

# Gender equality and parental leave policies in Switzerland: A discursive and feminist perspective

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## Abstract

Taking a discursive and feminist perspective, this paper aims to understand policy changes as well as gendered outcomes in two policy areas within the Swiss welfare state: *gender equality* and *parental leave policies*. We conduct a discourse analysis from a social science perspective of policy documents and interviews from 1996 to 2011. Our results show similar discourses concerning welfare responsibility between the two case studies. Specifically, there are opposing state- and economic-oriented discourses, which reveal different gendered assumptions. However, the time period under study shows an increasing mobilisation of discourses arguing for non-state, negotiated solutions between social partners or within work organisations. We discuss the potential risks of gender and class inequalities as well as scenarios for further policy change. Our findings call for an integrative approach to discourse and gender for welfare state analysis in general.

## Key words

discourse analysis, gender relations, social inequalities, welfare regime, welfare responsibility

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## Introduction

The Swiss welfare state has long been considered a welfare laggard. Its main social security programmes were implemented in the second half of the 20th century; several decades after its European neighbours had done so (Armingeon, 2001). In this paper, we focus on two policy fields which started developing even more recently: *gender equality* and *parental leave policies*. A case in point of this late development is the adoption of women's suffrage in Switzerland, which was only introduced at the national level in 1971 (Federal Commission for Women's Issues, 2010). In Switzerland, the gender equality act was enacted in 1996, while for example the UK did so in 1975 and Sweden in 1980 (Schär Moser and Strub, 2011). Maternity leave insurance was only implemented in 2005, and to this day Switzerland is the only European country where fathers do not have the right to a statutory parental or paternity leave (Moss, 2013).

Within this institutional context, persisting gender inequalities can be observed. In Swiss family life, in a third of couples with at least one child under the age of seven, mothers do not have a professional activity while fathers work full time (Federal Statistical Office, 2013). As regards inequalities in work life, a comparative study on the gender pay gap in OECD countries concludes: 'Switzerland does relatively poorly both in terms of level of the gap and the decline over the last decade' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013: 16).

How can these persisting inequalities as well as the (non-)development of such policy areas be understood? We argue, just as Béland (2009) and Orloff and Palier (2009) have done, that a discursive and feminist analysis of welfare policies provides a good basis to understanding policy change. Prior analyses of the Swiss welfare state are mainly gender-blind and have focused on policy programmes, outcome variables or institutional characteristics (e.g., Bonoli, 1997; Castles and Obinger, 2008; Esping-Andersen, 1990; for a review, see Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). This paper, however, undertakes a discourse analysis from a social science perspective (e.g., Bacchi, 2009; Keller, 2011) of gender equality and parental leave policies in Switzerland between 1996 and 2011.

## A discursive and feminist perspective on welfare states

'Discourse analysis' covers various approaches coming from different human and social science disciplines. From a social science perspective, discourses are 'socially produced forms of knowledge that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about' (Bacchi, 2009: 35). It accordingly

follows that reality is socially constructed through discourse. Discourse analysis can be applied to analyse different social institutions, such as media, science or politics (Bacchi, 2009; Keller, 2011). In recent years there has been a growing interest in what Padamsee (2009) labelled *ideational processes*, i.e., ideas, frames and discourses, within the analysis of welfare states (Orloff and Palier, 2009; Van Oorschot et al., 2008). Discourse analysis has for example been applied to family policies (Knijn and Smit, 2009; Kübler, 2007; Pfau-Effinger, 2008), gender policies (Charles and Mackay, 2013; Stratigaki, 2004; Verloo and Lombardo, 2007) and welfare policies (Wiggan, 2012). The common focus of these studies is to analyse *policy change* ('the process through which actors change their ideas, the process through which ideas, discourses and ideologies may influence welfare reforms' (Orloff and Palier, 2009: 406)), *policy regimes* (laws, rules and institutions) and potential *policy outcomes* (e.g., consequences in terms of social and gender inequality) (Béland, 2009; Orloff and Palier, 2009; Padamsee, 2009). Analysing the discursive level of a welfare regime provides a basis for understanding policy differences and similarities between national contexts or within nations, for example between different policy areas (e.g., Pfau-Effinger, 2008; Van Oorschot et al., 2008).

