

How Public Family Policies Shape Women's Social Roles: Experiences from the Welfare State

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Abstract: With profound changes in the structure and size of families around the world and the expansion of the influence of the concept of gender equality, it is increasingly recognized that the construction and the functioning of families need to be supported by public family policies. The existing practices of welfare states in the field of public family policies reflect their initiative and guidance in shaping women's social roles, and have shown strong superiority in promoting women's development and protecting their rights. However, in recent years, when the excessive welfare level of public family policies in welfare states has aroused many controversies, the active role of public family policies in shaping women's social roles should be moderately weakened, and its more necessary role is to enhance women's awareness of their own role choices and promote the dissemination of the concept of gender equality.

Keywords: Public Family Policy; Women's Social Roles; Social Welfare System

Introduction

The family, as one of the basic social settings, plays an important role in social stability and individual survival and development, and its proper functional roles in an idealized society include production unit, childbearing unit, provide for the aged unit and cultural transmission unit. With the development of division of labor and marketization, the family has become more and more closely linked to the functioning of society, and the demand of individuals for socialized services and the expansion of public service functions have led to the concept of family moving from the private domain to the public domain. With the profound changes in the structure and size of families around the world and the expanding influence of the concept of gender equality, more and more countries and regions believe that family building and family functions need to be supported by public family policies.

1. Review of Research

Public family policy refers to the public policies that are formulated and implemented by the state to intervene and manage the family in the social welfare system, so as to realize the direct or indirect influence of the state on the family and to support the family to have and perform its proper functions. Research on families and public family policies has been going on for many years in foreign academia, and the research perspective has shifted from single countries and specific policies to international perspectives and comparative studies in the last two decades, with a large body of literature reflecting the universality and importance of public family policies in national welfare arrangements[1]. Much of the research on public family policy has focused on family reproductive security, child and elder care, and work-family balance decision aids for female family members, for example, Esping-Andersen suggests that the welfare state reform program is "resorting to the feminization of the male life course," "increasing investment in children," and "reconfiguring the intergenerational contract"[2]. Since public family policies often bring positive effects on women's equal employment and physical&mental development and provide more possibilities for women's own social role shaping, some Western gender researchers also refer to them as female-friendly policies or gender equality friendly policies[3].

Women's social roles refer to the main functions and positions of women in society in a certain region at a certain time, and from the level of social welfare policy design, women as social individuals have a diversity of social roles. The four common types of

women's social roles: childbearer, family caregiver, economic participant, and political participant, each have their own characteristics and interact in various ways, and due to the limited time and energy that individuals devote to family and social work, there are to some extent mutual checks and balances between the several types of women's social roles. This study analyzes the common effects of public family policies on the shaping of women's social roles under different social welfare attitudes and reflects on them, taking into account the existing practices in welfare states and policy exploration in China.

2. Trends: The Shaping of Women's Social Roles by Public Family Policies in the Welfare State

The welfare state's focus on the provision of family welfare has become a trend, and the intention of promoting the family is to promote human development, that is, the development of family members. In most countries dominated by familism, it is often the female members who make more "sacrifices" and concessions for the survival of the family, and because the overall interests of the family take precedence over the interests of individual members, it is difficult to protect the rights and interests of female family members, and the social status of women is low, so in order to balance the gender differences in policy treatment among family members, the public family policy should promote the development of individuals in the family. Therefore, in order to balance the gender differences in policy treatment among family members and promote the development of individuals in the family, the welfare nature of public family policy has a "feminine tendency", i.e., it intervenes and guides the shaping of women's social roles. The public family policy of the welfare state has shaped women's social roles in four ways.

First, the role of women as childbearers has been weakened. The starting point of public family policies in welfare countries is combined with population policies. In Western countries where the demographic dividend tends to disappear and aging is serious, the direction of public family policies is mostly to encourage childbirth, but the premise is to ensure women's reproductive freedom, such as policies against domestic violence and allowing abortion. At the same time, the state and society actively bear the private costs of women's reproductive behavior, and provide more medical and health services and subsidies for women who give birth. In addition, many welfare states have introduced and improved the system of parental leave for men to encourage men to return to their families to bear the costs of accompanying and nurturing the act of childbirth and to reduce women's burden of childbirth.

