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Housework Policies and their Implications for Women's Employment

Women's difficulties in reconciling their work and family responsibilities stand in the heart of current demographic explanations concerning low fertility levels and low labour force participation levels of women in western developed countries (Frejka and Calot, 2001; McDonald, 2000; Rindfuss and Brewster, 1996). Despite the growing achievements of women in the labour force and in the public sphere, women have not reached gender equality in the household sphere. This "stalled" (Hochschild 1989), "incomplete" (Esping-Andersen 2009), and "uneven" (England 2010) revolution in women's roles is apparent in the unequal division of housework and care tasks (e.g. Bianchi et al. 2000; Bittman et al. 2003; Esping-Andersen 2009), leisure time (Bittman and Wajcman 2000), and household management tasks (Winkler and Ireland 2009) between the spouses in most western countries.

Scholars suggested that women's work-life balance will improve if men will increase their involvement and responsibilities in the domestic sphere (e.g. Cooke, 2008; Torr & Short, 2004). Another stream of literature suggests that governments can act to reduce role incompatibility, and thereby increase employment and fertility among women. This can be done by employing family policies concerning cash benefits and parental leave, childcare policies, and labour market arrangements, which might affect the degree of role incompatibility women face in different countries (Brewster and Rindfuss, 2000).

Initiatives taken by welfare states, which were targeted toward decreasing women's role incompatibility, included mainly policies and labour market arrangements which aimed at allowing women to maintain their careers while bringing up children (e.g. longer maternity leave with protection against dismissal, access to affordable child care, shorter working hours, offering part-time or flexible jobs, etc.). The current research suggests focusing on policy which was almost overlooked by current family-policy research. Such policy, whether deliberately or not, might reduce women's role incompatibility by allowing households, or by providing direct incentives to households, to outsource housework.

Why is it important that households will outsource housework? Should governments act to replace unpaid domestic production with market, state-subsidized or state-provided substitutes? The outsourcing of housework tasks has the potential of dissolving gender inequality within households, if most of the work is being done by the domestic helper. The time invested in housework can then be devoted by the spouses to other tasks, such as childcare or work in the labour market. Unlike with the case of childcare, housework tasks provide less enjoyment to parents (Robinson & Godbey, 1999) and women will be more prone to bargain them out, also because the outsourcing of such tasks incur less transaction costs for the parents (Raz-Yurovich, 2014). Moreover, as cleaning tasks are less trust-demanding than childcare tasks, the barriers to the delegation of housework are weaker (De Ruijter and van der Lippe, 2009). As far as governments are concerned, using policy tools which subsidize or support the use of paid domestic services in households can decrease unemployment rates by creating new jobs in this service sector, particularly for the less well qualified. Moreover, employment rates are expected to increase because more women, and especially mothers, will be able to join the labour force. Another

incentive is to formalize the domestic service sector, which is acknowledged to be a prime site for informal employment (Windebank, 2007).

Governments differ in whether or not they implement any policy that directly or indirectly encourages the outsourcing of housework by households. Such policies can include migration or work-migration regulations, subsidies given to employment agencies which employ domestic helpers, subsidies or tax refunds for households which employ a domestic helper, etc. In some cases, encouraging the outsourcing of housework is the main declared agenda for the implementation of such policies; and in other cases these are only the unintended consequences of other policies. In some contexts, "housework policies" are meant to reduce women's role incompatibility, and in other contexts these policies are implemented in order to reduce unemployment rates, to provide jobs for low skilled people, etc. Policies that fall under the broad category of "housework policies" might also differ in the way in which they are being implemented and in the population to which they are targeted.

The current research focuses on three "housework schemes": the French *Chèque Emploi Service Universel* (2005-2006) and its antecedents (the *Chèque Emploi Service* (CES) from 1993, and the *Titre Emploi Service* (TES), from 1996); the Belgian *Service Voucher Scheme* (dienststijcheques) from 2004; and the Austrian *Household Service Cheque Act* (Dienstleistungsscheckgesetz, DLSSG) from 2006. The three mentioned schemes differ in the declared objectives which were presented upon their enactment; in the actors which are involved in their implementation; in the range of domestic tasks that can be outsourced under the service voucher system; and in the subsidies which are granted under the scheme. However, all the three schemes give incentives to households to outsource housework, by offering subsidized service vouchers with which the households can pay the domestic helper, therefore reducing

transactions cost for households (Raz-Yurovich, 2014). In addition, the three schemes also share in common a tremendous increase in the number of employees, usually low-skilled women, working under the scheme; as well as a growth in the number of households using these schemes. In Belgium, for example, the number of employees increased from 15,077 in 2004 to 151,137 in 2012 (Marx & Vandelannoote, Forthcoming). According to Marx & Vandelannoote, 97% of the employees were women, in 2011, and 57% of them had low educational level. The employers, on the other hand, were mostly married/cohabiting partners (76%), 65% of them with higher education. According to Adjrad (2003), the number of households using the French scheme increased from 469,000 in 1998 to 765,411 in 2002. This proportion of households further increased to 950,000 households between 2002 and 2003 (Adjrad, 2005).

In the current study we aim at analyzing whether the fast growth in the labor force participation of low-skilled women, in the service sectors of France, Belgium and Austria, following the introduction of the housework schemes, have contributed to the growth in the labor force participation levels of highly-skilled women, who are in most cases the employers of these women. By using the European Labor Force Survey and by employing time-series analyses, we will investigate whether the growing availability of low-skilled women who work in services that are close substitutes to household production improve the work-life balance among highly skilled women and increase their labor force participation rates and the time invested in the labor market.

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