We consider that the discursive approach is fruitful and complementary to mainstream approaches to welfare state analysis, which – following Esping-Andersen's (1990) seminal work – mainly focus on policy programmes, outcome variables and institutional characteristics (for an overview, see Arts and Gelissen, 2002; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). Esping-Andersen (1990) defined a *welfare regime* as a complex of legal and organisational features that are systematically interwoven. Taking into account the degree of decommodification – i.e., the degree to which social rights permit people to maintain livelihoods independently of pure market forces – and social stratification, he proposed three ideal types of welfare regimes: *liberal*, *conservative-corporatist* and *social-democratic*. Although he argued that regimes were embedded in different ideologies (respectively liberal, conservative and socialist), he did not take them into account in the empirical analysis of welfare states.

Mainstream approaches have been criticised not only because they overlook ideational processes, but also because of their gender blindness. Many feminist scholars (Daly, 2000; Lewis, 1992; O'Connor, 1993; O'Connor et al., 1999; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1996) have highlighted that the theoretical assumptions behind Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology overlooked the sexual division of paid and unpaid work – especially care work and domestic labour – as well as the relationships between welfare and both paid and unpaid work. This critique was partly taken into account and the welfare mix is now often conceptualised as a triangle composed of the market, the state and the family (see Orloff, 2009). Some scholars proposed to also consider communities, non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations (e.g., Evers et al., 1994) such as trade unions and employers' associations

(Trampusch, 2010). Feminist scholars (O'Connor et al., 1999; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1994, 1999) further criticised Esping-Andersen's typology for ignoring the differential effects of the benefits of decommodification for men and women. They showed how the categories of welfare provision produce gender-based identities and support specific family models, e.g., male breadwinner versus egalitarian model.

Connecting the feminist and discursive approaches, we focus on gendered assumptions in policy discourses as well as on possible consequences for gender and other social inequalities.

## Switzerland's welfare state: A complex case

The empirical comparative welfare regime literature that includes Switzerland tends to focus mainly on outcome variables such as social expenditure levels, programme-related expenses and social inequality levels (e.g., Bonoli, 1997; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Nollert, 2007), or on cultural, economic and political-institutional features (e.g., Castles and Obinger, 2008; Obinger and Wagschal, 2001). Research is also often gender-blind, although some contributions do consider gender segregation in the labour market as well as levels and types of family support in country classifications. Overall, very few studies apply both a gender-based and a discursive approach to Switzerland's welfare state. Exceptions are found in the works of Kübler (2007), Häusermann and Kübler (2010), and Pfau-Effinger (2008), whose analyses of policy reform highlight the role played by cultural values and the importance of framing processes.

Authors disagree as to whether the Swiss welfare state corresponds more closely to a conservative-corporatist regime (Lane, 1999), a liberal regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Levy, 2007), a hybrid of the two (Mach and Trampusch, 2011) or whether it has moved from a liberal to a corporatist-conservative regime (Armingeon, 2001; Obinger, 1998). However, they all seem to agree that Switzerland's position is the furthest from a social-democratic regime.

The difficulty in analysing and classifying the Swiss welfare state and its public policies is mainly explained by institutional and political features, within which policymaking is embedded (e.g., Armingeon, 2001; Mach and Trampusch, 2011; Obinger, 1998). Federalist governance, the limited policy capacity of the central state and direct democracy give the federal state a subsidiary role, promote cantonal differences and generate incremental policy development. The dominance of right-wing and centre parties in parliament also explains Switzerland's low social expenditure levels in comparison with those of its continental neighbours. Furthermore, the 1990s were marked by progress of the Swiss People's Party (Federal Assembly, 2013); a party known

for its positions against welfare state extension as well as its conservative views on gender relations.

Another important factor is Switzerland's historical tradition of delegating state responsibilities to civil society actors (Butschi and Cattacin, 1993; Mach and Trampusch, 2011; Nollert and Budowski, 2009). Among civil society organisations, labour unions and business interest associations have been particularly powerful, privileging self-regulation mechanisms over state solutions (Mach and Trampusch, 2011). Finally, Switzerland's non-membership status in the European Union, as well as its cultural and religious heterogeneity also help explain the limited and complex development of the Swiss welfare state. For instance there are conflicting views concerning gender relations and the role of the state across the different linguistic regions of Switzerland (e.g., Bühler, 2001).

The above mentioned institutional, political and cultural characteristics help to explain the comparatively limited and delayed development of the Swiss welfare state.

## **Empirical case studies: Policy areas, data and methodology**

The Swiss gender equality legislation and parental leave policies are at very different stages of development and implementation (see Table 1).