Second, the role of female family caregivers has been shared. Many public family policies have made it possible to share the responsibility of family care within and outside the family, and women's role as caregivers has been weakened by the participation of the state and the market in the private domain of the family. The availability of more choices and higher-quality social care services not only reduces the crowding out of women's paid work time by family care, but also shares the caregiving burden of family members, and has a positive effect on the growth of children and the elderly.

In addition, it promotes the role of women economic participants. Public family policies promote the autonomy of women's time and energy allocation and labor participation in two main ways: first, through employment security measures to provide a large number of jobs outside the family that are suitable for women's labor advantages and encourage women to choose their own jobs, so as to guarantee women's physical and mental health and equal rights and interests in social labor; second, the paid care work within the family makes it possible to quantify the value of family care work and promote. Secondly, the paid care work within the family allows the value of family care work to be quantified, which promotes the recognition of the value of women's labor and provides more job choices for women's employment while improving the social status of female labor.

Finally, the role of women as political actors is emphasized. The public family policy of the welfare state not only promotes a democratic atmosphere and an equal and harmonious family atmosphere within the family, advocates women's freedom to make decisions and negotiate family affairs, opposes arbitrary patriarchy, and resists domestic violence; it also enhances women's voice in political life, expands the influence of women's rights on the adjustment of social policies, and fights for women's rights to make more decisions rather than just treating them as passive recipients and implementers of social policies. The government has also increased women's voice in political life, and expanded the influence of women's rights on the adjustment of social policies.

3. Reflection: The controversy of public family policy in the welfare state and the real dilemma of women's "new role" choice

For a long time, the discussion of public family policies in the welfare state has been accompanied by various controversies, mainly focusing on the effectiveness of the policies and the level of welfare provided by them. At the beginning, the family was not the target of family policies, but was seen as a medium and tool for the transfer of benefits from the state to the individual. The real public family policy emerged in the 1970s, in the context of economic recession in various countries, when the "all-inclusive" welfare policy brought excessive welfare burden and the government could not support the expenditure of the universal welfare system. Different from the established welfare states, the social welfare realization in the emerging welfare states pays attention to the functions of welfare supply subjects such as families and other social forces and market subjects, focuses on the pluralism of welfare responsibility subjects, emphasizes the cooperation and collaboration between families and welfare providers, and the policy design and welfare provision not only target family support for specific groups, balancing the universality and underwriting of the policy. 1990s Until now, the new exploration of public family policy in Western countries has put more emphasis on diversified and multi-pillar welfare provision, balancing the roles of social agents such as the state, market, and family, and welfare provision has gradually shifted from direct to indirect provision, developing family functions with a new public family policy system and making family policy the main object of social policy to restore the welfare provision and protection capacity of families[4].

In practice, public family policies have explicitly intervened in the rationalization of the division of labor among family members and in the development of family functions, but despite the shift in the way welfare is provided, these direct or indirect interventions still result in greater investment, and their action is gradually becoming controversial again: whether "female-oriented" family policies can really contribute to the development of women's freedom and independence and thus to the development of family members. At the macro level, public family policy has contributed to the weakening of traditional patriarchy, the improvement of women's status in society, and the encouragement of the free development of individual citizens by balancing the differences in rights and interests among family members. At the micro level, public family policy provides treatment such as babysitting and care services that to some extent liberate the family from the constraints of women, allowing husbands and wives to share the roles of earner and caregiver, and supporting the autonomy of female members of the family in their social role choices. With this aim in mind, the core focus of existing public family policies in the welfare state remains on the output of welfare for women rather than the deeper, inspirational function of autonomy in women's social role choices. Such a policy focus may be counterproductive in the contemporary socioeconomic environment.

In recent years, controversies about the functioning of public family policy and the welfare state's investment in it have resurfaced. The concept of "welfare state paradox" was introduced by Hadas Mandel and Moshe Simonov[5]. This has widened the income gap between women and men. Despite the lack of empirical evidence for the existence of the "welfare state paradox," this qualitative hypothesis is plausible, and the challenges encountered in the achievement of women's social roles by public family policies have been identified and valued by comparative scholars.

