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Retrenchment and Universal Family Supports; The Case of Child Benefit

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Abstract

The EU gender equality paradigm promoting women's employment achieved the objective of significantly increased levels of employment by mothers.

Alongside and in support of this objective, children were increasingly conceptualized as a collective risk and as a worthwhile public investment. However since 2009, most EU countries have introduced austerity measures in a bid to contain public deficits. Across Europe transformations in social protection are being observed in particular a shift to individual risk management. Universal benefits such as child benefit institutionalised under the post-war welfare state are now subject to negotiation and have been targeted in recent budgets in both Ireland and the UK. This paper will focus on policy transformations in child benefit in Ireland in the past decade. The rise and fall of child benefit is located in the context of the Government's policy choices which are a reflection of compromise and negotiation between competing socio-economic interests.

Keywords

Child benefit, mothers' employment, childcare, policy moment

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Introduction

Historically child benefit bears significance as the only universal family payment and continues to remain the key form of state cash support to families for children in Ireland. Over time increases in child benefit were used as a compromise between competing interest groups and to address a range of policy issues; supporting families, combating poverty, supporting mothers who are full-time in the home, and more recently subsidising the cost of childcare for working mothers.

This paper examines policy transformations in child benefit at two critical junctures, one over a decade ago when the benefit was increased during an economic boom, and, currently when the benefit was cut during an economic downturn in Ireland. It will examine the social policy input of two groups in particular one centred on women's rights and the other on children's rights. The paper will highlight the emerging policy paths and the implications for family policy at a time when child benefit has become a critical part of family income.

Methodology

This paper draws on Government debates, policy documents, commissioned research, NGO documents, media and press statements to track the rise and fall of child benefit at two key junctures during the past decade, one at the beginning of 2000 and secondly from 2009 as the impact of an international downturn began to impact on Government spending. It analyses policy statements and debates to present an understanding of key policy moments and the social groups influencing policy changes

Results

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This paper shows how child benefit was used by the government as a short term solution to the demands of a changing socio-economic climate in the country. So at the first juncture in 2000, the Government chose to treble the rate of Child Benefit as a compromise between working mothers' childcare expenses and for those who demanded payment for caring in the home. At the second juncture from 2009, Child Benefit has been targeted in three successive budgets as part of a retrenchment package. In the recent period this has given rise to a public debate on the benefits of universal payments against targeted selectivism which has been the hallmark of much welfare state provision in Ireland. This debate is led on the one hand by those who favour taxing child benefit. On the other hand, two key NGO's representing respectively women's rights and children's rights and have been in the forefront in highlighting the significance of Child Benefit for all families.

The principle underpinning universal payment such as child benefit is that all children are a collective risk with shared responsibility between the state and the family. The cost of raising children during a recession does not reduce anymore that at other times and the supports needed for people require policy paradigms centred on sustainability, capability and care.

Changing Models of Care

State support for families is tied up with mothers' employment and principally with issues around funding for childcare. Trends in Europe show that childcare is increasingly being defamilialized in all Western European countries (Lister et al,2007. At EU level the development of childcare provision became central to the Lisbon Council's agreement of 2000 with a target of sixty per cent female employment by 2010. This was followed on in 2002 by

the Barcelona Council agreement which set targets for child-care provision of 90 percent for children between 3 years old and school age and 33 percent for under threes. "Europe 2020" (2010) followed on from the Lisbon Strategy with a target of 75% employment rate for men and women aged 20-64 by 2020. By the early 2000s, the main policy issues relating to childcare was the redistribution of responsibility between the state and the family, the redistribution of economic and unpaid work including caring work between mothers and fathers and the global redistribution of care work (Lister et al, 2007). Cultural values and norms in relation to the family and care and different cultural models of motherhood and fatherhood are important in determining national variations in the development of care policies across countries (Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Lewis et al., 2008; Lister et al, 2007)

Pfau-Effinger's (2005) analysis shows that the development of care policies in different welfare states is linked to different development paths. She concludes that the care arrangements of eight European countries studied changed during the post-war period along two differing cultural paths of development linked to family values.