The Swiss gender equality act came into effect in 1996 with the aim of furthering true equality between women and men (Federal Authorities, 2013b: Article 1). It is based on the 'equality article' of the Swiss constitution which came into force in 1981 (Federal Authorities, 2013a: Article 8, para. 3). The gender equality act forbids both direct and indirect gender discrimination in the private and public sectors (Federal Authorities, 2013b: Articles 2 and 3). The equality act provides a good basis for rights claims (Fuchs, 2010). By international comparison, however, equality offices have limited competences and there exist nearly no mechanisms of monitoring and control of gender equality in work organisations (Bothfeld et al., 2010; Schär Moser and Strub, 2011). The only exception is a control of equal salary in companies within the federal procurement (Federal Office for Gender Equality, 2013). As well as that, there exist financial grants for promoting gender equality in the workplace, which are according to Fuchs (2008) comparable with the European Union's action programmes, but only on a small scale. From 1996 to 2011, more than 200 such programmes have been implemented (Lanfranconi, 2012).

In contrast to the gender equality legislation, parental leave policies remain barely institutionalised. Although maternity insurance was enacted in 2005 (60 years after the principle had been accepted in a national vote), no statutory parental or paternity leave or insurance exists (Valarino, 2013).

Table 1. Comparative view of gender equality and parental leave policies (selected European countries).

Country	Policy area		Central characteristics (statutory mechanisms of monitoring* and control of gender equality at the workplace)	Leave policies		Central characteristics (length and compensation of leaves**)
	Equality policies	Leave policies		Year of introduction	Year of introduction	
United Kingdom	Year of introduction	Year of introduction	Statutory gender equality plans at the workplace in the public sector, no mechanisms of control	a. maternity	a. 1976	a. 1.5 months paid at 90% + ~ 8 months' flat rate benefits b. 4.5 months for each parent, unpaid c. 2 weeks' flat rate benefits
	a. gender equality b. general anti-discrimination	a. 1970 / 1975 b. 2010		b. parental c. paternity	a. 1952 b. 1986 c. none	
Germany	a. Individual articles since 1980 b. 2006	No statutory mechanisms of monitoring and control of gender equality at the workplace	Statutory gender equality plans and control of gender equality at the workplace in the private and public sector	a. none b. 1974	a. 1976 b. 1999 c. 2003	a. 3.5 months paid at 100% paid at 67% (+ 2 months' bonus if fathers use parental leave) b. 12 months to share between parents, c. 2 weeks' flat rate benefits
	a. 1980 b. 2009	Statutory gender equality plans and control of gender equality at the workplace in the private and public sector		a. none b. 1974	a. 1952 b. 1986 c. none	
Sweden	a. 1996 b. none	No statutory mechanisms of monitoring, nearly no control of gender equality at the workplace	Statutory gender equality plans and control of gender equality at the workplace in the private and public sector	c. 1974 a. 2005 b. none c. none	a. 1976 b. 1999 c. 2003	b. 13 months paid at 80% + 3 months' flat rate benefits (2 months are reserved for each parent, the rest is shared) c. 10 days paid at 80%
	a. 1996 b. none	No statutory mechanisms of monitoring, nearly no control of gender equality at the workplace		a. 1974 a. 2005 b. none c. none	a. 1952 b. 1986 c. none	
Switzerland	a. 1996 b. none	No statutory mechanisms of monitoring, nearly no control of gender equality at the workplace	Statutory gender equality plans and control of gender equality at the workplace in the private and public sector	a. 1974 a. 2005 b. none c. none	a. 1976 b. 1999 c. 2003	a. 3.5 months paid at 80% of salary b and c. regulated in work contracts and collective labour agreements (no statutory minimum)

Notes: \* For example, statutory gender equality plans, which obligate work organisations with a certain amount of employees to develop, monitor and document gender equality goals within their organisations.

\*\*We indicate information as of 2013, for paid leave only (unless there is only unpaid leave), as well as the shortest and highest paid combination when different options exist.

Own table, *sources*: Bothfield et al. (2010); Moss (2013); Schair Moser and Strub (2011).

This is exceptional; internationally, men usually have access to one or even both types of leave (Moss, 2013). In Switzerland, depending on company regulations or collective labour agreements, fathers are usually granted one or two days of paid paternity leave. A few employers grant extended benefits: one to two weeks of paid paternity leave for fathers and an unpaid parental leave for male and female employees (Canning Wacker and Dalla Palma, 2005). In the past few years, Members of the Federal Parliament (MPs) have submitted more than 20 proposals for such leaves (Federal Social Insurance Office, 2013). Some aimed to implement paid cantonal or federal parental leave; others, unpaid paternity leave or tax-deductible, private parental leave insurance. To date, none of these proposals has been accepted by parliament.

