

# **Balancing Employment and Family Responsibilities in Southern Europe**

## **Trends and Challenges for Social Policy Reform**

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### **■ Introduction**

Southern European countries (i.e. Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) have experienced major socio-demographic changes since the mid-1970s. These transformations mainly arise from the new role of women in society and, in particular, women's higher levels of training, work experience, and labour market attachment. The changes in women's labour force participation have occurred in conjunction with a progressive postponement of main family events, such as leaving the parental home, forming a partnership and having children, as well as with a reduction in the family size. Southern Europe is, indeed, characterized as having the "lowest low fertility levels" within western industrialized countries (i.e. total fertility rates see below and Kohler et al., 2002), a pattern that is exacerbating the ongoing process of population ageing. This picture partly reflects the conflicting relationship that currently exists between women's labour force participation and the accommodation of family responsibilities: the so-called "work-family balance".

Southern European countries, as the sample of analysis, share many similarities concerning their recent history and the important role of the family as a welfare provider (Ferrera, 1996, and Saraceno, 1994); but they also exhibit many contrasting patterns concerning women's labour force participation. Portugal is, for instance, a very distinctive case within Southern Europe due to the relatively high level of female labour force participation, which, as a matter of fact, has been above the European Union (EU) average since the early 1970s. One-earner couples (i.e. in which the man is the main economic provider) are consequently very rare in Portugal, whilst they are still common in Italy, Greece and Spain. These contrasting patterns of family and occupational behaviour within Southern Europe make the comparison undertaken here far more interesting.

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The aim of this research is to analyse, from a comparative perspective, the relationship between family formation (i.e. living with a partner and having children) and occupational mobility in the early stage of women's life course. The paper is divided into two main parts. The first part describes main trends in women's labour force participation, and the private and institutional support available to families that facilitate the combination of employment and family responsibilities. The second part explores the work-family balance from a very specific viewpoint: the impact that different family structures and male partners' involvement in caring activities have on women's early occupational trajectories. Occupational trajectory is measured by four main transitions: remaining in the same occupation; downward mobility; upward mobility; and, exit from paid work. These transitions reflect women's constraints to pursue a career concurrently with the family formation process. Transitions are captured by simultaneously estimating multinomial logit regression models for various origin states and destinations. The empirical analysis is based on yearly data (eight waves from 1994 to 2001), stemming from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP). Finally, the conclusion discusses the main policy challenges for reconciling family and employment in Southern Europe.

## ■ Unstable Equilibrium: Young Adult Women in Family and Career Formation

No general agreement exists about the meaning of "work and family balance" across countries, social groups or welfare states. There are instead different individual preferences and cultures around which caring and domestic activities are organized alongside employment. The normative idea implied in many well-meaning policies of reconciliation, although not always explicitly stated, is to "allow women to behave like men" in the labour market while allowing them to take care – as best as possible – of their family responsibilities. The reasons for this normative assumption originate in the fact that many policy measures primarily focus on mothers, the workplace culture assumes men to be primarily focused on work and, last but not least, the "ideal worker" in competitive post-industrial societies still resembles a fully committed and pushy employee free of family worries. Even policies that effectively succeed in facilitating a family-friendly environment eventually reproduce perverse gender inequalities in the labour market given that they primarily involve women while leaving men aside. Thus, many more women tend to take time out for family responsibilities than men, who instead remain fully committed to their occupational career. The pending agenda for most reconciliation policies in western societies is to get more men involved in caring, while promoting changes in the

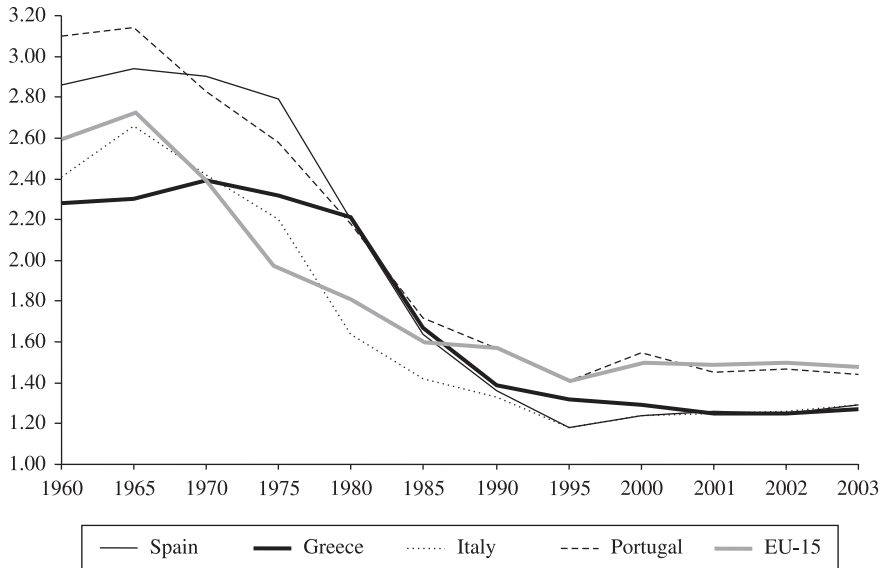
well-established male work culture. Until these transformations occur, the conflict is mainly centred on women's lives and, in particular, on policies that allow women to have both paid work and family. This paper, therefore, is mainly focused on women who are in the process of combining family and paid work.

Comparative studies tend to classify Southern Europe within a "familist" cluster, which usually entails rigid gender division of labour, great dependence on family solidarity, and limited support from the state. This is only part of the reality in which a huge gender-generational divide has emerged due to the rapid societal and economic transformations that have taken place in Southern Europe since the mid-1970s. In order to properly tackle the work-family dilemma we need to identify the main characteristics of the target population: young adult women. The next section describes in detail the so-called "gender-generational divide".

### ***Trends in Family Formation: the Generational Divide***

The young adult women analysed here mainly consist of those born at the beginning of the mid-1960s until the mid-1970s, which include the baby boom and the beginning of the baby bust generations. These women are driving the generational divide with respect to the new life course pattern of family and labour force participation that is emerging in Southern Europe. These women reached their working age in a totally different context than the previous cohort (i.e. their mothers). Women born before the mid-1950s, the mothers, have had mostly short and discontinuous occupational careers, reached relatively low educational attainment; had relatively large families (Spain and Portugal were well above EU levels in the 1965; see Figure 1), and they also had relatively early and stable marriages. The baby boom generation, instead, are the most-educated and well-trained women in recent history in Southern European countries. These women have benefited from the early expansion of the welfare state and, in particular, from the take-off of the public educational system. The public educational system opened the doors to young people from different social backgrounds who were looking for better opportunities on the labour market. Women also needed to acquire training and education to compensate for greater difficulties they faced as compared to men in incorporating into the labour market. According to data from 2000, Greece, Spain and Italy exhibited the highest gender disparity in unemployment within the EU (Eurostat, 2002). In fact, unemployment was almost double for women than for their male counterparts. The unemployment rate is also slightly higher for Portuguese women than for their male counterparts, but they both face relatively low unemployment rates.

