

## **EU gender equality and work-life balance policies: managing tensions between the demands of production and reproduction**

Key messages:

- As more women enter the labour market, tensions between production and reproduction grow.
- The European Union addresses these tensions through new gender equality policy initiatives.
- These policies underestimate the value of reproductive labour and prioritise the productive sphere.
- As a result, EU gender equality policy fails poorer, minority and migrant women.

### ***Introduction***

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has increasingly acknowledged the existence of tensions between productive and reproductive labour which arise as more and more women enter the labour market. In response, the EU has introduced initiatives such as the Work-Life Balance Directive (OJ 2019) and the European Care Strategy (European Commission 2022). This is seen to build upon the EU's efforts to champion gender equality, a value inscribed into its foundational treaties (OJ 2016). Nevertheless, what 'gender equality' is understood to mean in political discourse is often adapted to the needs of political agendas and policy makers (Lombardo et al 2009). Since EU gender equality policies have historically focused on women's access to productive labour (Lewis 2001, Stratigaki 2004), it is pertinent to analyse how the more recent gender equality policies perceive reproductive labour and its role in the economy.

Feminist political economy stresses the importance of reproductive labour to the continued operations of contemporary capitalist economies, including that of the EU. Productive labour is usually defined as waged work which creates exchange value (Vogel 1983); reproductive labour, overwhelmingly performed by women, includes the biological reproduction of human beings, the reproduction of the labour force which involves subsistence, education and training and the provisioning for caring needs (Bakker 2007). Reproductive labour is a key enabler of social reproduction – the process through which a social and economic systems reproduce themselves (Federici 2019). These concepts build upon debates between feminist thinkers, in particular feminist economists from the 1970s inspired by Marxist thought, on the relationship

and tensions between productive and reproductive labour (such as Benston 1969, Dalla Costa and James 1972 [2017]) and the division of these types of labour between men and women within capitalism. Contemporary feminist political economists point out that even though such divisions are shifting, with women increasingly entering the productive labour force, the retrenchment of the welfare state has resulted in a reprivatisation of reproductive labour to the level of the individual household, in practice mainly to women (Bakker 2003, Fraser 2016). Meanwhile, the only activity truly considered to be ‘work’ within capitalist societies is productive labour (Weeks 2011), with reproductive labour forced to occupy only as much time as necessary to allow workers to regenerate their capacity to participate in production (Fortunati 1995).

In this article, I aim to contribute to these feminist political economy debates by examining whether the gradual recognition of tensions between production and reproduction in contemporary capitalist societies results in raising the status allocated to reproductive labour in the economy. To do so, I will answer the following questions:

- Is there a recognition of the (economic) value of reproductive labour in EU gender equality policy, and is it equated to the (economic) value of productive labour? If so, how often is this recognised and in what contexts?
- How do different EU institutions (Council of the EU, European Commission, European Parliament) frame the existing tensions between productive and reproductive work, and with what potential implications for the status of reproductive labour within the bloc?

Answering these questions will allow me to test my starting assumption that while a gradual shift towards the recognition of the value of reproductive labour is taking place within the EU, it is one which fails to fully equate it with productive labour. I argue that as a result, EU gender equality policies have attempted to address the tensions between production and reproduction while continuing to prioritise the interests of the productive economy: this is evidenced by the continued emphasis on ‘work’ (meaning, productive labour) as distinct from ‘life’ (meaning all other activities, including the essential tasks of social reproduction).

To test this assumption, I analyse the more recent (2014-2023) EU gender equality and work-life balance policies, focusing on a period which saw policy makers announcing a renewed commitment to social values (Copeland 2022). This is relevant as scholarship on this topic has so far looked at pre-2008 economic crisis policies (Young 2000, Lewis 2002, Stratigaki 2004) or focused on the effects of austerity (Walby 2015, Bruff and Wöhl 2016). Conversely, more

recent policies have rarely been analysed through a feminist political economy perspective (see Zacharenko and Elomäki 2022 for an exception). Other scholars have mainly discussed these issues without questioning the hierarchies between productive and reproductive labour, rather assessing EU gender equality policies' ability to limit the burden of women's reproductive labour and enhance participation in waged work (for example Caracciolo di Torella 2017, Plomien 2019, Sikirić 2021). While there is a sizeable literature on the EU's work-life balance policies (for example Stratigaki 2004, Kantola 2010, Hubert 2012, Carbonnier and Morel 2015, Vanhercke et al 2019), the more recent texts focus on analysing the main policy initiative in question, the Work-Life Balance directive (for example Caracciolo di Torella 2017, Chiergato 2020), or its implementation in EU member states (for example Caracciolo di Torella and Masselot 2020, de la Porte et al 2020, de la Porte et al 2023, Pircher et al 2023) rather than the policy discourses of the EU's three main institutions (European Commission, Council and European Parliament) on gender equality and the definition of 'work'.

The article begins with a discussion of feminist debates on the nature of 'work' and productive and reproductive labour. It then discusses the historical development of the EU's gender equality policies. This is followed by a methodological section. The analysis section is divided into four parts: the first describes the recent shift (or return) towards defining gender equality as the equal responsibility of women and men for both the productive and reproductive spheres. The second discusses the framing of reproductive labour in the discourses of the three different institutions (European Commission, Council of the EU and European Parliament). The third discusses the two distinct approaches taken in EU policy to manage the tension between productive and reproductive labour. The final section discusses the limitations of the three institutions' framing of work-life balance.

