

BARRIERS AND SUPPORTIVE CONDITIONS FOR CARING MASCULINITIES

Abstract. The authors examine the “freedom of choice” concept which, while widely talked about by traditional economists, is often opposed to gender equality policies. Making use of the Strauss and Corbin’s (1996) conditional matrix, different societal and policy levels are considered in seeking to explain why decisions on paid/unpaid work are based on different conditions. The authors find that in circumstances that are inequalitarian there is no “freedom of choice”. Among other things, free choice requires better conditions for caring masculinities, such as leave policies that include fathers. The paper is based on a secondary analysis of national data and studies in Austria, with a comparative aspect by looking at the results of international studies.

Keywords: *gender equality, care work, masculinity, rational choice, pay gap, care gap*

Introduction

Policies in many European countries recognise that gender equality affects all genders and that policies must therefore address this. For about 10 years now, men have increasingly appeared as actors and target groups in EU studies and gender equality strategies. For example, the Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men 2010 specifically encouraged men to take on care responsibilities and share leave entitlements with women.

Nevertheless, the goal of gender equality is already contested: Right-wing parties see it as interference by the state in private affairs. But even less radical groups favour supposedly ‘gender-neutral’ models of welfare state services and support the concept of freedom of choice, especially with a view to upgrading family work.

This paper is based on a study in which the conditions for ‘freedom of choice’ in terms of work and gender inequality were critically examined

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(Scambor and Kirchengast, 2014), where an important blind spot in the approach was given special focus: the role played by men in gender equality and men's participation in family work.

We are interested in what 'freedom of choice' actually means, how it is framed theoretically, especially in relation to gender equality. We analyse the concept, provide examples of differing national policies, examine the approach's epistemology in rational choice theories in economics and practically discuss the conditional dimensions left out by the freedom of choice approach.

The 'freedom of choice' concept and incoherent policies

Family policies state the 'freedom of choice' concept refers "in principle to the free choice of lifestyle, to the decision for or against children, to the way of upbringing, to the division of labour within the family and to the organisation of family life in general" (Eckstein, 2009: 42). With regard to care for children, freedom of choice may be seen as "the possibility of being able to determine for oneself the extent of one's professional activity and of child care at home or outside the home" (Riesenfelder et al., 2007: 7). The authors critically note that careless application of this term risks overlooking the status quo of very limited options and often underestimated occupational risks in practice.

Various care allowance systems based on freedom of choice operate in European societies which have often supported traditional work-sharing models (Ellings ter and Leira, 2007). In Germany, a childcare subsidy was introduced by the conservative-liberal government coalition in 2013 (and abolished 2015 at the Federal level due to it constituting a breach of the Constitution). Families taking care of their children aged up to 3 years, without relying on public services like day-care centres, were given a monetary bonus. The law was based on a notion of freedom of choice and the concept was mainly oriented to the 'New Maternity' model (family work undertaken by women should be regarded as equivalent to gainful employment). The argument was primarily based on the welfare of the child, seen as guaranteed by maternal care (Eckstein, 2009). The German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) critically noted that "negative incentives to work are to be expected, especially for mothers with an employed partner" (Spieß, 2012: 24). In fact, within a short period, the take-up rate in Western German regions was far higher than in the eastern ones with less gender-unequal structures (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2014). It is remarkable that during the time of validity of this law the extension of public childcare facilities was being promoted and legally enforced. Just a couple of years before then, in 2007, the Parental Allowance Act introduced a more gender-equal system

of parental leave in Germany. Accordingly, the ‘stay-at-home bonus’ may be seen as a reaction by gender-conservatives to retain certain elements of the old, unequal gender order while, at the same time, it also makes gender policies less coherent as to which measures for/against gender equality weaken or even cancel each other out¹.

