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Do French women really have it all?
The origins and impact of work/family policies in France

This is the text for the oral presentation given at the ASA meeting, so references are not included. This presentation is mainly based on two publications:

Anne Revillard, (2006), "Work/family policy in France: from state familialism to state feminism?", *International journal of law, policy and the family*, 2 : 133-150.

Catherine Marry, Laure Bereni, Alban Jacquemart, Fanny Le Mancq, Sophie Pochic and Anne Revillard (2015). (2015). "Le Genre Des Administrations. La Fabrication Des Inégalités de Carrière Entre Hommes et Femmes Dans La Haute Fonction Publique." *Revue française d'administration publique* (153):45–68.

As all Americans know, the French woman has it all. We dress with class, we don't get fat, we have achieved feminist goals without needing to declare a sex war, and most importantly, not only do we keep our jobs while having kids, but our kids are well behaved without any conscious effort on our part. While this popular vision is often sustained by a culturalist narrative of French womanhood, a more politically aware version of this trope stresses the fact that French women's capacity to have it all is favored by a strong tradition of generous policy regarding work/family reconciliation[1].

Like all stereotypes, this image contains a part of truth, but it also limits a more precise sociological understanding of the contemporary mechanisms of gender inequality in France. So what I'd like to do here is to discuss this image of the French "working mom" supported by a generous social policy in two ways: first, examine where this policy historically came from, and second, revisit the question of its effects on French women.

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Where does this general social policy to support work-family reconciliation come from? As is most often the case with feminist policy, the intention was not first and foremost feminist, and the mix of provisions which can today be analyzed as forming a supportive work-family reconciliation policy were not initially thought of in those terms. Rather, it is the result of a sedimentation of measures coming from different policy sectors, following motivations which in many cases had nothing to do with feminism.

[1] See for example Laura June, "The Real Reason You'll Never Be Able to Parent Like a French Mom", *New York Magazine*, 30/06/16 http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/06/french-parenting-government.html

At the turn of the XXth century several provisions within labor law and education policies had an important impact on work/family relations, and tended to favor women's and mothers' labor force participation.

The changes made to labor law resulted from the fact that, at a time when demographic concerns where on the rise throughout Europe, French political leaders took for granted working class mothers' participation in the labor force as a necessary evil, and framed the issue in terms of "protection" of working mothers: as Jane Jenson notably stressed, the idea was not to prevent mothers from entering the labor force, but to make it possible for working women to have as many healthy children as possible.

Hence the creation of a legally ensured 8 week maternity leave in 1909, to which a daily allowance was added in 1913, and this allowance shifted from a system of assistance to a system of insurance in 1930, covering the lost wages. The duration of the maternity leave was then gradually extended to the current 16 weeks. Even though these measures were not designed by French politicians in a feminist goal but mainly for demographic reasons, they resulted in facilitating mothers' labor force participation. Moreover, this model of the "working mother" was mostly circumscribed to the working class: middle and upper class women were not encouraged to work on the labor market.

As far as care for young children is concerned, full-day preschools were developed since the middle of the XIXth century. Kim Morgan shows how this development of early childhood education can be linked to the fight of secular republicanism against the Catholic church. Here again, although the provision was not meant to help women combine child-care and waged work, it certainly had that effect. The development of the preschool system also initially targeted in priority the working class.

Then after the Second World War, different and contradictory provisions came from another policy sector, that of family policy, institutionalized around the defense of a strict model of gendered division of labor and pronatalism. At the time, tax incentives and allowances aimed at keeping women as care providers at home and encouraged families of at least three children.

In the 1960s and 1970s, this more conservative orientation was, in turn, challenged by the rise of both a feminist movement and state feminism, with the creation of women's policy agencies which promoted a new definition of work-family reconciliation as a means to women's equality

Hence as of the 1970s, new measures were adopted to facilitate women's labor force participation: the child care system expanded, various allowances and tax deductions for child care were created. This feminist reorientation of family policy was also encouraged by feminist policy at the EU level, which framed work-family reconciliation as a gender equality issue as well as an economic issue, the idea being to favor women's labor force participation.

But the familialist tradition didn't cease, and other measures, sometimes also adopted in the name of work-family reconciliation, promoted a more traditional view of the family. For example in 1985 an allowance was created to fund a long parental leave (up to three years for each child), the financial compensation being high enough to create a strong incentive for working-class women. While part of family policy, this was also a means for the government to decrease unemployment rates by taking these women out of the labor market.

So these work-family provisions were also differentiated according to social class, but not in the same way as what was the case at the beginning of the century: this time, by means of such allowances, working-class women tend to be encouraged to stay home, while the other provisions mainly benefit middle and upper class women.
Recently, this has been reinforced by the general upper-class orientation of gender equality policy, focusing a lot on access to power and higher positions in the aftermath of the adoption of the parity laws in 2000.