### ***Reproductive labour as 'non-work' and its consequences***

The feminist 'domestic labour' debates from the 1960s and 1970s have been essential to pointing out how the productive needs of capital shape the perception of what constitutes 'work'. Margaret Benston (1969) made the first attempt to theorize women's work in the home as integral to the political economy of capitalism. Benston argues that, just as men are considered to be structurally responsible for commodity production under capitalism, women are held structurally responsible for reproduction in the household. She suggests that in a society where money determines value, the fact that a large proportion of women's work was not remunerated designated this work – and those who perform it – as valueless (Benston 1969). Such a designation of reproductive labour misunderstands the role which it plays in the

capitalist economy, as pointed out by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972 [2017]), who argue that reproductive labour is indispensable to the reproduction of the waged worker and replenishing his strength, and that the capitalist economy would cease to function in its absence.

Other feminist scholars disagree with the Marxist feminist analysis. Theorists such as Lise Vogel (1983) suggest that as important as reproductive labour is, it falls outside of the scope of productive activity as understood in Marxist economic theory. Contemporary feminist political economists continue the debate, with thinkers pointing out that reproductive labour cannot be qualified as equal to production as it does not produce surplus value (Bhattacharya 2017) nor commodities (Teepie Hopkins 2017). This assertion is countered by scholars who argue that creating divisions between value-producing ('productive') and non-value-producing ('reproductive') labour does not hold explanatory power in a wider global context, as most of the world population work in informal, informalised or precarious jobs, often within the home, without access to welfare or state services which could support their social reproduction (Mezzadri 2019). In this article, I side with thinkers who argue that reproductive labour does indeed produce economic value. As such, it is both a key contributor to social reproduction – defined as the process through which a social and economic systems reproduce themselves (Federici 2019) – and enables the continued operations of the economic system which depends on its provision as a *sine qua non* condition.

Nevertheless, contemporary economies invisibilise the contributions made by reproductive labour (Hoskyns and Rai 2007). This coincides with the gradual shift away from the male breadwinner model and its clear division between the reproductive and productive labour roles for women and men (Lewis 2001), which has resulted in greater demands being placed on women to become providers of both unpaid reproductive and paid productive labour. Kathi Weeks (2011) has argued that this is the case as under capitalism, productive labour is portrayed as the sole purpose of life, with reproductive labour forced to occupy only as much time it takes to regenerate workers' capacity to perform productive labour (Fortunati 1995). All the while, the essential nature of reproductive labour means that it cannot be foregone (Fraser 2016).

This tension has resulted in the creation of overall bigger workloads for women, termed the 'double shift', whereby women complete a second shift of reproductive labour after that of their paid employment (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Two policy solutions are typically proposed to address this challenge: flexible working or the outsourcing of reproductive labour

(Weeks 2011). However, both fail to address the challenges identified by feminist scholars. A flexible work schedule ‘neither reduces the hours of work nor challenges the assumption that social reproduction should be a private and largely female responsibility’ (Weeks 2011:172). Indeed, the fact that flexible working solutions and care leaves are currently used in a gendered way – seen as a means of ‘facilitating’ women’s entry into the labour force, and are more frequently applied for by women, but eschewed by men – has prompted research into the exact policy solution which would encourage men to use them too (for example Van Belle 2016, Koslowski 2021). Meanwhile, the outsourcing of reproductive labour to private markets, that is hiring domestic workers or otherwise relying on commodified care services, results in only those who are affluent enough being able to mitigate the tensions between their productive and reproductive responsibilities (Fraser 2016). The outcome is a redistribution of reproductive tasks from one group of women to another, rather than between women and men (Uhde 2016). Rhacel Parreñas (2015) demonstrates how this practice creates an international division of reproductive labour, whereby reproductive work is increasingly passed on from higher-class women in wealthier countries to female workers from poorer countries, ethnic minority backgrounds or those of lower socio-economic class.

As I will demonstrate in the next section, there is a progressive recognition of the importance of reproductive labour which appears to be taking place within EU policy. This seems to be an attempt to manage the abovementioned contradictions between the needs of the productive economy and the constantly increasing demand for reproductive labour. I will argue however, that EU gender equality policies have attempted to address this tension while continuing to prioritise the interests of the productive economy.

### ***Tensions between production and reproduction in EU policy***

EU member states take a variety of approaches to regulating questions of social provisioning, employment and care. Esping-Andersen (1999) classifies regimes as familialistic or defamilialising depending on the extent to which they rely on families to deliver in this area. Among others, Sigrid Leitner (2003) expanded Esping-Andersen’s model by adding a gender perspective, nuancing the varieties of welfare regimes based on what roles these assign to men and women respectively. Thus, Leitner suggests that four ideal types of welfare state are present in Western Europe: explicit familialism (Portugal, Spain and Greece), implicit familialism (Germany, Italy and the Netherlands), optional familialism (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Belgium and France), and defamilialism (Ireland and the UK). Szelewa and Polakowski (2008) adapt Leitner’s (2003) model to include countries in Central and Eastern Europe and suggest

clustering it into explicit familialism (Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia), implicit familialism (Poland), female mobilizing (Estonia and Latvia) and comprehensive support (Lithuania and Hungary) types. Political and policy developments in the region have since then suggested that some countries have moved towards a more explicit familialism model (for example Poland – Szelewa 2017), or what has been termed as a carefare regime in Hungary (Fodor 2022).