Studies by Ellings ter and Leira (2007) show that two models in the Nordic countries are largely opposed to each other: The concept of couples having an equal share of paid/unpaid work (including an expansion of public childcare) and the model of freedom of choice for parents, aimed at subsidising parental care work and apparently having been formulated in a gender-neutral way. Where care allowance systems operate, it is mainly women who take on the tasks of unpaid care. In Norway, for instance, the number of working hours of young women was significantly reduced in the 1990s after introduction of the ‘Kontantstøtte’ childcare allowance. However, the subsequent expansion of institutional childcare saw a halt or reversal of this trend. As the development of childcare facilities progressed, the paid working time of young women increased. This example shows that political measures and welfare state regulations have clear effects in the direction of equal or unequal share.

The concept of freedom of choice might possibly be built on incorrect assumptions, e.g. that autonomous actors in different life situations are able to make free decisions. Yet, in fact, ‘free decisions’ are subject to social and socio-economic constraints that may be expected to have restrictive effects on individual actors (Scambor and Scambor, 2012). The model of freedom of choice thus conceals certain ideas and political concepts regarding the ideal division of labour within the family. In general, six partial motives for family policy action can be identified: *Family-institutional motives* support the family as an institution, often based on traditional family images; *demographic motives* relate to demographic changes (e.g. the birth rate); *economic motives* emphasis the economic relevance of family policy measures; *socio-political motives* focus on costs that arise from family responsibility; *gender policy motives* relate to a gender-equitable division of paid and unpaid labour; and *child welfare motives* concentrate on the needs of children (Blum, 2012; Blum and Rille-Pfeiffer, 2010).

Therefore, it is not only ideologies that refer to gender (in)equality which are different and sometimes contradict each other (like feminist or gender-conservative approaches), but some of these family-political motives are inconsistent with each other, while others overlap and can be

¹ Zweiter Gleichstellungsbericht der Bundesregierung, Bundesregierung, BT-Drs. 18/2840, 29 June 2017 accessible at <https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/119794/b69d114cfbe2b6c1d4e510da2d74fd8d/zweiter-gleichstellungsbericht-der-bundesregierung-bt-drucksache-data.pdf>, 17. 12. 2019. Here, namely tax and labour market incentives that weaken gender equality were criticised.

pursued at the same time. In particular, traditional family policies propagate the concept of freedom of choice for families in the care of their children, resulting in measures like the 'stove-bonus', a critical expression for a measure introduced in some Austrian municipalities for the care of children at home². Intended to promote adherence to traditional gender roles (familial-institutional motives), these political measures are based on child welfare motives, whereby it is believed that a child is best looked after by its mother (Eckstein, 2009). In the 1980s, fathers were included in freedom of choice concepts for the first time.

The gender-blind freedom of *rational choice*

Which criteria underlie the choices made by women and men on particular forms or combinations of paid/unpaid work? A possible decision criterion stemming from an economic point of view is the question of whether specific options for action give rational advantages to the individuals who make the decisions. According to Becker's (1964 and 1965) theory of rational decision (rational choice approach), actors try to maximise their benefits based on certain preferences.

Women's decision to work or not may be explained by considering the points of view of Mincer (1962) and Becker (1964 and 1965) and the context of the rational choice approach with reference to the gender-specific division of labour. In this approach, women interrupt their careers after making a household-related optimisation calculation. Family members maximise a common household utility function (which Becker ultimately defines as the utility function of the altruistic head of the household) while respecting budget and time constraints. The members of a 'two-person company' family decide not only between work and leisure, like in traditional micro-economics, but also between housework and paid work. Since women hold comparative advantages in household production, it is rational for family members to fully specialise in paid (men) or domestic (women) work. The inclusion of de facto wage discrimination against women increases their comparative advantage in domestic work and thereby increases their specialisation (Kreimer, 2009).

From a feminist perspective, a central point of criticism of the core assumptions of 'homo oeconomicus' is that an autonomous individual reduced to himself, without a history, tradition, culture or body, without a social location and sense of belonging to any social group, simply does

² On the premiums introduced in some Austrian municipalities and provinces for the intra-family care of children. Accessible at <http://derstandard.at/1379291643847/Die-Herdpraemie-macht-Schule>, 1. 6. 2019.

not exist (Kreimer, 2009). 'Homo oeconomicus' experiences no phases of dependency (childhood, old age, illness), life phases – when individuals typically need to take care – are systematically ignored. Yet care work must be done by individuals unless it is provided by state institutions.