The data we analysed in these two case studies consist of legal texts, parliamentary proposals and debates, reports and official publications. Semi-structured interviews with key representatives involved in the gender equality legislation implementation process were conducted. Interviewees, as well as some of the documents, were selected by theoretical sampling (Keller, 2011), and when possible, all documents for the respective data types were included (see Table 2).

We analysed the data using a discourse analytical methodology from a social science perspective. We examined the construction and communication of meaning in textual data in relation to their context of production and mobilisation by social actors as well as the possible consequences (Bacchi, 2009; Keller, 2011). We defined three sets of questions which we applied systematically to the data sets during the analysis.

- (1) What discourses can be distinguished within the respective policy areas? What problems are represented, and what solutions are proposed? Who is defined as the actor that can legitimately take action: the state, the market, the family or civil society? What are the underlying gendered assumptions?
- (2) Which collective actors mobilise these discourses? How is power distributed among these actors? How do these discourses relate to the socio-economic and political contexts? Have the discourses changed in the last 15 years?
- (3) What are the possible implications of these discourses for gender and other social inequalities in Switzerland and for policy changes?

To answer the first set of questions, we analysed all themes, arguments and statements in the documents in order to identify different problems and solutions raised as well as to highlight gendered assumptions. We used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA and NVivo8) in order to code the documents and interviews. The coding process implied, in an inductive–deductive interplay, the creation of categories of, for example, different policy solutions and thereby of the role of the state, the market, families and civil society. Representations of women and men, as well as gender relations were also coded. The aim of the analysis was to identify typical

Table 2. Presentation of the data type and selection mode.

<i>Policy area</i>	<i>Data type</i>	<i>Selection mode</i>		<i>Number</i>
		<i>Theoretical sampling</i>	<i>All documents</i>	
Gender equality implementation process	Interviews at the cantonal and federal levels	X		7
	Representatives of gender equality offices and advisory centres	X		7
	Representatives of employers' associations and trade unions	X		2
	Representatives of administrations of economic affairs	X		
	Documents			
	Swiss gender equality act and bye-laws		X	4
	Evaluation of the equality act, projects, and advisory centres		X	5
	Parliamentary debate about the evaluation of the equality act		X	1
	Reports of the Federal Council and parliament regarding gender equality	X		6
	Publications concerning equality projects and measures	X		≈80
Parental leave policies	Documents			
	Parliamentary interventions		X	23
	Federal Council responses		X	17
	Reports of the Parliamentary Commission for Social Security and Public Health (National Council or Council of States)		X	7
	Parliamentary debates		X	10



recurring discourses and discursive dimensions in the different documents. This is a similar approach to that of Lombardo and Meier (2008: 105–106), who applied a *critical frame analysis* in their study of gender equality, by identifying the ‘diagnosis’ (what is the problem, who is the victim and who is the perpetrator) and ‘prognosis’ (what is the solution, who should solve the problem) in EU political discourses.

To answer the second set of questions, we considered systematically the context of the discourses identified and their evolution in time. This implied, as for example Jäger (2009) suggests in his *critical discourse analysis*, analysing the coalitions of actors behind the discourses and the power they had to impose them. We did this by analysing the date of publication, the author and audience, as well as the institutional and socio-historical context of the documents. The use of qualitative data analysis software made it possible to manage a large volume of documents and to have a quantitative view of specific characteristics such as, for example, the frequency of documents published by year, or the mobilisation of discourses according to specific actors (e.g., political parties). Furthermore, including and analysing interviews allowed us – besides having another source of representation of problems and solutions – to reconstruct, for example, why specific arguments were put forward and others silenced (Keller, 2011). Häusermann and Kübler’s (2010) analysis of family policy reforms provides an enlightening empirical example of how *policy frames* (the meanings attached to policy instruments) produced specific majorities and coalitions among political actors in Switzerland.

Finally, we highlighted the possible implications of the underlying assumptions identified in policy documents for gender and class inequalities, similarly as for example Stratigaki (2004) did in her analysis of the ‘reconciliation of work and family’ frame in EU policies. By systematically including context, actors and power relations, we were further able to gain a deeper understanding of how the silencing of specific problem representations may restrict particular political interventions. In the same line, Charles and Mackay (2013) showed that the framing of domestic violence policies in Scotland and Wales, and the concrete measures developed in both contexts, were related to different institutional settings as well as to differing opportunities for feminist activists to influence policy development.