The EU and its predecessor communities have taken an interest in coordinating the diverse state provisions related to gender equality when these were seen to impact the field of employment. The 1957 treaty establishing the European Economic Community contained a provision requesting equal payment for equal work to avoid unfair competition between signatory states (van der Vleuten 2007) but also in response to second-wave feminist demands (Hubert 2012). This created the original connection between employment and gender equality in EU policy (Hubert 2012) and resulted in a 1975 directive banning pay discrimination (OJ 1975), followed by others prohibiting discrimination in access to employment and protecting employees who are pregnant, have recently given birth and/or are breastfeeding (Locher 2012). Scholars point out that the EU's focus on achieving gender equality through women's labour market participation has indeed been successful in enhancing equality between women and men in relation to aspects such as equal pay and non-discrimination (van der Vleuten 2007, Kantola 2010). These achievements are due in large part to the pressure exerted by the feminist movement (Hoskyns 1996, Van der Vleuten 2007) – Alison Woodward (2004) points to the role played by the 'velvet triangle' of feminist bureaucrats and politicians, feminist academics and experts, and feminist NGOs in placing these issues on the EU agenda and championing their adoption into policy.

Gradually, the demands of employment policy led EU decision makers to develop a broader approach targeting matters previously considered to be 'private', such as care provision (Hubert 2012). The introduction in the early 1990s of certain legal provisions relating to childcare-related leave, designed to facilitate mothers' access to the labour market, such as the 1992 Maternity Leave Directive (OJ 1992), were an implicit recognition of feminist theorisations on the impact of unpaid work on women's lives (Stratigaki 2012). In the late 1990s, further echoing feminist demands, EU gender equality policy began to lean towards promoting a better sharing of reproductive labour between women and men through the introduction in 1996 of the Parental Leave Directive (which included rights for fathers but did not earmark or guarantee pay for their leave) (OJ 1996, Stratigaki 2004, de la Porte et al 2022). However, this approach quickly shifted towards calls for women to adapt their lives to the demands of the labour

market, by reconciling their reproductive workloads with paid employment (Stratigaki 2004). This removed the initial feminist potential from such policies and individualised the challenge of managing the tensions between production and reproduction.

Indeed, regardless of the exact nature of feminist demands, the EU's gender equality principles have remained subordinate to the bloc's economic priorities (Jaquot 2015). This was particularly visible in the wake of the 2008 eurozone crisis, which saw a large-scale implementation of austerity policies, with dire consequences for women and their share of reproductive labour (Bruff and Wöhl 2016). Cavaghan and O'Dwyer (2018) point out that the economic recovery claimed to have been achieved through these policies did not serve the interests of those who were most impacted by the economic crisis: women and other marginalised groups, in particular migrant and ethnic minority women.

By the mid-2010s, the negative consequences of austerity became startlingly obvious around the bloc, resulting in a renewed public interest and political appetite to return to a stronger social agenda by the Commission of Jean Claude Juncker (Carella and Graziano 2022). In addition, the issues of falling birth rates and population ageing were becoming increasingly salient, with policy makers concerned about the implications on the size of the workforce and the rise in demand for (and therefore of the cost of) long-term care services (Zacharenko 2023). This is the context in which in 2019, the Work-Life Balance (WLB) directive was launched (OJ 2019). The directive obliges member states to provide workers with (paid and earmarked) time off for care responsibilities, focusing on the promotion of the role of men in providing care for children and dependents. The introduced entitlements implied a significant extension of social rights in most EU countries, incurring increased social costs; as such it had been subject to opposition by national governments who succeeded in watering down the text (Pircher et al 2023). Subsequently, the right of workers to provide care to dependents – in a way which is compatible with labour market participation – has been reiterated through the adoption of the (non-binding) European Care Strategy in 2022 (European Commission 2022), through which the EU simultaneously addresses its objectives relating to women's employment and concerns about demographic shifts (Zacharenko 2023).

The launch of the WLB directive in particular can be seen as an effort to apply gender equality policy to reach both gender equality and demographic goals (see Henninger et al 2008), aiming to optimise both biological reproduction (fertility rates) and capitalist productivity targets (labour market participation) (Repo 2016). However, the directive's focus on measures such as

remote working and flexible working hours appears to uphold the EU's historical tendency of confusing the needs of 'working white women' with those of all women (Hoskyns 1996), basing rights on employment status rather than citizenship or residence (Stratigaki 2012). The provisions it proposes are thus not reflective of the challenges faced by (largely working class, ethnic minority or migrant) workers in occupational sectors such as services and care, whose jobs often cannot be done remotely and who may already suffer from too much rather than too little flexibility in their schedules (Chierogato 2020). They may also exclude workers in vulnerable employment (11 per cent of the EU's workforce in 2022 – World Bank n.d.) or those on part-time contracts (18.6 per cent of the EU's workforce in 2022 – CEDEFOP 2022) (Chierogato 2020). This deepens the discrimination faced by groups such as domestic workers – of whom there are at least 9.5 million in the EU and 90 per cent of whom are women, 55 per cent with a migrant background (European Commission 2021). Domestic workers are particularly subjected to restrictions in accessing family-related leave, as in many jurisdictions they are accorded a special status placing them outside of normal labour laws (McCann 2012). This exclusion is particularly jarring in view of how the creation of a low cost personal and household services sector in the EU has been touted as a means to promote gender equality, albeit mainly for white, middle-class, educated women, who would thus be 'liberated' from performing mundane domestic tasks to perform higher productivity work (Morel 2015).