Figure 1: Total Fertility Rate: Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, 1960-2003



Source: Eurostat.

In the context described above, the emergence of a new socio-demographic behaviour amongst young adult women is not surprising. “The main characteristic of this new demographic behaviour is that ‘youth’ has been expanded”; youth understood from a sociological point of view. That is to say, there has been a progressive delay and reduced intensity at most vital demographic events (e.g. leaving the parental home, forming individual dwellings, forming partnerships, having children and so on). Thus, current statistics show that young Southern Europeans remain in the parental home until late ages, leading to the well-known “long families”; most of them leave the parental home to directly enter a new partnership either through marriage or consensual unions and very few of them experience living alone or with friends, which is commonplace in other EU countries (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001). Therefore, the first child arrives rather late and overall fertility levels are kept at rather low levels as compared with the EU.

Fertility patterns are illustrated in Figure 1. Total fertility rates (TFR) have plummeted since the mid-1960s in Portugal and Italy, and since the mid-1970s in Spain and Greece. It reached the lowest levels in recent history in the mid-1990s, particularly for Italian and Spanish women, and ever since Southern European countries have entered the scenario of the so-called “lowest-low” fertility levels in the EU (Kohler et al., 2002). Portugal is, again, the only country within Southern Europe with fertility rates close to the EU levels. It is then obvious that demographic behaviour of young adult women has experienced a great deal of change in timing and intensity at

different family events. The next section describes women's foremost changes in labour force participation.

### ***Trends in Women's Labour Force Participation: Moving Towards EU Levels***

Female labour force participation in Southern Europe is often characterized as being relatively low for western industrialised countries. This is only partly true. According to the Labour Force Survey, the female activity rate for women aged 15-64 in the EU-15 during the fourth quarter of 2004 was 63 per cent (Eurostat).<sup>1</sup> Italy (51%), Greece (54%) and Spain (58%) were well below the EU-15 levels, whereas Portugal (68%) was above this level. Aggregate data with large age groups, however, conceals the real change that has taken place in recent years. As previously explained, there has been an important generational divide concerning women's demographic behaviour and investment in human capital. Young adult women are at the forefront of most of these changes, whereas older age groups (particularly those born before the mid-1950s) represent the stagnation within the old model characterized by short and discontinuous working careers.

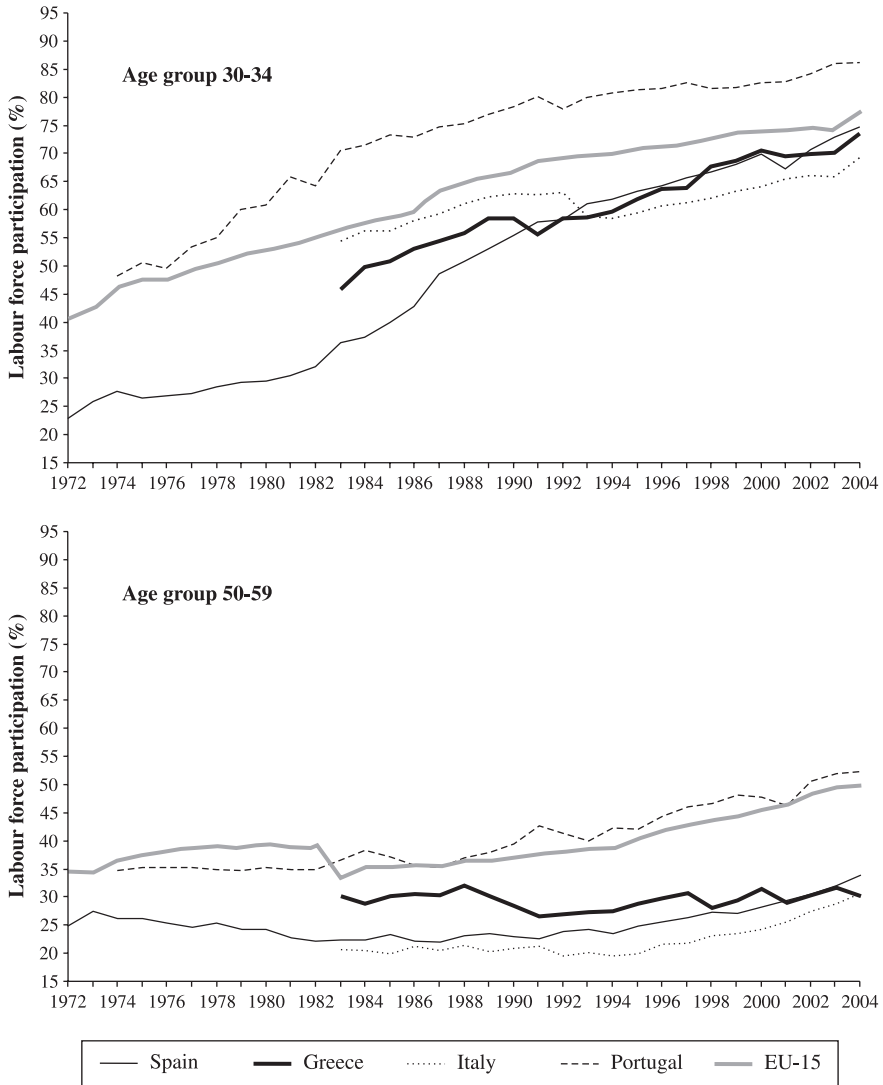
Figure 2 depicts the generational divide illustrated by the female activity rates of women aged 30-34 and women aged 50-59 from the early 1970s to the early 2000s. These figures are snapshots of the same age groups across time. As also shown in Figure 2, major changes in women's labour force participation have taken place since the early 1970s and 1980s. Female activity rates of young Spanish women, for instance, almost doubled from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. Yet, in the mid-1980s, young Spanish women were still far behind their southern counterparts, while Greece and Italy were already close to the EU-15 levels. Since the mid-1980s, female activity rates have increased at the same pace as the young age group in Western Europe and nowadays, in 2004, are very close to the EU-15 levels.

The case of Portugal deserves particular attention. As it is illustrated in Figure 2, activity rates of Portuguese women have traditionally been above the mean in Western Europe. Since the early 1980s until now, in particular, the activity rates of Portuguese young adult women are about 10 per cent above the EU-15 levels. This is an extraordinary fact given that Southern European countries share similar institutional contexts at the national level (i.e. formal provisions available to parents to combine paid work and caring tasks), a historical heritage of late industrialization and a Catholic cultural tradition. Nonetheless, female employment in Portugal is culturally embedded and well valued in the society amongst all social classes. Above and beyond, female employment is essential for large sectors of the population to make ends meet (André & Areosa, 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> Eurostat data is available online: <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int/>; see "Population and Social Conditions".

**Figure 2: Trends in Female Labour Force Participation by Age Groups: Young Adult Women (aged 30-34) and Mature Women (aged 50-54), EU-15, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, 1972-2004**



Source: OECD (Labour Market Statistic: <http://www.oecd.org/>).