## Implementation process for gender equality legislation

### *Two dominant discourses*

In the implementation process for gender equality legislation in the years 1996 to 2011, two distinctive, dominant discourses emerged: the *elimination of discrimination discourse* and the *economic potential discourse* (Lanfranconi, 2012).

The *elimination of discrimination discourse* argues that presently and historically, employers have discriminated against women in terms of pay, promotion, allocation of duties and other issues. This argument is supported by statistical data about women and men in the labour market as well as by the country's legislation and constitution concerning gender equality. An exemplary citation comes out of a study mandated by trade unions:

For 30, respectively 15 years the constitution and the gender equality act have prescribed equal salary for women and men for equal and equivalent work. In reality, this objective has not been reached. Statistics still reveal considerable pay inequality: women earn one-fifth to one-fourth less than men in the private sector and in the cantonal administrations. (Schär Moser and Strub, 2011: 9)

The elimination of discrimination discourse proposes binding public solutions that ensure equal opportunities and the elimination of discrimination for all women. The legitimate actor to take action is the state, which can produce laws and control mechanisms that favour victimised individuals (who are mainly perceived to be women). In addition, individuals suffering from discrimination or their representatives (such as women's organisations or trade unions) are entitled to pursue court remedies.

Owing to the persistent power imbalance between women and men in Swiss workplaces, the underlying gendered assumption is that all women are victims who need 'help' from the state: resources, programmes, measures and laws. This contributes to the ongoing representation of women as victims. In this discourse, equality and the division of work within families is perceived to be a public issue.

The problem represented in the *economic potential discourse* is that the Swiss economy lacks qualified workers and this will be an increasing problem in the future. The typical explanations are the country's ageing population and its decreasing fertility rate, which together have generated a shortage of workers within the Swiss economy. Integrating more qualified women into the Swiss economy is one proposed solution to this problem. A typical example of this discourse is:

The demographical prognoses show that from 2015 onwards, there will be a shortage of qualified workers. It would be fatal not to exploit the potential of talented and highly qualified women. However, only modern and attractive employers will be able in the future to attract the best and the most motivated employees. (State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, 2010: 6–7)

The proposed solutions are thus voluntary, flexible measures for or within the labour market which benefit work organisations. Such measures are perceived to attract and retain qualified women. This discourse sets the market as

the responsible actor. Qualified women and men are asked to negotiate their working conditions with their employers. Social partners are also asked to get involved. In this discourse, the role of the state is perceived as secondary, providing structure, resources and programmes for the market.

The underlying assumption within this discourse is that gender equality and the division of work within families is a non-state issue and that women and men are already equally able to defend their own interests and to find common solutions to their workplace conditions. The notion of 'partnership' between women and men is prominent in this discourse. The economic potential discourse silences the unequal power relationships between women and men. This consequently justifies allocating programme resources to both women and men. However, this discourse does not refer to women and men in general, but rather focuses mainly on qualified employees.

### ***Actors, power relations and contextual factors***

Between 1996 and 2011, with regard to the Swiss equality legislation, the mobilisation of these two discourses can be seen in three phases. From 1996 to 2001, the elimination of discrimination discourse was predominant. The collective actors were mainly women's organisations, trade unions, institutions for gender equality and women's issues, and female MPs. A case in point for this manifestation of the elimination of discrimination discourse is the Swiss equality act itself. Over this time period, the Federal Office for Gender Equality (FOGE) only financed equality projects targeted at the improvement of women's conditions, not men's. This is shown in the following citation: 'We discussed [in the first years after the act came into effect] a lot about the budget question: that the budget is for the betterment of women' (interview, representative of the Federal Office for Gender Equality, 2010). During this first phase, the Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) – of which the FOGE is part – was headed by a social-democratic woman and strong defender of women's rights; and the presence of left-wing groups in parliament grew. This political background contributed to the strength of the elimination of discrimination discourse during the first phase.

In the second phase, from about 2001 to 2006, the economic potential discourse was introduced by new actors who were entering the field: employers' associations and economic affairs administrations. In order to respond to the labour market's needs to attract and retain qualified women, these organisations for example produced information on family-friendly measures and the promotion of women's careers. The actors from the first phase were still active and continued to apply the elimination of discrimination discourse by introducing new programmes and demanding new measures; for example, equal pay rules were introduced within the federal procurement (Federal Office for Gender Equality, 2013). The first signs of the incorporation of the

economic potential discourse among institutions lobbying for gender equality are also found at this time. For example, the FOGÉ started financing and developing programmes for men and proposed arguments such as ‘investing in the human capital, which strengthens the image of a company’ (Federal Office for Gender Equality, 2005). Over this period, the presence of left-wing groups in parliament stagnated, while the presence of right-wing groups increased. In addition, a liberal man took over the FDHA in 2003. The economic situation in Switzerland was relatively good, which may explain part of this new development.