### ***Methods and materials***

In this article, I analyse EU gender equality policies by adopting a starting position that these are not solutions to problems that are objectively 'out there' but rather 'social constructions that reflect subjects' ideas, norms, and values about what a problem is, and what solutions are offered to the problem' (Kantola and Lombardo 2017:160). I assess how EU gender equality policy documents construct the concepts of 'gender equality' and 'work' and what this says about their perception of productive and reproductive labour. I focus on problem representations since the way a policy problem is represented restricts the range of solutions available to address it (Bacchi 1999). While intersecting inequalities has received more attention recently (Ahrens 2023), the way in which policies impact women from different social classes, backgrounds, racial and ethnic groups has historically been a challenge for EU gender equality policies to recognise (Stratigaki 2012). This may help explain why some visions of gender equality (such as equality in access to productive labour, outsourcing of reproductive labour) may be favoured over others (such as the equal sharing of reproductive labour, provision of state services).

To fully capture the variety of approaches to reproductive labour in EU policy, I analyse the discourses of three of the EU's main institutions: the European Commission, the Council (composed of the heads of state – European Council – and ministers – Council of the EU) and the European Parliament. The three institutions, whose powers have become increasingly equalised since the European Parliament was granted increased powers as co-legislator under the Lisbon Treaty (Kantola et al 2022), all contribute to the debate on prevailing norms and shape framings which influence policy discussions at EU level. The European Commission has historically held the right of initiative on gender equality policy, with a designated unit charged with promoting and mainstreaming this agenda across other policy areas – although 2011 institutional restructuring resulted in decreasing the influence of this unit on social and employment policy (Jaquot 2015). The Commission is also charged with gathering input from national actors and civil society (such as the European Women's Lobby and trade union representatives) (Locher 2012), although the abovementioned restructuring has also reduced these contacts (Hubert and Stratigaki 2016). The Council of the EU, within which member states discuss and vote on policy proposals, has been a site of contestation of initiatives related to gender equality both due to the variety of gender regimes represented by member states (Locher 2012) and to the increasing political polarisation on the topic (Kováts and Zacharenko 2022). It is also the institution which is least accessible to feminist advocacy efforts (Sanchez Salgado 2014). The European Parliament has often been described as a champion of gender equality (Locher 2012, Ahrens and Rolandsen Augustín 2019, Van Der Vleuten 2019). This has been attributed to its status as the only directly elected EU body, the increasing numbers of women parliamentarians, as well as specific gender equality structures present within it (Kantola and Lombardo 2023). In particular, the Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee (FEMM) and its members, while structurally disadvantaged and often bypassed in the allocation of legislative proposals, have been shown to exert an indirect influence on the work of the whole institution (Ahrens 2016). The outsized influence which left and green political groups hold within this committee often results in FEMM reports being more progressive than the EU political mainstream (Warasin et al 2019). However, scholars have pointed towards tensions on the topic of gender equality increasing also among European political groups (Kantola et al 2022, Ahrens et al 2021, Kantola and Lombardo 2021), which has complicated its role as of gender equality champion (Berthet 2022).

The research data consists of documentary material from the gender equality policy field over the period of 2014 to 2023, covering the period of the EU's renewed commitment to a social

agenda (Copeland 2022). Specifically, I cover the period of legislation of two European Commissions – the Juncker (2014-2019) and Von Der Leyen (2019-2024) colleges – which had openly declared a strong commitment to promoting social and gender equality policies respectively, driving the EU agenda in those directions (Vesan et al 2021, Abels and Mushaben 2020). The documents analysed contain both hard law (directives) and soft policy (strategies, action plans, reports and parliamentary resolutions). They include two major inter-institutional initiatives which have been presented as key for the promotion of gender equality, as they attempt to reconcile paid employment with care obligations: the (binding) Work-Life Balance Directive (including the 2017 Commission communication and the 2019 adopted text) and the (non-binding) European Care Strategy (including the Commission communication and Council recommendation on early childhood education and care from 2022). European Commission documents analysed include its strategies and guiding documents on gender equality (2015, 2020) and an action plan on the gender pay gap (2017). The Council documents analysed include conclusions on gender-equal economies (2019), the gender pay gap (2020) and gender equality in unstable economies (2022). Five European Parliament resolutions on topics relating to gender equality in the workplace, work-life balance, women’s economic independence and poverty, all of which had been launched or co-drafted by the FEMM committee, are also included (2015, 2016, 2017, 2022a, 2022b). The Council conclusions and European Parliament resolutions were selected based on having a simultaneous focus on gender equality and labour market participation, where it was assumed that a discussion on the tensions between production and reproduction would emerge. In total, I analysed fifteen policy documents.

I performed the analysis through a coding (labelling) process, assisted by a qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti. Atlas.ti allows for a comprehensive approach to data collection, coding and analysis. The codes are not generated by the software but determined by the user, who then uses them to label specific text fragments. Atlas.ti is therefore primarily a file repository and organisational tool: it allows the user to store and organise source files as well as perform simple and intuitive hand-coding of specific text fragments, facilitating the subsequent interpretation of the text. The use of this software allowed me to easily view and compare the different sources, as well as group documents into subcategories for ease of comparison. For this article, I grouped the source documents by institution, which allowed me to more easily identify framings predominating among the different EU actors. Therefore, using Atlas.ti, I was able to quickly bring up a side-by-side comparison of all instances in which I

had coded fragments of the source text as adopting the same frame and see whether and how the different institutions applied these.

