Working parents and the welfare state
Family change and policy reform in Scandinavia

The mass entry of mothers into the labour market, the decline of the male breadwinner norm and the rise of the dual-earner family have all profoundly transformed the societies of the Western world. How do welfare states approach the reconciliation of paid work with the responsibilities for the care of young children? Arnlaug Leira’s timely book examines the politicising of childcare: childcare is reconceptualised as a joint venture of parents and the welfare state, and as an entitlement or social right of working mothers and fathers.

Drawing upon new empirical material from Scandinavia, Leira’s thoughtful analysis centres on the interplay of family change and policy reform. At times, social change precedes policy reform – motherhood changed to include employment, then policy was altered; sometimes policy change comes first – the political promotion of fathercare has preceded large-scale change to fatherhood. Fathers less than mothers use the right to be carers, and gender-neutral childcare policies usually reinforce the gendered division of work and welfare.

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Preface

During the 1990s a substantial part of my research has focused on the interplay of family change and policy reform in Scandinavia, and especially on the welfare state approach to the dual-earner families with young children. For this book I have drawn upon the empirical data collected, and have frequently revisited my earlier writing. In developing my ideas I have benefited from participation in several European research networks and projects, and from stimulating exchanges with colleagues, particularly in the research networks on Women, Welfare State and Citizenship organised by Trudie Klijn, University of Utrecht; Gender and Citizenship: Social Integration and Social Exclusion in European Welfare States co-ordinated by Birte Siim, University of Aalborg; Working and Mothering: Social Practices and Social Policies co-ordinated by Ute Gerhardt, University of Frankfurt; and the research project Defining Family Obligations in Europe co-ordinated by Jane Millar, University of Bath.

A number of individuals and institutions – too numerous to mention – have in different ways contributed to the book. An added bonus is discussions with students who have followed my classes. Several dissertations by the students are cited in the text.

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Preface

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