In the context of labour supply decisions, the bias appears as the way that individuals should choose between two alternatives (gainful or reproductive work) which are de facto neither independent of each other nor comparable in their consequences for their further (gainful) career. (Kreimer, 2009: 62)

Kreimer (2009) describes developments in the modelling of labour supply that go well beyond Becker's approach, including sociological approaches that analyse this decision primarily from the perspective of embedding it in the family context. From a gender perspective, research on structures of organisations is very interesting (Acker, 1991; 2006; Wilz, 2002):

...in which processes within the labour market, such as barriers to advancement due to social closure processes, discrimination due to gendered substructures, etc. can be analysed. In the context of participation decisions, these processes are relevant insofar as they have an impact on newcomers and re-entrepreneurs in the labour market through experiences and socialisation processes. (Kreimer, 2009: 65)

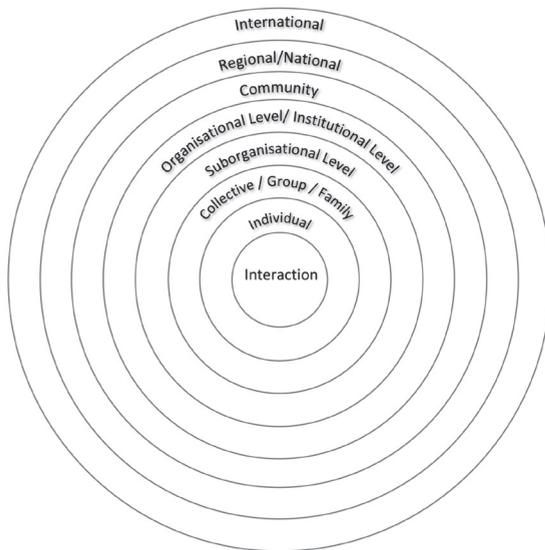
Another point of criticism of the rational individual decision model in the rational choice approach is that family members are either regarded as independent, autonomous individuals or modelled as 'durable consumer goods' (e.g. children). Responsibilities and dependencies are not adequately considered. Feminist identity concepts try to capture this relationship better (Nelson, 1996).

Even the discussion on the rational choice model, which is only briefly touched upon here, shows it is not simply possible to speak of individuals having a free choice. At least several levels and conditions have to be considered. Some questions arising from this are, for example: Which alternatives do women and men perceive as available given the assumption of care tasks and compatibility with gainful employment? What leeway and constraints do they see in this? Can decisions regarding one alternative or another be made rationally at all?

Conditions of choice – the social construction of care/work decisions

We have seen that advocates of freedom of choice focus on the individual, but not the conditions that support one decision or another. However, greater male participation in care and the early re-entry of women into employment are influenced by a variety of external conditions on different levels. These levels are described in the Conditional Matrix designed by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Figure 1: *CONDITIONAL MATRIX (GROUNDED THEORY)*