The codes used in this process were meso-level issue frames (Dombos et al 2012) emerging from the data and based on a feminist political economy theoretical framework. Meso-level frames are particular to a specific policy actor or policy domain (Schön and Rein 1994); issue frames are policy frames which ‘identify’ problems for policy to address and consistently propose specific solutions to do so (Dombos et al 2012). I began the analysis by identifying issue frames referring to the existence of tensions between productive and reproductive labour, such as reproductive labour as a hinderance to production, reproductive labour as equally important as production, and productive labour as hinderance to social reproduction. Subsequently, I analysed the text segments this hand-coding resulted in through a theoretical framework which stresses the contribution made by reproductive labour to the capitalist economy as well as the invisibilisation of this type of labour. While the initial analysis of the issue frames aligned with the research questions, the additional frames which emerged in the analysis process allowed me to better formulate my central argument and findings. Thus, I adjusted the codes used in the analysis to consider framings emerging from the documents. As a result, I applied the following codes to analyse the frames appearing in the documents: (1) gender equality as equal access to production and/ or (2) as equal sharing of reproductive labour; (3) reproductive labour as work or (4) non-work; tensions between reproductive and productive spheres as an obstacle for (5) the needs of the productive economy or (6) the requirements for social reproduction.

The analysis section is divided into four sub-sections, with the first focusing on the framing of gender equality in relation to production and reproduction by the three institutions. The second sub-section looks at whether the different institutions frame reproductive labour as work or non-work. The third sub-section focuses on how the tensions between the need for production and reproduction are framed within the different institutions’ gender equality discourse. The final sub-section focuses on the policy implications of the differing framings adopted by the three institutions and analysed above, discussing how these hinder the achievement of the EU’s gender equality goals.

### ***Gender equality – equal sharing of productive and reproductive work***

Since 2014, EU gender equality policy began to shift from framings primarily stressing the need for women's labour market participation (Lewis 2001) to ones presenting gender equality as equal responsibility for both productive and reproductive work for both men and women. For example, the European Commission states that 'the 21<sup>st</sup> Century European way of life should allow for a good balance between family and professional commitments and provide equal opportunities for women and men in the workplace and at home' (European Commission 2017a:16). This suggests a return to the early 1990s framings which emphasised the role of men in shouldering their share of reproductive responsibilities and echoing historically feminist demands (Stratigaki 2004). Such a shift in the perception of the gendered division of roles may be a result of the growing recognition by EU policy makers of the fact that women's 'double shift' is preventing them from fully engaging in the labour market and reduces fertility rates, as has already been demonstrated at member state level (Henninger et al 2008). In these circumstances, it may appear crucial to 'recruit' men as carers, in the hopes that this might reduce women's reproductive workload, making them more available for the labour market and open to having children.

The adoption of the Work-Life Balance directive (OJ 2019) has allowed to embed this framing into legally binding form and promote it across the EU policy discourse. Indeed, all three EU institutions appear to increasingly embrace the dual earner/ dual carer model (Caracciolo di Torrella and Masselot 2020), with the European Parliament stating this explicitly:

it is necessary to overcome the segregation of unpaid domestic work and care responsibilities mainly performed by women and strengthen the fight against stereotypes in order to reinforce care service work-life balance measures and family-friendly working arrangements, such as adaptable working hours and the possibility of teleworking to promote the "equal earner-equal carer" model (time use policy), so as to allow women and men to better reconcile their professional life with their private life. (European Parliament 2022b:11)

However, in binding texts negotiated by all three institutions this more egalitarian sharing of reproductive labour remains secondary to the primary goal of boosting employment levels. For example, the WLB directive makes the case for the introduction of paternity leave by stating that 'the use of work-life balance arrangements by fathers, such as leave or flexible working arrangements, has been shown to have a positive impact in reducing the relative amount of unpaid family work undertaken by women and leaving them more time for paid employment'

(OJ 2019:81). Thus, the concern is less about the unjust division of reproductive responsibilities, or about how essential they are, and more about ensuring that women can take up more of their share of productive work – a motivation which remains strongly economic (Zacharenko and Elomäki 2022).

In and of themselves, calls to facilitate the combination of productive and reproductive work in the shape of work-life balance policies suggest that EU gender equality actors are aware of the excessive workload, or ‘double shift’ which many workers, predominantly women, face. However, this phenomenon is framed as primarily being due to men’s lack of adequate engagement in reproductive tasks. As such, the ‘double shift’ has been rebranded in recent EU gender equality policy discourse as a ‘gender care gap’ (Council of the EU 2020, European Commission 2020) – a framing which rather than pointing to systemic factors, centres the role of gendered stereotypes and norms in influencing the unequal division of unpaid labour. Referring to a ‘gender care gap’ points to the role of men’s lack of equal engagement in reproductive labour as the sole reason for women’s double shift. This individualises the issue and obscures other factors which play a role, notably gaps in state service provision and structural challenges related to the prevalent models of employment, such as the lack of adequate state funded care facilities, excessive or unpredictable working hours and low salaries. This requires the higher earner to maintain or engage their productive work commitments and is just as much to blame for families – and women in particular – having to assume most of the reproductive labour. However, tackling these challenges would require substantial financial investment by states, which the European Commission and Council appear unwilling to point towards – likely because of the dominant economised logic which perceives state spending on reproduction as a burden (Zacharenko and Elomäki 2022) and thus a strong member state opposition to increasing spending in this area (Pircher et al 2023). Conversely, framing the issue as an individualised gender care gap allows it to be addressed with minimal implications for state budgets.