To understand the high levels of female participation in Portugal requires looking into its recent history. Two main dates shall be mentioned. First, wars took place in the 1960s within the ex-colonies (Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau) which mobilized a large number of working-age men who were rapidly replaced by women in the urban centres; wartime also

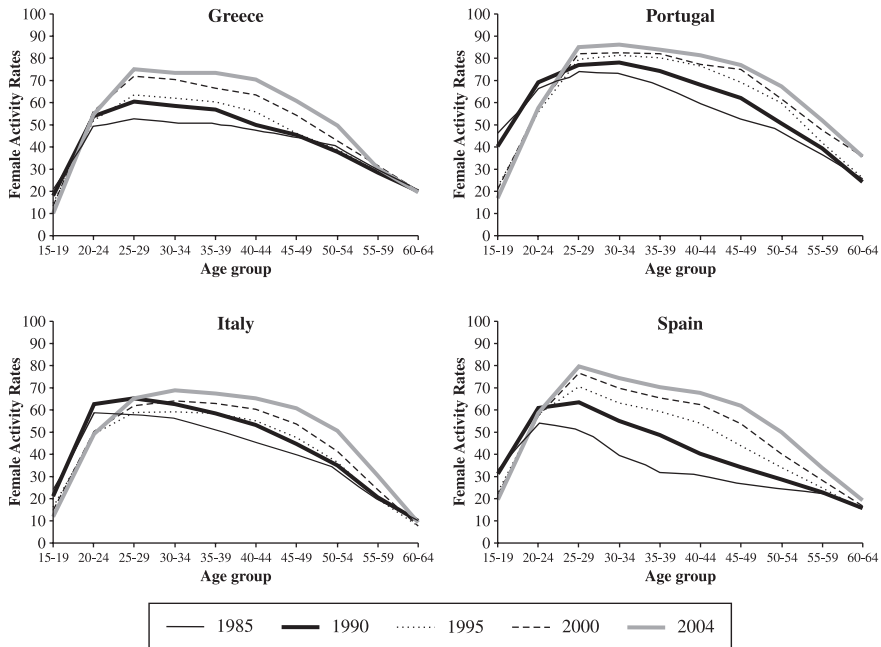
forced many women in the rural areas to assume a more active role in the fields. These women did not retreat from the labour market after warfare, as has often been the case in most western countries. Second, the economic recovery of the 1970s was followed by the Revolution of April 1974, which led to the expansion of the public sector (social services, health and social assistance), favouring the increase in women's labour force participation (André & Areosa, 2000).

Nowadays, Portuguese society takes for granted women's role within the labour market, which, in principle, seems difficult to explain given the relatively limited support of the welfare state and the inadequately developed family-friendly policies. As a matter of fact, authors such as André (1996) argue that female employment is very high but the conditions under which family responsibilities are reconciled are very different. Better-off women externalize caring and domestic activities in the market sector and make full use of available institutional childcare, while less-economically privileged women simply adapt as best as possible to the requirements of the market with informal arrangements for childcare (André 1996).

The second graph in Figure 2 represents the other side of the generational divide: the stagnated model of mature women presented here by the 50-59 age group. Women aged 50-54 have remained roughly at the same levels of labour force participation all through the period 1972-2004. This is particularly the case for Greek women, whereas the mature Spanish and Italian age group (50-54) has slightly increased its participation since the mid-1990s. Mature Portuguese women (aged 50-54) are only somewhat above the EU-15 levels of female participation in the same age group.

We shall conclude that only after distinguishing by age groups can one really grasp the rapid socio-demographic changes that have taken place in Southern Europe. Figure 3 illustrates the age-patterns of female participation in Greece, Portugal, Italy and Spain across different points in time. These figures illustrate, on the one hand, the increase in female participation at childbearing ages, which is particularly noticeable in Spain, and on the other hand, the absolutely high levels reached amongst young women aged 25-29: 85 per cent in Portugal, 80 per cent in Spain, 75 per cent in Greece and 65 per cent in Italy. The question now is whether these cohorts of young women will continue in the labour force due to the particularly conflicting balance of family and employment responsibilities in Southern Europe. Motherhood has been delayed all over Europe, a trend which is also remarkable in Southern Europe. In 2000, the mean age of mothers at birth of first child was 29 in Spain, 28.3 in Italy, 27.3 in Greece; whereas the youngest mothers in Southern Europe, at age 26.4, were found in Portugal (Eurostat, DEMO database). Therefore, most women are entering the child-bearing period around about their late twenties in Spain, Italy and Greece and again about two years earlier in Portugal.

Figure 3: Female Labour Force Participation by Age Groups: Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, 1985-2004



Source: Eurostat (LFS data available in the section of "Population and social conditions": <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int/>).

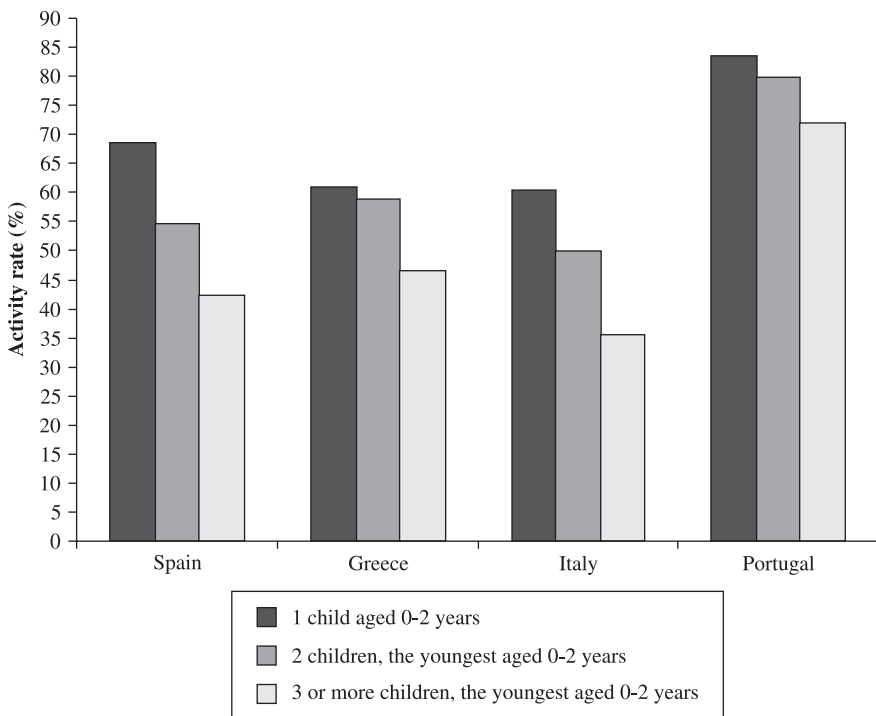
The effect of family formation on women's labour force participation is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows the changes in activity rates according to the number of children when the youngest child is aged 0-2. Women with a young child aged 0-2 still attain relatively high activity rates (84% in Portugal, 68% in Spain, 61% in Greece and 60% in Italy). However, the rates decrease gradually with the number of children and particularly after the third child when the youngest is aged 0-2. The negative effect of the number of children is a common trait across the four countries, although Portuguese mothers with three children are still outstanding for their relatively high activity rates, which are similar to those of Spanish women with only one child. It is worth noting that the negative impact of children on female activity in Southern Europe is far less noticeable among the highly-educated women. For highly-educated women (ISCED 5-6) with three children, for instance, only 59 per cent were in the labour force in France, 56 per cent in Germany and 65 per cent in Finland (data for 2003; Eurostat, 2005). In Southern Europe, on the contrary, a larger proportion of highly-educated mothers with three children were in the labour force: 90 per cent in Portugal, 76 per cent in Greece, 73 per cent in Italy and 70 per cent in Spain (Eurostat, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> According to Eurostat, the data is not fully reliable for the activity rate of highly-educated mothers in Portugal.