Finally, from 2006 to 2011, the end of the study period, a discursive alliance between the actors of the first and second phases could be observed. Actors in gender equality offices and advisory centres adopted the language and arguments of the economic potential discourse and strategically decided not to show their involvement, while employers’ associations and economic affairs administrations came to the forefront: ‘In our publications, we consciously avoided talking about our cooperation with the equality office. Otherwise, it would deter some companies’ (interview, representative of the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, 2012). A representative of a cantonal administration of economic affairs (interview, 2012) described the third-phase changes: ‘The topic [of gender equality] is no longer a women’s issue but a question of workforce acquisition’. The evaluation of the Swiss equality act in 2005 suggested the need for both new measures as proposed in the elimination of discrimination discourse – for example, higher penalties in discrimination cases – and measures designated in the economic potential discourse. In the parliamentary debates and the governmental reports from 2007, voluntary measures aimed at motivating employers to promote gender equality were favoured and subsequently partly implemented. As of 2009, work organisations may apply for grants for gender equality projects (Federal Office for Gender Equality, 2013) or participate in the so-called ‘equal pay dialogue’ between social partners (Equal Pay Dialogue, 2013). Over this period, liberal and central parties had a strong presence in parliament and ran the FDHA. At the beginning of the period, the economic situation was good and the argument in favour of qualified workers was generally accepted. In addition, the unequal power relations between the actors of the first phase and the work organisations – missing the competence of the former to enforce the equality act – help explain the adoption of the economic potential discourse:

Very few projects had a real impact on workplaces. It was always a contradiction: You want to foster gender equality in the workplace, but you cannot generate interest among the companies – the most important actors, those who can really decide about the work conditions. (interview, representative of the Federal Office for Gender Equality, 2010)

Besides this, women's organisations had lost importance. However, some actors such as trade unions and left-wing female MPs continued to put forward the elimination of discrimination discourse by demanding new measures concerning investigations of gender discrimination (e.g., Schär Moser and Strub, 2011).

## Emergence of parental leave policy proposals

### *Three discursive dimensions*

In the last 15 years, parental leave policy proposals have been discussed in accordance with three discursive dimensions. The dominant dimension concerns the policy legitimacy of parental and paternity leave; the other two concern economic aspects and gender relations.

In terms of policy legitimacy, the *family needs discourse* presents the lack of statutory parental leave policies as unsatisfying. By European standards, Swiss family policy is deemed lagging behind. Parental leave policies are presented as improving the reconciliation of work and family life and easing the transition to parenthood. Fathers' access to statutory leave is justified by mothers' needs for help and children's needs for their fathers. The solutions proposed involve statutory parental or paternity leave. Although there is no consensus on the length and payment of the proposed leave, the state is defined as the actor who should address it.

We observe various gendered assumptions in the family needs discourse. Very few policy proposals attempt to provide equal leave lengths to mothers and fathers, and this thereby maintains a gendered conception of parenthood. The roles of fathers are often defined as secondary and temporary, while those of mothers are taken for granted. A conservative representation of family is also seen here. Parental leave policies are framed as instruments that enable the preservation of nuclear families and prevent children's misbehaviour later in life.

At the other end of this discursive dimension, it is the illegitimacy of these policies that is highlighted. The *unnecessary discourse* presents parental leave policies as trivial:

Other family policy themes have priority, because they improve in a better way work–family life reconciliation. Among them, there is family taxation, the support of childcare structures and the promotion of flexible work hours in work organisations. (Federal Council, 2010)

This discourse argues that parental leave policies should be left to social partners. The legitimate actors here are thus work organisations, trade unions and

employers' associations, which should negotiate collective agreements integrating parental leave policies. The sexual division of work adopted within families is said to reflect couples' preferences: it 'is a private issue and not a state issue', as argued a Radical-Liberal MP (Schweizer, 2007) in a parliamentary debate. These assumptions silence concerns about gendered consequences and the structural constraints faced by families.