To sum up, the French policy tradition regarding the work-family interface is generally characterized by a high level of state intervention, but this translates into different, sometimes conflictive orientations. The extent to which it goes towards supporting women's labor force participation depends on a power balance between feminist and familialist actors, and it also varies a lot according to social class.

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Therefore the effects of this policy context are not homogeneous, and need to be analyzed specifically for different categories of women. Here I will focus on the most privileged categories to show how these policies indeed enable them to have rewarding careers, but also to show the limits of what these policies do.

I am drawing on a research I took part in, coordinated by Catherine Marry. The research addressed gender inequalities in the French higher administration, based on 95 life-story interviews with women and men in two ministries, finance and social affairs. The people we interviewed are all top executives in managerial positions within their departments. The dominant profile is white, with middle to upper class background, prestigious diploma, and rather traditional family situations: most of them are married in heterosexual couples with children.
If we focus on the women and to what extent their careers have been facilitated by the social policy context, the very fact that most of them have children and are pursuing fulfilling careers is already evidence of the positive impact of French family policy. They all rely on an extensive delegation of care work and they are both financially and symbolically supported for it – financially by the social policy I described earlier, and symbolically in the sense that the social control on motherhood and the pressure regarding "good mothering" is much lighter on upper class women, and probably lighter than what it typically is in the US (there so far has been a lot less social control regarding breastfeeding for example).
And yet, the experience is not as smooth and effortless as the stereotype has it. The combination of family life and professional life is an issue on many levels for these women: the interviews conducted with them are full of anxiety and expressions of exhaustion on the subject. Why is that?

The main reason is that there is a discrepancy between state-level policies which, as we have seen, turn motherhood into a state affair, and organizational policies, norms and practices, which remain grounded in a male-breadwinner model and define care as a personal responsibility[2]. I will give three illustrations of this.

First, an interesting result of the conflict between state policy and organizational policy is the fact that even though it is over a century old, the right to maternity leave still is not entirely perceived as an entitlement within the organizational settings we studied. Concretely, women feel they need to plan their pregnancies in order to limit their impact on the work organization, and several women have worked from home during their legal maternity leave.

Secondly, the day to day time constraints, with often 9am to 9pm work hours, are incompatible with parents engaging in any significant involvement in direct care for their kids during the week. However, the intensity of this constraint varies from one administration to the other: they are much stronger in the finance ministry than at social affairs. But besides the day to day organization of care, many respondents complain that the organization makes no room for the necessary unpredictable events of childhood life: having a baby-sitter until 9PM is not a problem, but having to leave work early for an emergency medical appointment is a whole other issue. Here again, the organization does not recognize workers as parents.

Finally, geographical mobility remains an important criterion for career advancement in the public as well as in the private sector in many managerial positions, even though some equality policies at the organizational level are trying to address this issue. Within a couple, geographical mobility often means sacrifying a person's career in order for the other one to be able to move, so this is a good example of the persistence of a single-career (if not single-breadwinner) model.

Hence one of the main limits of what state policies can do is that they are in contradiction with organizational norms.

Our study also shows that there are limits to what these policies do, and maybe to what they can do, in terms of promoting gender equality not just in the workplace, neutralizing the impact of family responsibility, but in the family itself, in terms of the actual sharing of this responsibility.
Even though there have been some policy attempts to address this, such as the creation of a paternity leave, the experience of conducting life-story research with both men and women is very revealing in this respect: it is actually for French men that the stereotype holds true. For them, work-family reconciliation is effortless, and it just does not come up as an issue in the interviews; whereas for women, it is a major concern. And this is also supported by quantitative data on a broader scale: today women in France still do twice as much domestic

[2] There have been some attempt at putting in place gender equality policies at the organizational level, notably as part of the general promotion of "diversity", but so far these have had very little impact on actual organizational norms and practices.

work as their male spouses on average, and it is still their labor force participation, not men's, which is challenged by the presence of young children in the family.

And finally, our study points to the limit of a reflection on work-family reconciliation that solely focuses on maternity leave and early childhood care. For example, for these upper class women, early childhood is not an issue, but they start being concerned when their children reach elementary school age. Then they feel they personally need to be there to check homework, for example, in compliance with the role of schools in social reproduction. This, again, calls attention to the need to situate the social control over mothers in terms of class.
Moreover, several of them argue that child care and education generally speaking is not the issue, but avoiding divorce is more of a preoccupation to them. And indeed, some career choices such as refusing a promotion are explained by the fear of divorce much more than by an anticipated incapacity to handle childcare issues. Some of the women we interviewed do not worry so much about being "bad mothers", but they do fear losing their spouse. And interestingly, this is also a preoccupation for some men, especially men who have already been through a divorce: there might be leverage for policy and social change.

To conclude, you will notice that while partly debunking one of the myths Americans have about the French, I have also confirmed another: no matter how lucky we are, we keep complaining.