The first path of development she describes as the modernisation of the male breadwinner model which entailed major cultural transformation in countries including Great Britain, Norway, the Netherlands and West Germany. This path of development saw the integration of women into paid employment but with recognition that women may interrupt their employment in favour of care and part-time work at some stage. In the Irish case the high rate of part-time work for mothers, the lack of paid parental leave and the absence of statutory family friendly practices is evidence of adherence to this

path. Since 2007 paid maternity leave for mothers was extended to 26 weeks. Irish men still have no statutory right to paternity leave and is at the discretion of their employer. Since 1998, men and women have a statutory entitlement to unpaid parental leave. However very few men utilise this option since it is unpaid.

The second path of development is the dual breadwinner family model evident in France, Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Pfau-Effinger's ,2005). According to Leira (2006), the dual-earner family model challenges the gender-typing of parental practices and implies a more egalitarian sharing of parenting. The development of comprehensive public childcare services in Nordic countries facilitated the employment of both parents and paid parental leave for both mother and father with the aim of encouraging the sharing of parental responsibilities. The dual-earner/dual-carer family model came to dominate politics on parenthood in Scandinavian countries from the 1970's supported by the social democratic welfare. The social democratic model supports the defamilialization of childcare with the state working in partnership with families (Leira 2006).

Mothers' Employment

Since the commencement of an economic boom in Ireland from the mid-1990s, a model of development of a competitive knowledge based economy held dominance. Knijn and Smit's (2009) analysis of EU countries shows that liberal regimes such as Ireland and the UK have shifted significantly towards the social investment model. This requires childcare provision, protection of flexible work and facilitating transitions between work, care and learning. The

Irish Governments' key policy document for the development of the economy, Towards 2016 (2006) shares features of the social investment paradigm.

From the mid 1990s, Ireland moved from a depressed high unemployment economy to a country with a booming economy, unprecedented levels of wealth and growth in employment and the arrival of migrant workers into the country. Policies introduced at this time for women and in particular for mothers outside the labour market were driven by this economic development path but also by an EU gender equality agenda. From the mid 1990s there was a policy shift from one that constitutionally endorsed mothers role in the home to one that advocated paid work for all adults. The cultural model of motherhood changed and so too the strong male breadwinner model of family earnings to a combination of dual and one- and - half-earner households as women moved out of the home and took advantage of opportunities in the labour market.

Women's employment has risen everywhere across western Europe. However part-time employment is still very important as a means of reconciling work and family life and over a third of employed women work part-time, defined as less than 30 hours a week, in the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, Ireland and Belgium (Lewis et al, 2008). The employment rate for women in Ireland at 60.5 percent in 2008 exceeded the EU target in common with many other EU countries (CSO,2008). However due to the current recession the employment rate for women in Ireland reduced to 56% in 2010 compared to an EU average of 62.1% (Eurostat,2011).

From the 1970s women were also choosing to move into the labour market in greater numbers and their increased participation in third level education presented women with more choices in the paid labour market (Richardson, 2005). The influence of the women's movement from the 1970s and the implementation of the EU equality laws from the 1980s meant that there was a strong cultural shift in women's citizenship in Ireland (Mahon, 1998). From the 1990s the Irish Government was committed to developing strategies to expand the labour force in pursuance of an economic growth path . An acute labour shortage particularly within the female dominated services sector saw the increased recruitment of women workers (Richardson 2005). The Irish Government pursued the EU target of a 60 per cent female employment rate by 2010.

The economic boom in Ireland was fuelled by dramatic growth in the construction and financial sector and these and related sectors have been hit hardest by the recession. Unemployment pre-recession in 2007 was 4.6 % compared to 13.8% at the end of 2010 with male unemployment at 16.7% and female unemployment at 9.8% (CSO, 2011). This compares to an EU27 unemployment rate of 9.6% for December 2010 (Eurostat, 2011). In the current euro zone crisis most EU countries are following a path of fiscal consolidation in a bid to contain public deficits and sovereign debt.

First Policy Moment

The principal child income support in Ireland is Child Benefit introduced as an anti-poverty measure for large families but later extended to all children. It is a universal payment which is highly valued in Ireland and importantly is paid directly to mothers.