The discussion of parental leave policies' economic aspects represents them as either *burdensome* or *cost-effective* policies. The *cost-effective discourse* frames parental leave policies as having positive human resource outputs for businesses by increasing productivity and attracting highly skilled workers, as this excerpt from a postulate submitted in 2008 by a Green MP suggests:

Several companies probably know the study published by McKinsey in 2007, which proves that the economic performance of a company increases when it enables its employees – both men and women – to have a balanced life and considers their well-being. (Teuscher, 2008)

Leave supporters also argue that parental leave policies contribute to increased fertility rates and female participation in the labour force, and therefore they have positive macroeconomic consequences. The proposed solutions within the cost-effective discourse are diverse. Both state-regulated parental leave policies and company-level discretionary parental leave policies are proposed.

In contrast, the *burden discourse* suggests that the costs of parental leave policies would be unbearable, especially because of the tight financial situation of social insurance. Statutory parental leave policies are also said to be inadequate for the labour market's flexibility needs, in particular for small and medium-sized companies. The solution proposed is to maintain the status quo while encouraging social partners to negotiate parental leave policies.

Finally, there are two opposing discourses on gender relations. The *gender equality discourse* presents parental leave policies as enabling a more equal division of work between men and women by fostering paternal involvement in childcare. Current policies are presented as ill-adapted to more gender-equal family organisations. The solution proposed is to modify gendered state institutions by implementing statutory leave that is accessible to men:

In order to foster and support the participation of [fathers] in childcare, parental leave and parental benefits should be public allowances, part of the family policy measures, and should not be left to the employers. (Green Party, 2011)

The legitimate actor is here defined as the state, considered partly responsible for the sexual division of work adopted by families.

The *difference discourse*, which is rarely put forward, is based on essentialist representations of motherhood and fatherhood which justify gendered access to leave. State intervention is defined as legitimate in order to protect maternity interests, but not to regulate fathers' leave, which is seen as a family affair.

### **Actors, power relations and contextual factors**

From 1996 to 2011, it is mainly left-wing MPs (seven Greens and five Socialists) and central MPs (eight Christian-Democrats) who have supported parental leave policies. Only two proposals came from right-wing MPs. The systematic rejection of these proposals by the majority of parliament is related to the dominance of right-wing groups, which oppose parental leave policies, drawing mainly on the economic burden and unnecessary discourses. Among centre MPs, although the majority have voted against leave proposals, there have been a few dissident voices; reflecting their political orientation in favour of families but limited welfare expansion.

Until the implementation of maternity insurance (2005) only left-wing MPs addressed parental and paternity leave issues. Since 2006, there have been an increasing number of proposals; from 2006 to 2008, they still came mainly from left-wing MPs, but were predominantly from centre MPs from 2009 to 2011. This evolution had concrete consequences: centre MPs proposed types of leave with little or no budgetary consequences (e.g., unpaid or short leave, or sharing or replacing existing maternity benefits), while left-wing MPs had previously predominantly proposed paid leave options ranging from one to six months.

Overall, the debate has remained mainly focused on the question of parental leave policies' legitimacy or illegitimacy as state policies. However, there have been variations regarding the two other discursive dimensions. While the gender equality discourse was strongly mobilised in left-wing proposals, it has been weakened within the recent centre MPs' proposals, which have tended to focus predominantly on their economic aspects. A case in point is the 2011 centrist proposal in favour of tax-deductible private parental insurance, a welfare mix between state-guaranteed access to leave and individual and voluntary financing. This proposal, supported by other parties, indicates a shift in the framing of welfare responsibility from the state to the family.

### **From state-oriented to economic-oriented discourses**

The analysis shows that despite the uneven development in the two policy areas under consideration, there are several similarities regarding discursive

processes. Basically two different responses concerning the definition of welfare responsibility appear. In *state-oriented solutions*, the state is defined as the legitimate actor (elimination of discrimination, family needs and equality discourses, and to a certain extent, cost-effective and difference discourses). Since the division of work within families and gender equality are perceived to be public issues, statutory and binding measures for all women and men should be implemented. These representations are related most closely to those of a social-democratic regime and correspond to Sainsbury's (1994) *egalitarian model* of gender relations. In a few cases, we observed gendered assumptions about women's and men's family roles which are characteristic of a conservative-corporatist regime where state intervention maintains gender role differentiations (family needs and difference discourses).

In *non-state solutions*, the market, individuals and social partners are defined as the legitimate actors. The economic potential, unnecessary and burden discourses, as well as the difference and cost-effective discourses, propose mainly non-binding, inexpensive and negotiated solutions at the company or branch level. Within these economically oriented discourses, the need for a highly qualified labour force and the economic consequences of the nation's demographic trends are often mentioned. The role of the state is considered secondary; as the provider of a suitable framework adapted to the needs of the economy. These discourses relate most closely to those of a liberal welfare regime. Gender relations are considered non-state issues which should be regulated either in the private sphere or by other market or civil society actors. The strong presence of civil society actors and the frequent reference to the idea of 'social partnership' within these discourses indicate that a corporatist conception of the welfare state is also at work.