Some of these systemic shortcomings are addressed in the European Care Strategy communication put forward by the European Commission (2022), as it aims to ‘ensur[e] quality, affordable and accessible [care] across the EU’ (European Commission 2022:3). However, its other major goal is for ‘mothers and fathers [to] confidently reconcile their work and family life’ (European Commission 2022:3). Throughout the documents relating to this strategy, EU policy makers refer to the ‘burden’ or ‘constraint’ of care responsibilities for women: ‘care responsibilities for children, particularly for very young children, are a

significant constraint on female labour market participation’ (OJ 2022:1); ‘women provide the bulk of care and this often leads them to adapt their work patterns to care responsibilities, including by taking career breaks, working part-time, or leaving the labour market entirely and prematurely’ (European Commission 2022:16).

To increase women’s access to paid employment and thus enhance equality between women and men, the strategy proposes the outsourcing of reproductive labour: ‘inadequate care services have a disproportionate impact on women as supplementary or informal care responsibilities still fall predominantly on them and this affects their work-life balance and options to take on paid work’ (European Commission 2022:2). While outsourcing to services provided by the state, assuming these are universally accessible, affordable and good quality, may indeed be beneficial to women’s workloads, this is not necessarily so in the case of outsourcing to private markets. Here, access depends on the ability to purchase services and is thus available predominantly to those who are more affluent (Fraser 2016). Reliance on private markets in this area has been shown to increase dependence on the precarious labour of predominantly ethnic minority or migrant women (Anderson 2012). In addition, the focus on outsourcing as such neglects the fact that the care sector (public or private) is both female-dominated and under resourced, meaning that in the absence of additional financing and better working conditions, it provides limited opportunities for the emancipation of the women who work within it.

On a theoretical level, the continued framing of reproductive labour as a constraint to production reinforces the idea that this type of labour is less valuable than paid employment and would best be reduced to a minimum. The contrary concept, that time spent on productive labour could instead be reduced to allow both men and women to reconcile reproductive and productive work is considered by the Council and the European Commission only rarely and at best proposed as a temporary solution, for example when it is suggested that member states could ‘develop... opportunities for workers to temporarily reduce or adapt their working hours, with a view to reconciling work, family and private life’ (Council of the EU 2020:13). However, as the next section will show, a more expansive vision of policies needed to manage both productive and reproductive responsibilities is proposed by the European Parliament.

### ***Reproductive labour as work or non-work?***

As demonstrated, the gradual shift to promoting the greater sharing of productive and reproductive responsibilities between women and men in the EU does not necessarily mean

that productive and reproductive labour are seen as equally valuable, or that both are considered ‘work’. The approach taken to valuing reproductive labour varies across the institutions, in line with their respective historical approaches to gender equality (for example the European Commission’s gender equality competences stemming from employment policy or the Council’s preoccupation with limiting expenditure in this domain) and the influence of gender equality actors within them (such as the FEMM committee in the European Parliament).

The European Commission overwhelmingly presents social reproduction as a personal concern without an impact on the economy, suggesting that reproductive labour has no economic value in itself, for example: ‘the introduction of carers’ leave and paternity leave will help workers to balance their personal and professional lives’ (European Commission 2017a:16). Within this framing, reproductive labour is a pursuit which is separate from and secondary to waged work, expected to fit in outside of the hours of waged work without obstructing the productive process. In its 2020 gender equality strategy, the European Commission states that ‘thriving at work while managing caring responsibilities at home is a challenge, especially for women’ (European Commission 2020:11). This frames reproductive labour as an obstacle to be managed in order to be able to perform the ‘real’ work of production – ‘responsibilities at home’ need to be prevented from interfering with work, even if without their fulfilment the operations of the economy be impossible. Occasionally, unpaid reproductive labour is acknowledged as work and its economic value recognised: ‘women also carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid work, which constitutes a significant share of economic activity’ (European Commission 2020:11). Nevertheless, such framings of productive and reproductive work carrying equal value are rare and constitute an exception in the Commission’s discourse. This is likely due to this institution’s historic preoccupation with promoting gender equality through the labour market and its limited competences to prescribe the valuation of reproductive labour.

When it comes to the Council, framings of reproductive labour as a hinderance to production also predominate, although EU member states appear more open to seeing it as work and a contributor to the economy – likely as the documents where these statements are made are non-binding and thus do not generate costs for national governments. For example, in 2019, the Council called in its conclusions on gender equal economies to ‘highlight the contribution of unpaid work of women to economic growth and society’ (Council of the EU 2019:10). This tendency increased in the post-COVID 19 context, for example ‘the pandemic ... highlighted the fact that unpaid care work has a significant economic value, but one that is not visible, for example, in the calculation of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), due to the absence of

remuneration' (Council of the EU 2020:5). While it is remarkable that this statement echoes feminist political economists' concerns (Waring 1988), member states do not follow it up with a commitment to address this lack of recognition.

Once again, when it comes to legally binding texts, such as the Work-Life Balance directive, a framing of reproductive labour as a hinderance to production prevails:

when they have children, women are likely to work fewer hours in paid employment and to spend more time fulfilling unpaid caring responsibilities. Having a sick or dependent relative has also been shown to have a negative impact on women's employment and results in some women dropping out of the labour market entirely. (OJ 2019:2)