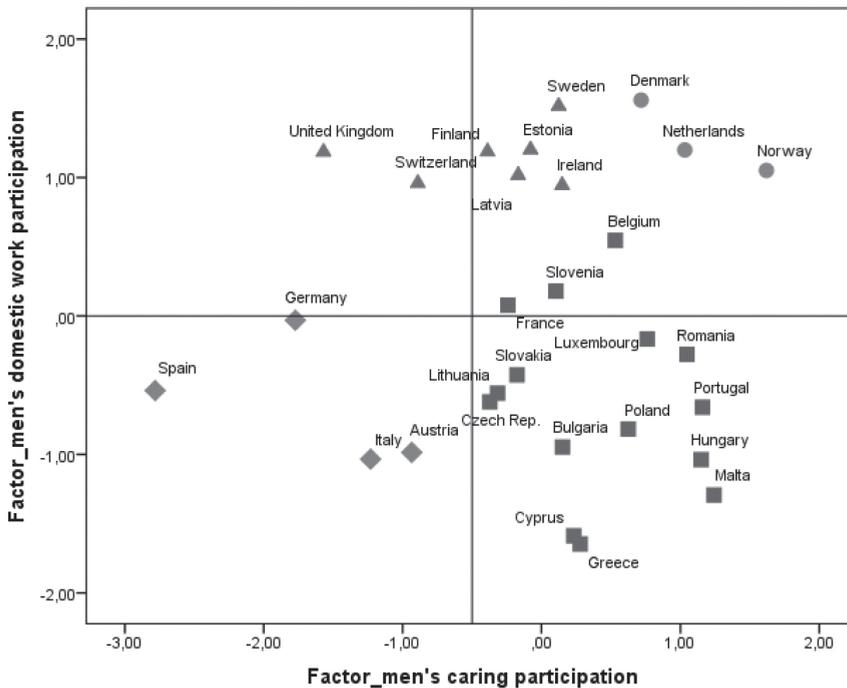
Source: Strauss, A./Corbin, J. (1996).

This perspective helps to understand that individual choices are embedded in structural, societal conditions that enable, support, hinder or inhibit certain decisions. For instance, if a supervisor (organisational level) clearly communicates that the taking up of parental leave could bring negative consequences, a father might think twice about taking it. However, the paternity leave question only reaches a critical mass of potentially involved fathers if the law (on the national level) supports men in taking paternity leave, and on various levels of interaction (family, community) men are given hindering or supportive reactions that impact their involvement in unpaid care work. Of course, individuals are responsible for their own decisions, but the same choices are made over and over within a framework of societal prerequisites. In the section below, we discuss some of these conditions impacting choice in care/work decisions.

Organisational level: Work conditions

Results of recent studies on working time and satisfaction show that satisfaction with the work situation of male employees is highest in countries with low average working hours and lowest in countries with long average working hours (Scambor et al., 2013), which may certainly be interpreted as indicating a desire to reject the dictates of the male full-time work culture.

Figure 2: SCATTER PLOT OF COUNTRY GROUPS, MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CARING FOR/EDUCATING THEIR OWN CHILDREN AND IN DOMESTIC WORK, 2005



Source: Scambor et al., 2013: 83.³

³ Source and explanation: EWCS 2005; combination of two variables; the underlying questions were: "How often are you involved in caring for and educating your children?" and "How often are you involved in cooking and housework?" Answers have been classified in the three categories "Every day for 1 hour or more", "Never", and all answers in between (every second day until one or twice a year) were classified as "In-between-participation"; EWCS includes only persons in employment/self-employment; a factor analysis was conducted with the answers "never" and "everyday" and two factors were extracted: factor men's caring/educating participation and factor men's domestic work participation. A cluster analysis was conducted with these two factors: method used: linkage between groups, 4 solutions.

Comparative studies reveal the increasing convergence of what men and women wish by way of working time and “that the gendered nature of working time is more an expression of institutional and company characteristics (...) which no longer match the needs of employees” (Kümmerling, 2013: 15). Studies in Austria and Germany point in two directions:

1. Many men now seem to reject a one-sided employment orientation and are increasingly aligning their identity concepts with other realities of life (Bergmann et al., 2014a; Gärtner, 2012; Kapella et al., 2011; Scambor and Scambor, 2006).
2. At the same time, developments in employment patterns suggest the growing dissolution of boundaries of paid labour. The *Flexible Time Regime*⁴ makes it more difficult for men and women to reconcile paid/unpaid work and risks the even stronger continuation of gender-specific role attributions:

The intensification of work and the higher availability of work anchored in the life patterns of men usually have the effect that the traditional division of gender roles is re-established in the families. (Böhnisch 2004: 124)

A study conducted in Austria in 2014 examined the possibilities of work-family balance (Bergmann et al., 2014a) and showed the enormous working time obligations of full-time working fathers. Almost half the fathers surveyed (full-time workers) regularly work overtime and additional hours (mainly based on all-in clauses or flat rates). Such excessively long working hours result in significant dissatisfaction with the possibilities for reconciliation. The biggest need for change is revealed in male-dominated production sectors.