The qualified child increase is an additional payment to families on social welfare and the family income supplement (FIS) is a payment for families in low paid work. The Child Benefit rate trebled between 2001 and 2004 to 166 euro for the first and second child. However between 2009-2010 the rate been reduced by at least 26 euro per child and it is feared that these cuts may be just the first in a series of budget measures. Child Benefit is highly valued in Irish society as the principal payment that supports families with the cost of raising children. Its universal nature appeals to all social groups including low and middle income working families. Families on social welfare or on a low FIS based income qualify for mainly free medical care and school transport, assistance towards the cost of child care, school books, uniforms and exam fees. However middle income and higher earner families have to pay full medical, childcare and education costs. The fact that Child Benefit is paid on behalf of all children gives it an appeal similar to any universal payment. Universality gives middle and high income earners a sense of real income on the taxes that they pay and giving them a rationale for defending public services. At the same time it reduces the stigma for low income recipients.

By the late 1990s the cultural model of motherhood had changed considerably in Ireland. There was a significant increase in women's labour force participation and with it economic independence and the statutory recognition of women's rights in employment and social welfare. The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI)

now represents over 160 women's groups nationally has been in the forefront of campaigning for women's issues since joining the EEC in 1973. In 1973 a group of women, set up the Council for the Status of Women (CSW), with the goal of gaining equality for women. It was an umbrella for women's groups, run by a voluntary committee. The Commission on the Status of Women, set up following pressure from women's groups in 1970, had published its first report in 1972, and the CSW undertook to campaign for its recommendations to be implemented. In 1979, the CSW now known as the NWCII got its first grant from the government and it has remained an important NGO for Irish women ever since. Women's new found economic independence and statutory equal rights gave rise to a gathering momentum in society for the Government to address the issue of childcare.

At the same time there were groups lobbying for the recognition of the rights of children. The Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) was set up in 1995 and is a coalition of over 90 NGO's working to secure the rights of children in Ireland. The National Children's Strategy (2000) 10 year plan was published in 2000. The National Children's Office was set up and the Ombudsman for Children was established in 2004 as an independent statutory body to promote and protect the rights of children.

In the late 1990s as the economy continued to grow and employment expanded there was increasing pressure and expectation that the Government would introduce a childcare tax relief (Department of Finance, 1998). There were competing demands presented to the Government at the time. 'In recent years there has been increasing pressure to introduce tax relief on the costs of childcare. In addition there have been demands that the Government

should recognise in the tax code the work done by the spouse in looking after children (Department of Finance: p2, 1998). Groups representing mothers in the home have always been listened to by the Government due to their protection by the Irish Constitution. The report puts the case for child benefit as the best compromise for the following reasons; 'Putting additional resources into child benefit would particularly benefit less well off family units as they may not be in a position to utilise any tax relief..... It is also the case that as Child Benefit is a universal payment and applies to all family units with children irrespective of employment status increases in the payment does not impact adversely on work incentives' (Department of Finance; p4, 1998).

It seems that the Irish Department of Finance perceived child benefit as the primary instrument of helping families with children. Further it viewed child benefit as a compromise between competing interest groups who were lobbying the Government at the time;

'The core objective was to provide support that would offer choice to parents whatever way they choose to care for their children. Child Benefit does not distinguish between whether a parent is working or not and applies to all income levels whereas tax relief for paid childcare would be of little or no benefit to those with low or no incomes' (Department of Finance, 2:2005). The compromise the Government sought had to accommodate women those advocating the rights of mothers who are full time in the home.

Following a report by the Expert Working Group on childcare established under the social partnership agreement, Partnership 2000, the budget of 2000 implemented a package of supply measures for the childcare sector (Department of Finance, 2005). Structural funding

was made available to increase the supply of centre based childcare places by 50% by 2006.

An EU funded Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) commenced in Ireland 1998 and was superceded in 2006 by the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP 2006) to facilitate women's labour market participation.

Significantly the Home Carer's tax credit was introduced in the Finance Act 2000 and was designed to recognise the contribution made by a spouse who remains working in the home caring for a child or other persons needing care (Department of Finance, 2005). The employers group, IBEC welcomed additional funding from the EOCP in particular the Government's decision to fund large private sector childcare providers (IBEC,2000)

On of the major pressure for change at this time was the Childcare 2000 campaign launched in May 1999. The NWCI was one of the lead organisations in a national campaign which lobbied political parties, Government departments and Ministers to put the issue of childcare on the national agenda..