Indeed, the very formulation 'work-life balance' segregates human activities into two mutually exclusive categories, of which only one – paid employment – is considered to be 'real' work. This is evident in formulations such as 'work-life balance measures should help workers to balance their care responsibilities with work' (European Commission 2022:16) which juxtapose reproductive labour with the 'real' work of production. Given that ensuring a 'work-life balance' for employees is a stated objective of the WLB directive, it appears that the predominant characterisation of activities that do not fall into the paid employment category is that of 'non-work'. Other scholars have demonstrated this in relation to the EU's annual gender equality index, designed to measure progress in reaching equality between women and men: the index classifies only productive labour as 'work' and measures it under a separate category than time spent on care and domestic tasks, which in turn is compared to that spent on sport, culture and leisure activities (Schmid 2022). This separation both obscures the true amount of work (productive and reproductive) performed by women in the EU and devalues the fundamental importance of reproductive labour.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given its tendency to be more progressive on both social and gender equality matters (Warasin et al 2019), the European Parliament is an outlier with regards to how it frames social reproduction. Unlike the two other institutions, it repeatedly highlights both the social and economic value of reproductive labour and the need to boost its availability regardless of the need for additional workers in the labour market: 'universal access to ... social services and facilities at affordable prices, such as early childhood care and education or care for other dependants, is not only key for avoiding increasing poverty, especially for women,

but is also critical for an economy that serves the public interest' (European Parliament 2022b:9).

In addition, the European Parliament's resolutions appear to fully recognise reproductive labour as work of equal value to productive labour. This is evident in calls for the payment of pension provisions to compensate for time spent on reproductive labour – one which is never echoed by the other two institutions:

calls on the Member States to include compensation for unpaid care work in their pension systems, for example through care credits or other measures added to the carer's pension, irrespective of whether the care is provided to underage children, elderly persons or sick or disabled persons, while at the same time encouraging men to become carers. (European Parliament 2022b:15).

Thus, framings equating the value of reproductive and productive labour remain limited to texts drafted by the Parliament and non-binding documents produced by the Council. The next section will demonstrate how this impacts on the problem interpretations of the tensions between these two spheres adopted by the different institutions.

### ***Tensions between reproduction and production – differing interpretations***

As discussed above, most EU gender equality documents classify reproductive labour as something separate from the 'real' work of paid productive labour. This section will demonstrate that the call for 'work-life balance' in EU policy is nonetheless an acknowledgement of the tensions between the needs for production and reproduction inherent in capitalist economies, and an attempt to diffuse them, albeit through different approaches, with the European Parliament once again presenting an alternative position.

The European Commission and (most often) the Council present an awareness of the tensions between production and reproduction by discussing reproductive labour as an obstacle to production. However, the European Parliament points also to the fact that current models of productive labour are interfering with meeting social reproductive needs, for example stating that 'fear of losing their job has caused many women to abandon the option of reconciling work and family life by means of a shorter working day or similar formulas, making a balanced family life difficult' (European Parliament 2015:6). Thus, the European Parliament points to a problem different to the usual framing of challenges in achieving work-life balance – that of the needs of production impeding the meeting of reproductive needs, which leads women (and

men) to struggle with the double shift as they are unable to reduce their hours of paid employment. The European Parliament thus recognises the role which production (specifically, the prevalent employment models) plays in hindering the fulfilment of essential reproductive needs.

The European Parliament further stresses the need to address the tensions between production and reproduction in favour of the latter, by ensuring families' financial security, security on the labour market as well as time to provide the necessary care: 'work-life balance policies should also enable parents to fulfil their responsibilities towards their children, ensuring the financial means, time and support necessary for both mothers and fathers' (European Parliament 2016:9). Such considerations appear to fall outside of the narrow scope of what the European Commission and Council consider to be needed to reduce tensions between production and reproduction. Indeed, the proposals made by the Parliament would require rethinking the framing of reproductive labour as less valuable than production and of paid employment ('work') being defined as a central objective to which other responsibilities must be subordinate – likely a reflection of the greater gender sensitivity and willingness to politicize gender equality issues by the actors involved in drafting these texts, notably members of the FEMM committee.

Thus, while the discourses of all three institutions recognise the existence of tensions between production and reproduction, the different framings applied by the European Commission and Council on the one hand, and the European Parliament on the other, are likely to carry differentiated impacts for different categories of workers and women of different (class, ethnic or migrant) background – the implications of this will be discussed below.

### ***Work-life balance for whom?***

While both the Council and the European Commission acknowledge that tensions between production and reproduction exist, they tend to present this clash as easily solvable through 'organisational' means, such as rearranging the hours of paid work or outsourcing reproductive tasks, thus minimising the disruption caused by 'life' on 'work'. Only a limited selection of solutions is proposed in this respect, notably 'increased access to special and family leave and flexible working time arrangements, such as part-time work, telework and flexitime' (European Commission 2022:16). No downsides are acknowledged, and the solutions are presented as unequivocally beneficial: 'the availability of flexible working arrangements can prevent workers from taking on jobs below their full professional potential and skills level or dropping

out of the labour market when taking on caring responsibilities' (European Commission 2017a:10).

The limitations of the work-life balance discourse in allowing for the reconciliation of productive and reproductive responsibilities among workers in atypical or low-income employment (Cheiregato 2020) are therefore invisible in the discourse of the European Commission and the Council. Both institutions remain silent about the fact that the provision of flexitime or remote work, while they may be beneficial to educated and higher-income office workers, do not respond to the needs of those working shifts, or whose work cannot be performed remotely, in sectors such as services or care. Part-time work may already be the norm for some precarious employees, but due to the low earnings with which it is associated, it may be rather a hindrance than help in meeting social reproductive needs; for other families, who only access minimum earnings, reducing working hours may not be an option at all.