At the same time, the study shows many fathers' desire to balance working time and childcare well:

Here (...) the results of the survey can be used to support the observation expressed in recent studies that it is not so much the (male) employees who allegedly do not want to reconcile but are often the traditional industry-specific structures that prevent this from happening. (Bergmann et al., 2014a: 74)

However, some companies have adjusted earlier than others to meet the growing desire of young fathers to take on a more active role in childcare (Pointecker et al., 2018). Scambor, Holter and Riesenfeld (2005) developed a three-stage model of change in terms of gender (in)equality and men:

⁴ The term refers to the flexibilisation of working time forms (length, location, plannability, payment) (Brandth and Kvande, 2007).

- Stage 1 (early): Gender and associated inequalities are mostly ignored, care is not seen at all as an issue that might be related to work or inspiring a call for measures. Usually, traditional gender behaviour is expected. Men in active caring roles are mostly unknown and/or receive 'othering' or sanctions.
- Stage 2 (middle): Gender (in)equality is seen as an issue that typically causes conflicts and requires measures and resources (which have started to be tried out). Carers, including men, have some (individual) scope.
- Stage 3 (advanced): Gender equality and work–life/work–family policies are regarded a necessary part of personnel policies. Care is not only about women/mothers, but also about men (and not only about children, but also about care for the sick, disabled and seniors). Measures are structural and relational such that employees do not feel they have to 'beg' or fight for reconciliation/balance options.

Signals of changes in family roles towards active fatherhood along with leaving the breadwinner model behind at the same time are usually first seen at the recruitment level. In general, conditions provided by companies and enterprises only – very slowly and often solely based on legal regulations (e.g. paternity leave).

Regional and national level: Institutional regulations

Flexible and adequate institutional childcare is the key to both greater equality and the reconciliation of work and the family. Parents' labour market participation, especially mothers, usually depends on the availability and organisation of institutional childcare facilities, that mostly relieve women of the burden of concentrating on family care (Rüling, 2007). Institutional care is typically regulated nationally, often regionally (in some cases even in the workplace). Both the existence and design of institutional childcare (opening and closing times, costs) are relevant indicators of the compatibility of family and work.

Looking at the development of childcare rates for three-, four- and five-year-old children (the proportion of children cared for in day-care centres in relation to the resident population of the same age) over the last ten years, all three age categories have shown significant increases. The care rate for three-year-olds rose from 73.4% in 2008 to 86.7% in the meantime. In the last ten years, an increase from 92.2 to 96.4% was recorded for four-year-olds and from 93.8 to 97.5% for five-year-olds. (Statistik Austria, 2019: 14)

Nevertheless, a European comparison shows the reported childcare rates for under 3-year-olds in Austria (65.1%) were still well below the European average (88.1%) in 2016. Currently, the childcare rate for newborns through to children aged 2 is 29%.

The opening hours of childcare facilities are often just the 'tip of the iceberg'. Austrian data for 2016 show that more than 20% of all kindergartens in Austria were closed by 14:00, especially kindergartens in rural areas. But there are also large differences between the federal states, with long opening hours in Vienna and comparatively short ones in provinces in the west.

Welfare regulations (like childcare benefits or parental leave) are also important determinants of choices. In recent years, men have become more and more eligible for parental leave benefits across Europe (Scambor et al., 2013).

Austrian fathers gradually became involved in parental leave measures in the last few decades, which in the context of this topic also changed their status. It was only in 1990 that they were allowed to take parental leave, a claim derived from that of mothers. In 2000, an independent claim for fathers was implemented (while women still held priority with respect to such leave). Finally, in 2005 both parents were given equal rights to claim leave.