The NWCI submission to Budget 2000 called for the implementation of a national childcare strategy and for a taxable parent's childcare payment (NWCI a,1999). There was increasing pressure in the run up to Budget 2000 to increase the supply of childcare places in the private sector and for disadvantaged areas. The subsequent lack of any budgetary support for parents in paying for childcare was perceived by the Childcare 2000 campaign as a travesty. The government gave out a clear message that supporting parents in paying for childcare is not its responsibility (NWCI,2000). The Childcare 2000 campaign reported disappointment at the absence of payment to parents which it continued to lobby for until the Government finally

introduced substantial increases in child benefit from Budget 2001 to Budget 2004. (NWCI b, 1999).

Between 2001-2005 the monthly rate of child benefit trebled increasing from 53.96 for the first child and 71.1 for third and subsequent children to 166 and 203 euros respectively. In that period overall expenditure on child benefit has grown to more than 2.5 billion. (Dail Debates 1 Dec, 2009).

Second Policy Moment

The second key policy moment was the period leading up to and after Budget 2009. Following the crisis in the banking sector and the deepening recession it was clear that the Government was going to introduce an austerity package over a series of annual budgets. Both the NWCI and the CRA who are now recognised as NGO's representing the rights of women and children respectively were in the forefront of opposing any cuts in Child Benefit.

During 2009-2010 the debate on Child Benefit entered the media and various commentators made the case for and against retaining it as a universal payment to families. The debate was fuelled by the government commissioned McCarthy report (2009) that recommended an across-the board cut in child benefit payment rates and the announcement by the UK Government that it would means test Child Benefit. A number of groups came together in late 2009 in solidarity to fight cuts in Child Benefit. The main groups were the CRA and the NWCI

and a number of lone parent groups. They called for the retention of Child Benefit as a universal payment and at its current level (NWCI,2009a).

The briefing paper on child benefit published mid-2009 (NWCI,2009) argued for the retention of child Benefit on the basis of its universality and as a support to mothers. The report highlights its benefits for childcare costs for working mothers and as a payment for care for those who stay at home. In addition from a feminist perspective it highlights its importance as a direct payment to mothers in contrast to some other social welfare payments and cognisant that household income is not always shared equally in couple households. In the survey of its members 45% of respondents said that it would be a 'financial disaster' for their families if Child Benefit was cut and 66.6% of respondents said that it was currently a 'critical part' of family income (NWCI. 2009c).

The Children's Rights Alliance(CRA) in its 2009 pre-budget submission strongly opposed any cuts, tax or means-testing of child benefit payment and the maintenance of the qualified child increases at 2009 levels and FIS (Children's Rights Alliance,2009).

The CRA outlines the importance of Child Benefit as a valued child-centred payment. Taxing or means-testing Child Benefit would undermine the principle of universalism and horizontal distribution. Further it makes a strong case for the unpopularity of any cuts and warns that such a move '....risks triggering mass political discontent'(CRA,6;2009). It goes on to warn of the potential political fallout of any cuts 'as taxing or means-testing Child Benefit would be deeply and politically unpopular' (CRA,6;2009)

In late 2009, in a pre-budget Government Debate, the Minister for Social Protection outlines the key reports that the Government was considering. This included the report of the Commission on Taxation (2009) which recommended that Child Benefit should be taxed and the Mc Carthy Report (2009) which favoured across-the board cut in the payment rates. The Minister also notes the key groups consulted in relation to Child Benefit including the NWCi and the CRA(Dail Debates 1 Dec 2009)

Minister Hanfin states '...the Governemnt is determined to find the fairest way of achieving savings, while protecting those on low income as much as possible' (Dail Debates, p5, 1 Dec 2009)

The Minister is careful in the attention paid to addressing childcare and low income groups as Child Benefit has been used by the Government to address these issues during the past decade. The Minister notes the creation of extra childcare places, the falling cost of childcare and reduced fees for those supported by the community childcare subvention scheme (CCSS). In this context Minister Hanafin refers to the substantial funding provided for the CCSS which offers reduced rates to disadvantaged and low income families.

The introduction of a free preschool year in early childhood care and education (ECCE) from 2010 directly linked to the Barcelona agreement added to the case the Minister was making in support of Government policy changes. The free preschool year is universal regardless of parental income. A free pre-school year for all children demonstrated a progressive policy shift

and tipped the balance towards the state taking some more responsibility for care. It was widely welcomed by

groups such as the CRA welcomed the introduction who expressed the view that it must be seen as the first in a series of steps to develop early childhood care (CRA,2011). The changing economic climate and the free pre-school year has, the Minister argued, led to a fall in childcare costs for parents. 'Child benefit is paid to all families not just those on low income. We appreciate it is important to all mothers and to different families for different reasons' (Dail Debates, p2, 1 Dec 2009).