The effect of education on mothers' labour force participation has two major implications. On the one hand, highly-educated women can reach a better work-family balance, quite probably by externalizing family responsibilities; whereas low-educated women can hardly afford these services in the market place. On the other hand, as more women reached better positions in the labour market, they may also have been afforded better chances to privately organize family matters. The main problem lies in the fraction of women who remain at the bottom of the educational and occupational structure, as they will be the main "losers" or the less capable of balancing family and employment in those institutional contexts that are characterized by the limited support of the welfare state and a large reliance on the informal work of families.

Figure 4: Female Activity Rates by the Number of Children and the Age of the Youngest Child: Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy, 2005



Note: the sample consists of working age women with small children (aged 0-2).  
Source: Eurostat (LFS data: <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int/>), 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter.

The labour market in Southern Europe is not an example of a family-friendly environment.<sup>1</sup> Usual working hours of women in full-time jobs are above the EU-15 levels (38.8 hours): Greece (39.6), Spain (39.5) and

<sup>1</sup> Statistics used in this paragraph are based on Eurostat (2005).

Portugal (39.1), with the only exception of Italy (37.0). Part-time jobs are in short supply: they only represented 3.7 per cent of those women employed in Greece, 8.6 per cent in Spain, 8.2 per cent in Portugal and 11.3 per cent in Italy, as compared with the 19.7 per cent of women in part-time employment in the EU-15 as a whole. Employment instability is commonplace among women, particularly in Spain and Portugal, where as many as 35.2 per cent and 21.1 per cent respectively had limited duration contracts; whereas only 14.4 per cent of women in the EU-15 as a whole had this type of contract. Limited duration contracts are less frequent in Greece and Italy in which only about 14 per cent of women held this type of contract.

Finally, southern women rely far more frequently on self-employment without employees (13% in Greece, 9.1% in Portugal, 7.1% in Italy and 8.4% in Spain) than the EU-15 as a whole, where only 5 per cent of women are self-employed as a proportion of the total employed in industry and services in 2000 (Eurostat, 2002). In countries such as Greece, self-employment has favoured the creation of multiple jobs in both the formal and the underground economy around which different types of family businesses are based and where women play a significant role as unpaid family workers (Alipranti & Nikolaou, 2005). Another characteristic of Southern Europe is the fact that the public sector has not absorbed as many women as other central and Scandinavian countries. Jobs in the public sector are usually more attractive for working parents due to the availability of more generous time-related support measures, flexible work-hour schedules and job security (OECD, 2001). In Denmark and Finland, the countries with the highest female labour force participation in Western Europe, around 55 per cent of full-time employed women worked in the public sector in comparison to only under a quarter in Italy (23%) and Portugal (24%) and a third of female employees in Spain and Greece (32%) [data for 1998; Eurostat, 2002]. In the next section, parents' opportunities to reconcile caring and domestic responsibilities and paid-work are further explored.

### ***Work-Family Balance: Private and Institutional Support***

The previous section has described the main socio-economic changes of women since the mid-1970s in Southern Europe: their increase in educational attainment, their higher labour force attachment, the progressive delay in family formation, and the low fertility rates reached already in the mid-1990s. All in all, women's public role and expectations regarding employment have significantly changed in recent decades. The question now is to what extent gender relations in the family and gender equality in the institutional context (i.e. social policies) have accompanied these transformations. It is clear that the combination of full-time employment and family life is very costly without gender equity in the family or a high degree of institutional support. These two spheres are briefly described in the next section.

## Family and Gender Relations

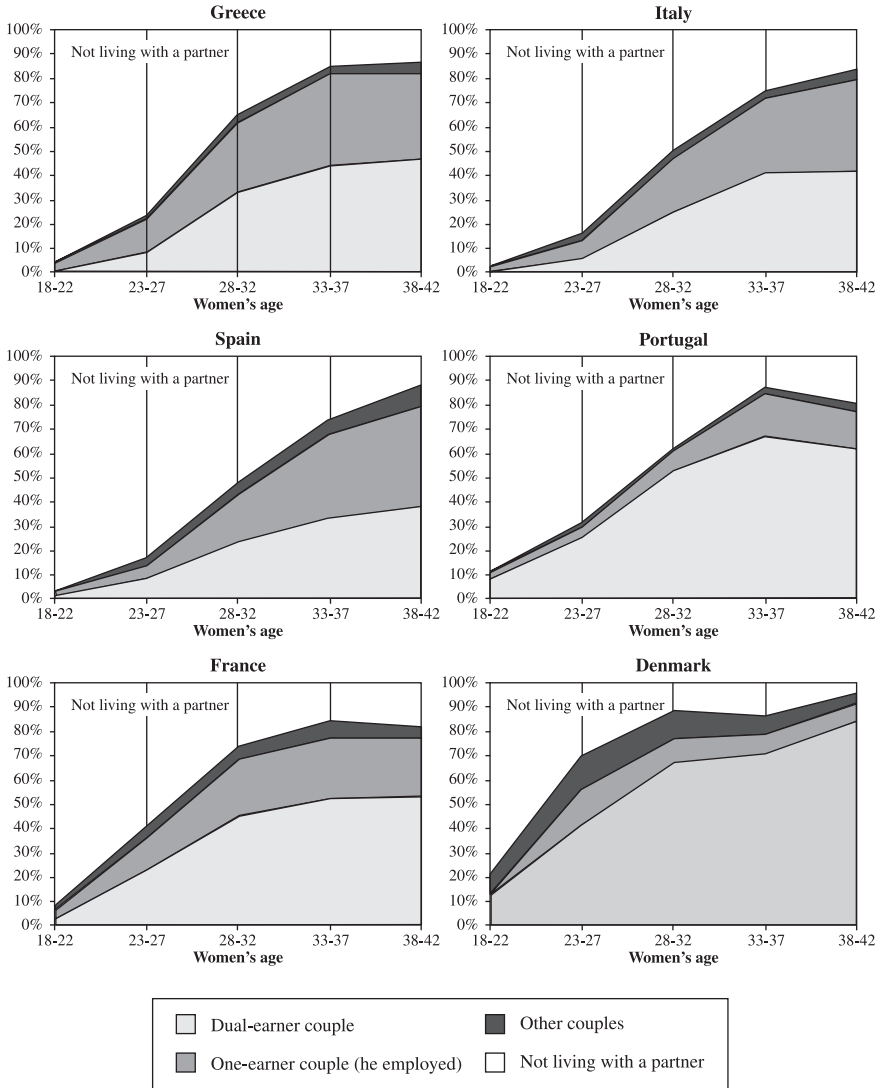
Feminist theorists have developed different typologies of families' division of work and care arrangements and the implicit economic, ideological and welfare state contexts that sustain these families.<sup>1</sup> An ideal model to foster women's self-fulfilment in both family and employment could be what Crompton (1999) labelled as "the dual-earner, dual-care society". This model is based on the principle of an egalitarian division of both caring responsibilities and the provider role, limited use of care from outside the household and, likewise, a family-friendly labour market that facilitates parents sharing caring responsibilities. This ideal is still very far from reality in Southern Europe. The introduction of women into the labour force has not resulted in an equivalent involvement of men in home-based unpaid domestic and caring activities; not even in Portugal, where female participation is amongst the highest in Western Europe, has the division of domestic and caring work significantly changed (Wall, 2004). The average time spent by fathers looking after children (i.e. where the youngest child is 3-10 years old) in dual-earner couples in which both parents were in full-time employment was 7 hours per week in Greece, 9 hours in Portugal, 11 in Spain and 13 in Italy, whereas mothers spend an average of 27 in Portugal, 33 in Italy and Greece and 39 in Spain (author's calculations from the ECHP 2000 data). The median number of hours was zero for men in Greece, Spain and Portugal, which means that half of the fathers in dual-earner couples reported not being engaged in any child caring activities.