Controversies about the paradox of public family policies in the welfare state have led to the question: Is a public family policy that directly provides a large number of "feminine tendency" benefits really an absolute good news for the female members of the family? The Scandinavian countries, as traditional welfare states, have implemented a large number of generous public family policies in pursuit of gender equality, but have failed to change the traditional gender division in the labor market. There is a gap in income and social status between women and men. However, in Anglo-Saxon countries, where public family policies are relatively unimportant, women are not allowed longer breaks from work or higher levels of compensation for childbirth and family care, and this "lack of support" for women's domestic work deprives gender occupational stratification from occurring and promotes the phenomenon of occupational stratification. This "lack of support" for women's family work, on the contrary, deprives the opportunity of gender occupational stratification and promotes women's participation in socio-economic work with higher pay and status[6]. Through these cases, what we want to explore is not the necessity of public family policy to shape women's new social roles, but how public family policy can break through the traditional direct intervention in women's social role choices and play the role of assisting and guiding

women to choose their own diversified social roles, helping each family member to balance the time and energy taken up by work and family.

In welfare states where family policies tend to be well established, the dilemma faced by women in adapting to new social roles is reflected in the fact that autonomy over their own social role choices is still influenced by traditional social culture, the squeeze on labor market opportunities, and the sense of political participation. Women's own freedom of choice to have children is still less defended in family policies, women are still considered to be the mainstay of caregiving roles despite the increased diversity in the provision of caregiving services, and women tend to enter the caregiving field in employment, which often does not offer higher positions of power and pay. In addition, the impact of public family policies on women also reflects "class" differences, with higher public family policy treatment being a stronger barrier to career advancement for highly educated, skilled, and advantaged women, while public family policies are more gender-responsive among disadvantaged, lower-class groups.

In short, public family policy is beginning to question its usual "feminine tendency" in the face of the new "paradox" of the welfare state. The solution to the dilemma of women's social role choices in the present era depends not on the support and benefits provided by the policy, but to a large extent on the renewal of awareness and thinking.

4. Insights: How to get out of the "paradox" of the "feminine tendency" public family policy

The results of public policy exploration in the welfare state have certain implications for the development of public family policies in other countries, but the "paradox of the welfare state" and the actual dilemmas faced by women in life and labor should also be analyzed in the context of national conditions. In general, under the premise that the "feminine tendency" public family policy of the welfare state may bring new inequalities, the ideal state of women's social roles should be: women can be autonomous and capable childbearers, family caregivers without oppression and restraint, social and economic workers without discrimination and with protected rights and interests, and women with political participation and judgment. Women's right to choose their roles is protected and the costs are borne by society and the state. This requires a comprehensive approach to public family policy that is responsive to women's autonomy in shaping their roles in society.

First, women's reproductive freedom and rights are guaranteed. Public family policies need to focus on legislation to protect women's rights against domestic violence or forced childbirth; compensate families for the costs of childbirth and provide material assistance, as well as medical and health services for female family members during childbirth and follow-up care for a certain period of time after childbirth; and encourage male family members to care for and accompany their wives during childbirth through policy arrangements such as maternity care leave.

Second, reduce the burden of care for women and socialize care services. The state and the market need to take some responsibility for providing care services, but more than that, they need to guide the sharing of care work among members within the family. The role of public family policy should not be to take over the responsibility of caregiving within the family, but rather to break the stereotype of a single female caregiver in the family, which not only facilitates the creation of a harmonious and healthy family environment, but also provides an opportunity for women to freely balance family-work time.

Third, to build an employment-friendly social environment for women. Public family policies need to support the state and the market to build a more liberal and friendly employment environment for female family members, which requires promoting respect for women's choices about whether to participate in socio-economic work, and to reduce to a certain extent the gender differences within the family when taking care of family services. The Government should also advocate that society and employers ensure the stability of women's employment when they give family time, and work together with other social policies to counter gender discrimination in the labor market.

Finally, the protection of women's political rights and the creation of a democratic atmosphere within the family. Public family policies should guide and promote women's political rights, advocate gender equality in political life with the family as the basic unit, encourage women's political participation and voice in society, improve the political status of female family members, and create a democratic and harmonious family atmosphere.

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