However, the European Parliament does appear to recognise some of these challenges, albeit not explicitly:

work-life balance must be based on workers' rights and security on the labour market, and on the right to take time off without it being curtailed by increased mobility and flexibility requirements; ... increased flexibility can result in an intensification of the labour market discrimination currently experienced by women – in the shape of lower wages, non-standard forms of employment and disproportionate responsibility for unpaid household tasks. (European Parliament 2016:17)

To address this, the Parliament highlights the need for work-life balance policies to go further than simply propose to rearrange working hours through flexible or remote working:

well designed and implemented reconciliation policies are to be considered as an essential improvement of the working environment, enabling good working conditions and social and professional well-being ... the policies to be implemented to attain these objectives must ... be based on the establishment of a coherent policy framework supported by collective bargaining and collective agreements to allow for a better balancing of caring, professional and private life ... the implementation of work-life balance policies will not in itself produce benefits for workers unless it is accompanied by policies to improve living conditions, alongside policies to foster and promote cultural, recreational and sporting activities. (European Parliament 2016:6-10)

This approach exposes the dangers of increased flexibilization of employment as well as the fact that those who work in non-standard employment – often women and workers from ethnic minority or migration backgrounds – suffer disproportionately from challenges related to reconciling reproduction with production. By taking this perspective, the European Parliament looks beyond the policy and political interests of the privileged and intermediate social classes (estimated at 19 per cent and 38 per cent of the EU population respectively – Hugrée et al 2020) of educated and predominantly white workers who stand to benefit most from the provisions introduced in the directive. Rather, it considers the needs of the more vulnerable working class (43 per cent of the EU population – Hugrée et al 2020) who need comprehensive social policies to ensure an overall good quality of life, including time for reproductive responsibilities and well as better employment protections. Nevertheless, even in the European Parliament’s progressive discourse, these issues remain implied rather than explicit and do not directly reference the exclusion of people from specific class, occupational level, ethnic or migration background from the current design of work-life balance policies – perhaps as a recognition of limited ability of the FEMM committee to impose a more radical discourse in the plenary (Warasin et al 2019).

### ***Conclusions***

The analysis of EU gender equality policy documents from 2014-2023 confirms my starting assumption: while all three EU institutions openly recognise the existence of tensions between the demands of productive and reproductive labour, this does not result in a wide-scale recognition of the equal value or contribution of reproductive labour to the economy in EU policy. Thus, aside from some exceptions, EU policy perpetuates the misrecognition of reproductive labour as economically valueless (Hoskyns and Rai 2007). While broadly speaking, reproductive labour is presented as relevant to the functioning of the economy in that it can hamper the process of production, it is not seen as directly contributing economic value, contrary to the claims made by feminist political economists such as Dalla Costa and James (1972 [2017]) and Mezzadri (2019). Taking this position means that a full recognition of the value and importance of reproductive labour cannot take place.

However, differences can be distinguished between approaches taken by the three institutions analysed. The European Commission mostly presents reproductive labour as a personal concern without a direct impact on the economy and suggests it should be minimised to not hinder production. While the Council occasionally highlights reproductive labour’s contributions to the economy and society in its non-binding statements, in binding documents

it follows the same line as the Commission. The European Parliament is an outlier on this issue, recognising the social and economic value of reproductive labour and equating its value with production. The approach taken depends on the given institution's historical perspective on gender equality (such as the European Commission's focus on promoting gender equality through employment), the presence of progressive and gender equality actors within it (such as the active role of the FEMM committee in the European Parliament) and whether a given document is binding and thus carries potential financial implications for member states (such as a directive as opposed to Council Conclusions). Future research might help to further disentangle the causal factors for these differentiated approaches on a more granular level.

As hypothesised, EU policy continues to overwhelmingly address tensions between production and reproduction by prioritising the interests of production (which are equated with economic growth) over the needs of social reproduction. This reinforces the idea that reproductive labour would best be reduced to a minimum – to achieve this, EU policies propose 'work-life balance' measures. In itself, this formulation creates a false opposition between 'real work' (production) and everything else ('life', including reproductive labour), automatically devaluing reproductive labour and positioning paid employment as a more valuable and meaningful activity.

As a result, the gender equality goal of work-life balance policies appears to trail behind that of addressing the needs of the labour market. While work-life balance policies call for the greater participation of men in reproductive labour, motivated by an awareness of the ongoing crisis of social reproduction, this is designed primarily to address pressing demographic shifts: an ageing population and dropping fertility rates, both of which result in a lower supply of workers. Ensuring the greater involvement of men in reproductive labour is expected to encourage more women to join the labour force, all the while they continue to have children. Thus, the EU's focus on ensuring a gender equal approach to reproductive responsibilities, as welcome as it is, appears to be an extension of the economised goal of promoting economic growth.

Furthermore, the prioritisation of the interests of production means that the solutions put forward to address the tensions between the demands of productive and reproductive labour in EU policies can only be partial at best. Reconciliation measures such as flexible working do not respond to the needs of those workers who already suffer from too much rather than too little flexibility in their work schedules, in particular women from working class, ethnic

minority or migration backgrounds. The outsourcing of reproductive labour, unless it relies on universally accessible state services, can increase divisions along class, ethnic and migratory background lines as only those who are more affluent are able to purchase privatised services on the market.

In addition, EU's gender equality documents remain blind to the role which they themselves play in increasing women's workload or 'double shift'. Indeed, recent documents reframe and depoliticise this issue as a 'gender care gap', focusing on individual responsibility for reproductive labour and avoiding a discussion of the systemic factors which contribute to it (for example poor service provision or incompatible working hours). As such, EU gender equality policy largely absolves member states of the responsibility to supply their citizens with the means of social reproduction.

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