The persistent gender division of labour even within dual-earner couples exemplifies the time pressure that most working mothers may be facing. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that a large proportion of women eventually end up in more traditional family arrangements such as "the one-earner family" in which men are, again, the main economic providers and women the main caregivers. The different divisions of labour within couples have been portrayed in Figure 5: dual-earners, one-earner (i.e. the man is the main economic provider) and other types of family arrangements. This typology includes the proportion of women not living with a partner. Two other countries, France and Denmark, have been also displayed in Figure 5, as contrasting Western European cases.

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of this literature see: Crompton (1999), Lewis (2001), Perrons (1995), Pfau-Effinger (1999, 2004), Drobnic and Blossfeld (2001).

**Figure 5: Women’s Living Arrangements across Age Groups: Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, France and United Kingdom, 2000-2001**



Source: ECHP (weighted data).

Different conclusions emerge from Figure 5. First, there is a high proportion of women not living with a partner at young ages (23-27 and 28-32), particularly in Italy and Spain, as compared to France and Denmark. This partly reflects the late timing of leaving the parental home in Southern Europe. Second, there is a large polarization between dual-earner and one-earner couples in Greece, Italy and Spain when women are still relatively young (aged 33-42). Third, there is a low prevalence of dual-earner couples

in Southern Europe as compared with countries such as France or Denmark; again, Portugal is an exception. In Portugal, 67 per cent of women aged 33-37 were in dual-earner couples, whereas only between 30 and 40 per cent were in other southern countries. The labour force participation of Portuguese women is very high even among working mothers with three or more children (60%); this participation rate is very close, for instance, to Danish mothers with the same number of children (67%) (Eurostat, 2005).

In general, despite the fact that young adult women have recently gained major access to the labour market, there is a high risk of reproducing a rigid gender division of labour when they reach the motherhood period and engage in family life. Data illustrated in Figure 5, however, offers only a static picture that conceals the dynamic processes explaining women's propensity to form different divisions of labour. A dynamic analysis is further explored in the next empirical analysis

### **Public Support to Combine Work-Family Responsibilities**

The previous section has shown that gender equity in the family is still far from being a reality, given the large prevalence of couples with a rigid gender division of labour, and the large distance between fathers' and mothers' involvement in childcare activities. We shall now look at the role of institutions in supporting dual-earner couples, or in other words, the role of institutions in supporting the combination of paid work and family responsibilities.

Fertility decline and its feared consequences upon population ageing seem to have renewed the interest of policy-makers in the family matters of most southern countries. However, family policy as such is still a rather neglected area within the welfare state, in spite of, or possibly owing to, the crucial role of inter-generational solidarity among families. Reforms in social policy have been overshadowed by more pressing issues since the beginning of the 1980s, including the high unemployment rate, industrial restructuring, and the achievement of international competitiveness. Therefore, families continue to be the basic institution for alleviating the social exclusion of unemployed youth and reconciling the difficult relationship between women's paid employment and family responsibilities (Flaquer, 1995; Ferrera, 1995; Meil, 1994). Some authors refer to the kinship solidarity family model – cohesive bonds of solidarity within the extended family – to characterize Southern European society (Jurado & Naldini, 1996). This model of allocating family responsibilities, however, has profoundly negative effects on women, because it places on their shoulders the main bulk of unpaid domestic and caring activities for dependent family members, while deterring young women from family life. Paradoxically, the social functions fulfilled by the family have been blamed for discouraging the state from providing higher levels of public provision (Naldini, 2001).

Southern European countries have in common the absence of an explicit family policy and the persistent reliance on family support, which

exacerbates existing gender inequalities. Portugal (1999), for instance, has analysed the Portuguese case and detects a clear contradiction between an explicit ideological commitment to the family in political discourse and the subsidiary position that family matters have within social policy as a whole. This would also apply to other southern counterparts where families still play an important role as a welfare provider, while social transfers represent insignificant amounts and the infrastructure of family support is poorly developed.<sup>1</sup> Southern European countries had indeed the lowest cash family benefits per person aged 0 to 19 in Western Europe: these benefits represented, as a percentage of GDP, only 1 per cent in Greece, 0.2 per cent in Spain, 0.5 per cent in Italy and 0.5 per cent in Portugal as compared to the 1.4 per cent average in the EU-15 in 2000.<sup>2</sup>

In Southern Europe, parents are entitled to relatively long parental leave to take care of young children, but it is either unpaid or poorly paid. In Italy, mothers can take 10 months after maternity leave, 11 months if the father takes at least 3 months, with 30 per cent of earnings. In Greece, each parent is entitled to 3 months full-time leave without benefits. In Spain, working parents are entitled to a cumulative full-time leave until the child is 3 years old without benefits. In Portugal, each parent is entitled to 6 months full-time leave, again without benefit payments.