The Minister here gives recognition to some of the financial difficulties of working families who have mortgage and other debt difficulties.

Research carried out by NGO's shows the significance of Child Benefit as an important part of family income perhaps even more crucial during a recession.

In mid-2009 the NWCI produced a briefing paper on child benefit based on consultation with 160 of its member organisations throughout the country (NWCI,2009a). At this stage the Government had already introduced the first of a series of austerity budgets. It cut child benefit from January 2009 including halving the rate for a child aged 18 years. In the 2009 budget the Government imposed a flat-rate cut on the monthly Child Benefit bringing it down from 166e to 150e for the first 2 children. It thus avoided means testing and taxation difficulties. Further across the board cuts were introduced in Child Benefit in the 2010 and it is no longer payable after a child is 18 years of age even if in full-time education.

While parents are worried about their jobs, childcare services fear closures. Given the

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changed economic circumstances, there has been a considerable fall-off in demand for childcare places (CRA, 2011). Childcare providers report parents switching from full-time to part-time care and paying on an hourly or daily basis rather than weekly. In a female dominated service, thirty six per cent of the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) members report a decrease in the numbers of staff employed, all are women. The primary reason given for this is children being withdrawn from services due to the recession (NCNA, 2010). While the recession is impacting on childcare providers and families the cost of children does not automatically reduce during a recession. As Child Benefit increases were offered by the Government towards the cost of childcare in early 2000 this was now being used as a case for reducing the benefit during a recession. However childcare is age related and is only one portion of the cost of raising children. In the current downturn children are still a central part of family expenses and possibly likely to rise due to current cutbacks in education and related services and children remaining on in education due to lack of employment

Conclusions

The boundaries between the state and the family are shifting all the while through the individualisation of risk, the socialisation of care, the conservative forces of familism and the rights based approach of NGO's representing groups such as women and children ;
'.....complexity and even ambiguity in policy, a manifestation of which is that reform within countries involves concurrent moves in several directions' (Daly, 2:2011)

This paper shows how child benefit was used by the government as a short term solution to the demands of a changing socio-economic climate in the country. So at the first juncture in

2000, the Government trebled the rate of Child Benefit offering it as a compromise towards the cost of childcare and as a payment for those caring in the home. At the second juncture from 2009, Child Benefit has been targeted in a number of budgets as part of a retrenchment package. In the recent period this has given rise to a public debate on the benefits of universal payments against targeted selectivism which has been the hallmark of much welfare state provision in Ireland. This debate is led on the one hand by those who favour taxing child benefit. .On the other hand, two key NGO's representing respectively women's rights and children's rights have been in the forefront in highlighting the significance of Child Benefit for all families. But when one examines Government decisions over this decade one must conclude that at the first crucial policy moment structural funding was invested in the main in the private childcare sector with the trebling in the rate of Child Benefit for families to manage their own risks. At the same time the influence of EU equality directives and the growing pressure from NGO's representing women's and children's rights has given families some hope in the current period with the introduction of a free pre-school year and the possibility of more. As Child Benefit became part of the solution to the childcare problem at the first crucial moment, it is of concern that the Government now finds it acceptable to reduce or possibly tax the payment.

The Government under a programme agreed with the IMF is now concentrating more on targeted measures and policy choices and how the cost of the recession is to be distributed.

Across Europe children are now viewed more as a collective responsibility and as an investment in the future. This includes investment in early childhood education as a very positive measure. In the absence in the main of public childcare services in the Irish case, this investment needs to be supported by financial supports to families. The principle underpinning

a universal payment such as child benefit is that children are a collective risk with shared responsibility between the state and families at all stages of the journey to adulthood. The cost of raising children in a recession does not reduce anymore than at other times. Continued collective support is necessary and universal family policy should remain an integral part of the state's partnership with the family for the future. As the socio-economic landscape changes across the EU the meaning and boundaries of social exclusion are being challenged and supporting people in their responsibilities may require new policy paradigms around sustainability, capability and care. Different policy responses will be required in the future not least for children at different stages in their journey to adulthood.

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