greater efficiency.	Demographic crisis (low number of births, greying population, pension gap, shrinking labour force)
<b>Cognitive dimension (narrative about the phenomenon and cause effect relations) - what has led to the problem?</b>	Women are restricted to activities within the private sphere, do not have access to paid work, nor to active participation in public life, which leads to their dependence, lack of dignity and equality. Women live in an androcentric (man-made and man-focused) world, where unpaid work is not valued.	Women are not sufficiently economically active. Women's labour market non-participation represents untapped potential. The more women enter the labour market, the greater the labour force, the larger the GDP, the higher the economic growth and competitiveness.	Women bare less children later in their lives (if at all) because of individualisation processes, career demands, economic difficulties. The state does not support sufficiently families to have as many children as they would ideally want.
<b>Policy dimension (public actions) - what can be done about it?</b>	Women's economic independence could be fostered through provision of accessible and affordable childcare facilities.	Provision of accessible and economically affordable childcare facilities.	Provision of accessible and economically affordable childcare facilities.

**Table 2: Steps in the dataset formation**

Search term	No of hits	Relevant hits	New hits
<b>EES acquis:</b> All EES guidelines	11	11	11
All EES implementation recommendations	7	7	7
Presidency Conclusions	46	41	41
<b>Search terms:</b> "child-care' and "child care"	44	15	13
"childcare"	99	25	9
"child-minding"	9	3	2
"crèche"	7	0	0
"daycare"	1	0	0
"child" AND "rear"	21	0	0
"child" AND "rearing"	14	0	0

**Table 3: Frequency distribution of the childcare related policy frames in the Presidency Conclusions from 1997 to 2008**

Month/Year	Eur. Council of:	Nr of references to childcare			
		Total	F1	F2	F3
Jun-97	Amsterdam	0			
Nov-97	Lux_Empl	1		1	
Dec-97	Lux	0			
Jun-98	Cardiff	1	1		
Dez-98	Vienna	0			
Mar-99	Berlin	0			
Jan-99	Cologne	0			
Oct-99	Tampere	0			
Dez-99	Helsinki	0			
Mar-00	Lisbon	1	1		
Jun-00	Feira	0			
Oct-00	Biaritz	0			
Dec-00	Nice	2	1	1	
Mar-01	Stockholm	1			
Jun-01	Goeteborg	0			
Oct-01	Ghent	0			
Dec-01	Laeken	0			
Mar-02	Barcelona	4	1	2	
Jun-02	Seville	0			
Oct-02	Brussels	0			
Dec-02	Copenhagen	0			
Mar-03	Brussels	1		1	
Jun-03	Thessaloniki	0			
Oct-03	Brussels	0			

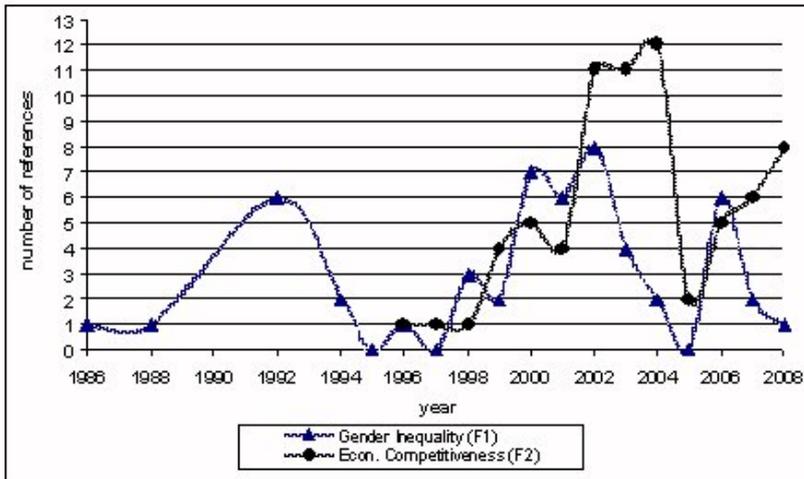
Dec-03	Brussels	0			
Mar-04	Brussels	0			
Jun-04	Brussels	0			
Nov-04	Brussels	0			
Dec-04	Brussels	0			
Mar-05	Brussels	2		1	
Jun-05	Brussels	0			
Dec-05	Brussels	0			
Mar-06	Brussels	3	2	1	1
Jun-06	Brussels	0			
Dec-06	Brussels	0			
Mar-07	Brussels	0			
Jun-07	Brussels	0			
Dec-07	Brussels	0			
Mar-08	Brussels	1		1	
Jun-08	Brussels	0			
Oct-08	Brussels	0			
	<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>