The fact, however, that childcare parental leave is mostly unpaid means that it does not really represent an alternative for many parents; at least for families requiring two salaries to make ends meet. A recent study in Portugal, for example, concluded that entitlements for working time reduction due to family care did not prove to be very successful, as most people could not afford the equivalent loss of earnings (OCDE, 2004). Another possibility for taking care of children is to externalize this responsibility to home-based institutions on either a private or public basis. This option, however, is not always at hand given the short supply of childcare. Childcare coverage for the under-three age group was about 15 per cent in Spain in 2003-2004, 6 per cent of which was in the public sector; although there were significant regional variations between Communities such as the Basque Country and Catalonia, with about 30 per cent of childcare coverage, and Extremadura or Andalucía with only about 2 per cent.<sup>3</sup> In Portugal, about

<sup>1</sup> Recent developments of family policy are included in the General Monitoring Reports of the European Observatory on the Social Situation, Demography and Family (see: Bagavos, 2004; Fernández-Cordón, 2004; Sgritta, 2004, Wall, 2004). Reports are published on the Observatory's website: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/eoss/who\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/eoss/who_en.html).

<sup>2</sup> Cash family benefits are the sum of different social benefits in the family/children function: birth grants normally paid as a lump sum or by instalments in the case of childbirth or adoption; parental leave benefits; family or child allowances; and other cash benefits to support households and help them meet specific costs, e.g., lone-parent families or families with handicapped children. It does not include cash benefits paid for income maintenance in the event of childbirth or tax benefits (Eurostat 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Childcare coverage was estimated with the number of pupils aged 0-2 and the population aged 0-2, which were provided by the National Statistical Bureau (<http://www.ine.es>) and the Ministry of Education, (<http://www.mec.es/mecd/estadisticas/index.html>).

16 per cent of under-threes were in crèches, with again strong variations across regions such as Evora (23%) and Portolegre (30%) which had the highest coverage (data for 1999; Wall, 2004). The coverage was even lower in Greece with only 3 per cent of children under three years of age in nursery schools (data for 1999; Bagavos, 2004) and Italy with only 5.5 per cent. National data in Italy, however, also conceals large territorial inequalities within regions of the south, with only about 1-2 per cent up to 20 per cent in some provinces within Emilia Romagna (data for 1995; Concetta, 2000). The lack of state provision for the elderly is very similar across southern countries; therefore, mature women in their mid-fifties may be facing the double burden of caring simultaneously for their parents and their young adult children.

The limited development of institutional childcare services explains the heavy dependence of working parents upon relatives and friends to organize the caring of small children. According to recent data for Spain, the help provided by the family network is particularly important for young working mothers (under 30 years of age), particularly among low-skilled working mothers and lone-mothers, while most working mothers (77%) seem to have a close relative – usually the mother (56%) – living in the same town (as referenced in Fernández-Cordón, 2004). The availability of relatives and friends to help with domestic and caring activities, however, does not exist for all families, and becomes increasingly more difficult as more women from young generations progressively enter the labour market; moreover, many of them are forced to move to different residential areas due to job requirements. The reliance on family networks, which is not always guaranteed or accessible, place less-privileged families in a very difficult position, while better-off families have more chances to externalize caring and domestic activities in the market place. In sum, neither public institutions nor families have substantially adapted to women's advancement in the socio-economic field, while the system of informal family support simply reproduces existing social inequality across women's socio-economic groups.

## ■ **Going Ahead with their Career: the Impact of Family and Gender Relations on Occupational Mobility**

The first part of the paper has illustrated the proliferation of young adult women in the labour market alongside the progressive delay in family formation, as well as the unresponsiveness that has accompanied these societal transformations in the arenas of social policy and gender relations. The aim of this section is to select a specific group, women aged 18-40 who are in

paid employment, and follow their early occupational trajectories in order to ascertain the variables that instigate different transitions in the labour market. The purpose is to test the extent to which family formation influences women's career trajectories from a dynamic perspective.

The empirical analysis only takes on board one aspect of the reconciliation: whether women maintain or improve their position in the labour market, despite having formed a partnership and having children. Young adult women who maintain or improve their position in the labour market as time goes by, regardless of their family circumstances, are the ones who "really make it" in the field of reconciliation. Withdrawing from paid work when it coincides with different family events, such as forming a partnership or caring for small children, is the maximum expression of a woman's inability to reconcile family responsibilities and paid work. It should be noted that women who are on maternity leave are still considered employed in our data, despite being temporarily absent from employment.

The empirical analysis focuses on women's occupational mobility, depending upon different family and work situations, as a main monitoring tool to capture the degree of work-family balance. Studying occupational mobility provides information about women's life chances, underlying opportunity structures and the cost associated with family formation.

The dependent variable has four main categories:

- immobility or maintenance of the occupational position (entails a success in reconciliation);
- upward occupational mobility (entails a substantive success in reconciliation);
- downward occupational mobility (may entail a negative context for reconciliation);
- exit from the labour market through either unemployment or inactivity (entails gender role specialization).

The following hypotheses are tested to explain women's chances to maintain or even improve their occupational status in their early life course in the particular context of Southern Europe:

- *Modern family hypothesis*: in the absence of a strong welfare state, women with higher chances of maintaining and even experiencing upward occupational mobility over time are those that have a partner who is fully involved in childcare activities, and have a similar "earning capacity" (homogamous couples);
- *Family solidarity hypothesis*: in the absence of a strong welfare state, living within extended families (a third generation within the household) facilitates reconciliation and, in turn, the maintenance and even upward occupational mobility over time;
- *Family-friendly hypothesis*: in the absence of a strong welfare state, working in the public sector increases the chances of working mothers to maintain and even experience upward occupational mobility over time.



## *Data and Methodology*

The analysis is based on the European Community Household Panel (ECHP). This is a harmonized survey on income and living conditions conducted by different national statistical offices and later centralized and coordinated by Eurostat. The survey has a panel design whereby the same persons are interviewed over eight years (1994-2001). The sample of the ECHP consisted of approximately 170,000 persons living in 60,500 households and contains an individual questionnaire for members of the household who are at least 16 years old. All persons and their current household members are followed over time. The ECHP is thus a unique source of information because of the standardized methodology and comparability across time and countries. It also has the uniqueness of combining rich socio-economic data on income, employment situation and housing tenancy with longitudinal demographic data.

The ECHP provides data on a monthly and yearly basis. Monthly data is available for the birth of family members and activity status – Germany being an exception – while yearly data is available for specific characteristics of the labour force participation (private/public, full-time/part-time, job status, etc.), social transfers and income. In addition, some data refers to the year prior to the interview, as in the case of net yearly income. This analysis is based on yearly data (person-year observations) for which most of the information is available. Seven waves of the ECHP (1995-2001) are effectively used to estimate changes in status position between year  $t$  and year  $t + 1$ . Occupational mobility is then analysed by simultaneously estimating multinomial logit regression models for various origin states and destinations. The first wave has been discarded from the analysis given that we ignore previous occupational status. Therefore, the first observations are changes in occupational status in 1995 (second wave), according to the occupational status the year before in 1994 (first wave).