Although discursive developments regarding parental leave policy proposals are slightly behind those identified in the implementation of gender equality legislation, we find a similar trend overall. The first phase was marked by the dominant presence of state-oriented discourses, which were mainly mobilised by left-wing MPs, women's organisations, trade unions and institutions promoting gender equality or women's issues. Following a transition period (2006–2009) which led to the most recent phase (until 2011), economic-oriented discourses in favour of voluntary, non-binding and inexpensive solutions have become predominant and others were silenced by broad coalitions of political actors and representatives of the economy.

This shift confirms the subordination of gender equality objectives for Switzerland to competitive economy ones, similarly to other European countries and to the European Union (see Knijn and Smit, 2009; Stratigaki, 2004). However, our study highlights that in the Swiss context, it is voluntary and negotiated policy solutions among social partners that are being put forward. These have been historically important policymaking routes within the Swiss welfare state (Butschi and Cattacin, 1993; Mach and Trampusch, 2011;



Nollert and Budowski, 2009). The power balance in favour of right-wing and centre MPs in parliament, the presence of a centrist federal councillor leading the FDHA and the liberal economic system in Switzerland all contribute to this shift. Finally, the strong presence of economic-oriented discourses in the two policy fields can also be understood by the fact that when the Swiss economy was growing, parental leave supporters and equality offices put forward the argument of the shortage of a highly qualified labour force. This result is in line with research results conducted on recent policy reforms on Swiss family policies (Häusermann and Kübler, 2010; Kübler, 2007).

## Policy change and gender and social inequalities

These economic-oriented discourses in favour of non-state, non-binding and inexpensive solutions, however, entail the following risks: by focusing on the economy, economic outcomes, not gender outcomes, are the main evaluation criteria (see Knijn and Smit, 2009; Stratigaki, 2004). Moreover, only some categories of employed women and men benefit from these non-state solutions. For example, qualified employees benefit more than unqualified ones from solutions based on the highly qualified labour force shortage argument. These gendered and classed outcomes call for an intersectional approach to welfare policies (e.g., Abramovitz, 2006; Williams, 1995). Furthermore, only employees with a gender-sensitive employer, and only those represented by specific trade unions, are favoured. With these types of solutions, in contrast to binding and universal solutions, the power relations between men and women, employers and employees, trade unions and employers' associations are not challenged. Furthermore, their implementation depends on the political and economic climate (see Lanfranconi, 2014). These results help in the understanding of the comparatively limited policy fields under study as well as the persisting inequalities in the Swiss labour market and family life.

We argue that there are two possible scenarios for further policy changes. Either economic-oriented discourses may further build consensus around minimal and partial parental leave solutions and equality measures (see Häusermann and Kübler, 2010) or, in the future, state-oriented discourses may gain more support. In the field of gender equality, this could for example mean that requested improvement measures, such as a new position for investigating gender discrimination or higher sanctions in cases of discrimination, could be introduced. Or in the case of parental leave policies, that a statutory parental and/or paternity leave would be introduced. However, unless shifts in ideas about welfare responsibility among political actors or a change of political majority take place, this scenario will face significant resistance and possibly result in a soft and small-scale state solution.

## Conclusion

To sum up, within the two analysed policy fields, we have identified discourses which correspond alternatively to social-democratic, liberal, or conservative-corporatist ideologies. This illustrates the complexity of the Swiss welfare state. However, we were also able to identify a predominant discourse in recent years, in which liberal and corporatist ideological principles are combined. In Switzerland, welfare responsibility is not only defined as individual (as in the liberal regime), but also located at the branch and company levels, where negotiated solutions between social partners should be developed (as in conservative-corporatist regimes). We observed that the predominant economic-oriented discourse was based not only on gendered but also on class assumptions, with the effect of silencing institutionalised inequalities.

Our analysis was limited to two policy fields. However, our findings call for an integrative approach to gender and discourse for general welfare state analysis. We incorporated gender at several stages of our analysis, which enabled us to highlight both gendered assumptions in policy discourses and potential gendered outcomes. Finally, our analysis shows that a discursive approach from a social science perspective to the welfare state or specific policy areas contributes to understanding past, ongoing and potential policy changes as well as policy outcomes.

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## Note

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