**Table 4: Frequency distribution of the childcare related policy frames in the studied documents**

Year	Document type	Topic	Nr of references			
			Total	F1	F2	F3
1986	Council Resolution	Equal opportunities	1	1		
1988	Council Resolution	Workforce participation of women	1	1		
1992	Council Recommendation	Childcare	15	6		
1994	Council Resolution	Workforce participation of women	2	2		
1995	Council Decision	Equal opportunities	1			
1996	Council Recommendation	Equal opportunities	2	1	1	
1997	Presidency Conclusions	Luxembourg European Council	1		1	
1998	Commission Recommendation	Home work	1	1		
1998	Council Recommendation	BEPG	1			
1998	Commission Special Report	Equal opportunities via ESF	5	1		
1998	Presidency Conclusions	Cardiff European Council	1	1		
1998	Council Resolution	EES guidelines	2		1	
1999	Council Recommendation	BEPG	2		2	
1999	Commission	Structural funds	5	1	1	
1999	Council Resolution	EES guidelines	2	1	1	
2000	Council Recommendation	EES implem.	2	2	1	
2000	Council Recommendation	BEPG	2		2	
2000	Presidency Conclusions	Lisbon European Council	1	1		
2000	Council Resolution	Balanced sharing of family respons	2	2		
2000	Council Decision	EES guidelines	2	1	1	
2000	Presidency Conclusions	Nice European Council	2	1	1	
2001	Council Decision	Gender Equality	2	1		

2001	Presidency Conclusions	Stockholm European Council	1			
2001	Council Recommendation	EES implem.	6	3	2	
2001	Council Recommendation	BEPG	3	1	1	
2001	Council Decision	EES guidelines	2	1	1	
2002	Council Recommendation	EES implem.	13	5	3	
2002	Presidency Conclusions	Barcelona European Council	4	1	2	
2002	Council Recommendation	BEPG	8	1	5	
2002	Council Decision	EES guidelines	2	1	1	
2003	Presidency Conclusions	Brussels European Council	1		1	
2003	Council Recommendation	BEPG	3		3	
2003	Council Decision	EES guidelines	5	1	2	
2003	Council Recommendation	EES implem.	12	3	5	
2004	Council Recommendation	EES implem.	11	1	10	
2004	Council Decision	EES guidelines	5	1	2	
2005	Presidency Conclusions	Brussels European Council	2		1	
2005	Council Decision	EES guidelines	2		1	
2006	Council Conclusions	Youth Pact	1	1		
2006	Directive of EP and Council	Equal opportunities	1	1		
2006	Presidency Conclusions	Brussels European Council	3	2	1	1
2006	Council Decision	EES guidelines	2		1	
2006	Council Decision	Rural Development	3		1	
2006	Regulation of EP and Council	ESF	1		1	
2006	Corrigendum to Council Regulation	ESF, ERDF, Cohesion fund	1	1	1	
2006	Council Decision	guidelines on cohesion	1	1		
2007	Council Conclusions	Alliance for Families	9	1	2	
2007	Council Recommendation	BEPG and EES impl. + update	9	1	3	
2007	Council Decision	EES guidelines	2		1	
2008	Council Recommendation	BEPG and EES impl. + update	10	1	5	
2008	Presidency Conclusions	Brussels European Council	1		1	
2008	Council Decision	EES guidelines	3		2	
	<b>Total:</b>		<b>182</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>1</b>

**Figure 1: Frequency distribution by policy frame (dynamics of interplay between F1 and F2)**



**Figure 2: Three periods in the 'career' of the childcare solution at the EU level of governance**