The ECHP contains information on occupation (2-digit ISCO 1988-code), the branch of industry (NACE) as well as the main characteristics of the working population. The occupational class variable used consists of five large categories: 1) High professionals; 2) Low professionals; 3) Intermediate; 4) Skilled workers and operators; and 5) Labourers.<sup>1</sup> These categories imply a class hierarchy in the occupational structure from which different competing transitions can be estimated:

- a) immobility in the occupational structure, that is to say, women remain occupied at the same category;
- b) downward mobility in the occupational structure;
- c) upward mobility; and finally,

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<sup>1</sup> These categories resulted from the cluster of variable PE006B (occupation in current job) in the ECHP.

d) exit from occupation. Therefore, the response variable has four categories relating to changes in women's occupational status.

The explanatory variables included in the analysis are the following: age and age squared, which capture the lower probability of experiencing occupational mobility after having reached older ages; educational attainment, which signifies individuals' skill level and training; seniority in current job, which determines the chances of mobility; and initial occupational class position, which checks the "ceiling and bottom" effects, so that the model of job mobility is conditioned upon the previous starting point within the occupational class structure. A set of variables check family characteristics: couples' educational homogamy, number of children and age of the youngest child, men's involvement in caring activities and whether women live within an extended family. Finally, the economic sector (private, public or self-employment) has also been included in the model as a proxy for family-friendly environment.

### ***Main Results: Women's Accommodation of Caring Responsibilities and Paid Work***

In this empirical analysis, women are observed during the early stage of their family formation, that is to say, from their 18th to 40th birthdays. During this period, most employed women tend to consolidate their position within the labour market; some of them may take some time off for family reasons and others may simply adjust their working time to accommodate competing demands from paid and family responsibilities. In sum, some women will be more successful than others in the process of accommodating family responsibilities alongside employment. It goes without saying that taking time off from paid work is not considered here as either an option or a successful practice for women in Southern Europe. The reason being that women in Italy, Spain and Greece face a significant gender gap in unemployment, systematically higher for women at all educational levels, and the return to employment is rather difficult after a break, especially after a long break. Furthermore, the exit from employment entails severe penalties as they lose contributory rights, such as unemployment subsidies and pensions, and are left to completely depend upon their partner from an economic point of view. Thus, the aim is to look at those who are in paid work across seven years (1995-2001) and analyse the relative risk, in that they may move from one year to another either upwards, downwards, exit employment or remain in the same occupational status.

Before analysing the peculiarities of Southern European countries, a general analysis was conducted in which several Western European countries were included. This analysis revealed that not only Southern European countries have distinct patterns of women's occupational mobility, but also

each Western European country analysed exhibits their own peculiarities.<sup>1</sup> These findings clarified the need for the analysis to be conducted individually for each case study. Therefore, different multinomial logit regression models have been separately conducted for each Southern European country. For the sake of space, only the variables of interest are displayed alongside the text.

### **Modern Family Hypothesis**

First, I tested the “modern family hypothesis”. The idea behind this hypothesis is that given the lack of support from the public sector or the generally weak welfare state support, equity within the family would allow employed women to remain or even experience upward occupational mobility. Here, partners’ involvement in caring activities is taken as a proxy for “gender equality”. The results are summarized in table 1. Table 1 shows the estimated excess/lower risks of leaving paid work among employed women aged 18-40. The estimates show how much greater or smaller the risk of leaving employment is – as opposed to remaining in the same occupational status (immobility) – for those with family responsibilities and a partner engaged in caring activities, compared to those without a partner or children (i.e. “free” of family responsibilities). A value close to 1 indicates that the risk of leaving paid work is of a similar size for both those with family responsibilities and those without responsibilities. Values higher/lower than 1 indicate that the risk of leaving paid work as opposed to remaining in the same occupational status (immobility) is higher/lower for those with family responsibilities compared to those without responsibilities. All estimates are obtained after checking age, age squared, education, as well as ceiling and bottom effects.

Table 1 only includes one equation from the multinomial logit model, given that men’s involvement in caring activities did not reveal a significant effect to predict women’s upward or downward mobility. However, men’s involvement in caring activities proves to significantly affect women’s chances to remain in paid work. Thus, in all countries but Portugal, the fact that men are not doing any caring activities negatively affects women’s chances to remain at the same occupational status and seems to precipitate their withdrawal from paid work. In the case of Spain, the higher the involvement of men in caring activities, the lower the chances that women will leave employment, as opposed to remaining in the same occupational status. Therefore, future improvements in gender equality within the family may entail higher chances for women to accommodate both family and paid work.

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<sup>1</sup> These models are not displayed here due to space limitation, but they can be provided upon request.

**Table 1: Relative risk of leaving paid work as opposed to remaining within the same occupational status (immobility) according to the partners' involvement in caring activities amongst women aged 18 to 40. Checked for age, age squared, educational attainment and ceiling and bottom effects, 1995-2001**

	Relative risk ratio			
	Italy	Spain	Portugal	Greece
<i>Living with:</i>				
Neither partner, nor children	–	–	–	–
With partner, no children	1.03	1.27**	1.05	1.03
With partner and children:				
Father not doing any caring	2.15***	1.78***	1.65	1.70***
Doing 1-20 hours x week	1.31*	1.46**	0.90	1.19
Doing >20 hours x week	1.26	1.36*	0.90	1.57**
Not living with a partner	–	–	–	–
Both highly-educated	1.51	0.83	0.20**	0.69
Both low-educated	1.38***	1.67***	1.50**	1.43**
He more educated	1.17	1.35*	1.74*	2.05***
She more educated	1.29*	1.27*	0.71	1.14
Education missing in either partner	1.21	2.03***	0.80	1.58**

Data: ECHP (coefficients with longitudinal base weights of interviewed persons).

Notes: cluster on pid (personal identification number) has been used to adjust standard errors for intra-group correlation given that there are repeated person-year observations across the panel.

– Reference category.

\* Significant at  $p \leq 0.10$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ .

Interestingly enough, men's involvement in caring activities does not alter Portuguese women's determination to remain in the same occupational status. This determination, however, shall be interpreted in the light of Portugal's income distribution and, in particular, the large sector of low-wage workers combined with the high incidence of working poverty (OECD, 2004). In this context, women's choice of remaining in employment, especially for the low-skilled, is imperative to make ends meet in the family. This would explain, together with the embedded female culture of paid work, the relatively high participation rates attained by Portuguese women within the EU context. Remarkably, the withdrawal from the labour market can mostly be afforded by high – and upper-middle class women (André, 1996).

Another indirect proxy for gender equality within the family is the “couples' educational homogamy”, which may entail different women's bargaining power within the couple as well as a different gender division of labour among partners (see, for example, Blossfeld & Drobic, 2001). Results are

summarized also in the second part of Table 1. Again, only one equation from the multinomial logit model is included here, given that couples' homogamy did not reveal significant effects to predict women's upward or downward mobility as opposed to remaining in the same occupational status. The results reveal that the relative risks of leaving paid employment as opposed to remaining in the same status are much higher for couples in which both partners have a lower educational level (homogamy at the lowest level of the educational structure).<sup>1</sup> This may be due to a mixture of limited economic resources to externalize family needs and traditional gender values. Another type of educational matching that negatively affects women's chances of remaining in the same occupational status is "a man with higher educational attainment than the woman". In Italy, however, this type of match does not have any significant effect. The negative effect of a more "traditional" gender asymmetry in the couples' education shall be interpreted in light of New Home Economics (Becker, 1993, Pollack, 1985), whereby those with the lower bargaining power within the couple have higher chances of specializing in the family sector. The great advancement of women in the educational system, though, introduces great scope for change in the field of family and gender relations.

### **Family Solidarity Hypothesis**

Second, the "family solidarity hypothesis" is analysed. The idea behind this hypothesis is very similar to the previous one in the sense that the lack of support from the welfare state is, whenever possible, substituted by family help. Here, living within an extended family (a person from the third generation, either grandmother/father or mother/father-in-law) is the proxy for the availability of family help. This proxy has several shortcomings as family help may be provided by relatives living nearby and not necessarily living within the same household, while having an older person at home may also be a barrier for employment rather than a real support. Furthermore, living in extended families is becoming rarer, particularly among young couples. Indeed, results from the multinomial logit regression reveal that living in extended families has no significant effect on women's relative risks of moving upward or downward in the occupational class status as opposed to remaining in the same occupational status. Only in Spain and Italy does living within an extended family prevent women from leaving paid work, and only in Spain does it seem to reduce the relative risk of moving downward in the class occupational structure<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Homogamy at the lowest level of the educational structure is measured when both have primary or both have secondary educational attainment.

<sup>2</sup> These models are not displayed here due to space limitation, but they can be provided upon request.

## Family-Friendly Hypothesis

Third, the “family-friendly hypothesis” is tested. The idea behind this hypothesis is that the only sector in which women encounter more facilities to accommodate family and employment responsibilities is in public administration. Being in the public sector did not reveal any significant effects to predict upward mobility. Only in Spain did it appear to have a negative effect on women’s chances to experience upward mobility as opposed to remaining in the same occupational status, the reason being the limited chances of mobility within the public administration. However, being in the public sector entailed lower relative risks of experiencing downward mobility in Spain and Portugal as well as lower relative risks of leaving paid work in Italy, Portugal and Greece as opposed to remaining in the same occupational status (see Table 2). Thus, public administration is not the place for experiencing great occupational upward mobility, but certainly represents a family-friendly environment. The concentration of women in the public sector may, however, cause different gender mobility patterns (i.e. faster and higher for men in the private sector) and a gender income gap (i.e. higher economic rewards in the private sector), which eventually reproduces other gender asymmetries.

**Table 2: Relative risk of experiencing a downward mobility and exit from paid work as opposed to remaining within the same occupational status (immobility) according to the occupational sector and family composition (children) amongst women aged 18 to 40. Checked for age, age squared, educational attainment and ceiling and bottom effects, 1995-2001**

	Relative risk ratio			
	Italy	Spain	Portugal	Greece
<i>Exit from paid work :</i>				
Private sector	–	–	–	–
Public sector	0.60***	0.87	0.54**	0.44***
Self-employment	1.24	1.25	0.57**	0.78
Sector not declared	1.68***	0.89	0.72	0.92
No. of children	1.26**	1.13	1.20	1.16
Childless women	–	–	–	–
Youngest child 0-3	1.27	1.47*	1.38	1.35
Youngest child 4-10	1.24	1.24	0.94	0.80
Youngest child >=11	0.97	1.14	1.12	1.35

Data: ECHP (coefficients with longitudinal base weights of interviewed persons).

Note: cluster on pid (personal identification number) has been used to adjust standard errors for intra-group correlation given that there are repeated person-year observations across the panel.

– Reference category.

\* Significant at  $p \leq 0.10$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ .

In sum, in order to move ahead in their occupational career with limited support from the welfare state, low-skilled women have to rely either on a certain degree of gender equality within the couple, dispose of some family help or be in a family-friendly work environment mostly provided in the public sector. Low-skilled women are generally in a very weak position to accommodate family and employment responsibilities. Likewise, recent socio-demographic changes such as the reduced family size and women's higher labour market attachment diminish the role of the informal sector of the family, while the main bulk of care for children and the dependent elderly population remains on women's shoulders. Highly-skilled women are the best prepared to balance both family and employment in the absence of family-friendly policies, because they can at least partly externalize caring and domestic work in the market sector. Women's overburden of responsibilities, however, may not do any good to reverse current patterns of late family formation and very low fertility levels.

## ■ Concluding Remarks

The aim of this research was to analyse the extent to which women manage to consolidate their position in the labour market with different family structures, occupational environments and couples' characteristics. The analysis has focused on young adult women aged 18 to 40. Young adult women are at the forefront of most socio-demographic changes in Southern Europe, while mature women in their mid-fifties have remained roughly stagnant during the last decades as far as labour market participation is concerned. Both age groups face different challenges to accommodate family responsibilities. Young adult women exhibit a significant delay in family formation (e.g. unions and motherhood), which may be a strategy to prioritize their career before assuming further family responsibilities. The activity rate among mature women is, on the contrary, relatively low as compared with young adult women, but they may also be under strain for assuming competing demands. They have to bear the responsibility for caring for the young and the elderly. In that sense, social policies aimed at the reconciliation of family and employment should take into account the stage of women's life course in order to better evaluate their specific needs for support.

This study has also highlighted the singularities of Southern Europe as compared with the EU as a whole. These singularities have been studied at two different levels. On the one hand, we examined major trends in women's demographic behaviour and labour force participation. In the last decades, at the macro-level, both processes seem to go in the opposite direction: women's labour force participation increases and fertility decreases. On the other hand, we assessed the extent to which the institutional

context in Southern Europe favoured women's employment alongside the family. In this case, it was clear that the institutional context appeared to be rather adverse. Southern European countries stand out for having the lowest proportion of social expenditure for family support in the EU-15, a short supply of caring services for the under-threes and the elderly and, last but not least, a low degree of gender equity within the family. In this context, the ongoing processes of polarization that are taking place in Southern Europe between women who specialize in caring activities is not surprising, as the only alternative is to accommodate childrearing and those women who go ahead with having both a family and employment career.

In the context of limited institutional support, only those better prepared, due to their training and education, manage to combine family and employment by externalizing caring and domestic activities; while others simply lag behind or form single-earner households. The large reliance on the informal sector of the family situates working mothers in a very fragile position, as they never really know for how long and when they will stop benefiting from informal support. The family solidarity model, which is characteristic of Southern Europe, is an alternative in the absence of other resources, but this model is about to disappear in the near future due to current socio-demographic trends such as declining fertility, reduced family size and women's higher attachment to the labour market. Likewise, the informal sector of the family by itself is not able to promote either gender equality or social equality. It is a limited resource, as it is neither always available nor always optimal to provide children's educational and caring needs.



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