Parents of children born after March 2017 may choose between an income-dependent childcare allowance and a childcare allowance account. A special Family Time Bonus Act provides fathers with statutory paternity leave and benefits for the first time. Based on these new regulations, parents can decide for themselves how long they would like to receive the childcare allowance within a time frame. There is also an option of a family time bonus for fathers, directly after birth, based on a daily rate. Paternity leave was introduced to encourage fathers to share more childcare duties between both parents. Although the legal environment has improved, as it is characterised by a variety of options also for fathers, their take-up rate is still quite low. Of 101,208 parents receiving childcare allowance in December 2018, only 3% were men⁵. In Austria, measures aimed at involving fathers in parental activities may be characterised as being halfway through a paradigm shift.

Parental leave arrangements vary widely across Europe and some reforms are more effective than others, for example, in Iceland, parental leave is regulated as a three-share model with the right to non-transferable paid time for mothers and for fathers (Gislason, 2012). The general status of gender equality and family policy have a major influence on men's

⁵ *Gender Index 2017*. Accessible at <https://www.frauen-familien-jugend.bka.gv.at/frauen/gender-mainstreaming-budgeting/gender-daten.html>.

decisions to assume care and provision tasks in the family Nordic experience (followed by Germany and other countries) shows that specific policy arrangements can increase men's participation in childcare. Such policies must be coordinated with strategies to promote gender parity in economic and policy areas if they are to help eliminate inequalities that lead not only to discrimination against women in public life, but also to a lack of gender equality within families.

Family models and gender cultures

The concept of freedom of choice assumes it is possible to decide on the form of the division of labour by considering a pool of different division of labour models.

Pfau-Effinger (2000) distinguishes several gender-cultural family models:

- the family economic model, in which both parents work in their own business;
- the male breadwinner model, in which the woman performs the family work while the man works full-time;
- the additional breadwinner model, in which one person, usually the husband, works full-time, while the partner works part-time and does the family work;
- the dual care model, in which both parents are employed full-time and childcare is mainly provided externally; and
- the double carer/double supervisor model, in which both parents share gainful work in approximately equal shares and family work in partnership.

An EU comparison of gender-cultural family models (Scambor et al., 2013) highlights the importance of the dual-carer model in the northern European countries Finland and Denmark as well as in some southern European (Portugal, Cyprus), post-socialist and Baltic countries. This model is not necessarily based on equality-oriented motives. Economic reasons also make full-time work necessary for both partners. Full-time employment of both parents may require a fair distribution of childcare responsibilities, but does not have to. Particularly in Central European countries (including Austria, Germany, Netherlands) and Sweden, the male-breadwinner-female-co-earner model is more strongly represented. With the exception of Sweden and the Netherlands, these countries have average or below-average participation rates of men in unpaid work. In southern European countries (e.g. Spain, Italy) and in Ireland, the male breadwinner model is particularly prevalent, with low participation rates of men in unpaid work (a strong reference to traditional gender cultures). In countries where

dual-carer households dominate, the possibility of reconciling work and family life is generally viewed positively. Nordic countries especially show high satisfaction levels with the compatibility of paid/unpaid work, notably with regard to the gender-equitable distribution of unpaid work and institutional factors like childcare facilities.

In countries such as Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, children are leading to a shift in the division of labour towards an additional earner model. In southern European countries and Luxembourg, however, the breadwinner model is gaining in importance in the case of children in the household. The labour-sharing models in post-socialist countries remain remarkably stable. In these countries, part-time work has traditionally not been widespread among women. The proportion of dual-earner couples with children where both parents are fully employed varies across Europe with the highest rates seen in post-socialist countries and due to economic necessity a long tradition in this work-sharing model.

Work distribution, care and the role of men

Nancy Fraser (1994) described two possible pathways towards a post-industrial welfare state: the universal breadwinner model, in which equality is to be achieved through the integration of women into the labour market by analogy with men, and the caregiving parity model, in which women are to be granted greater social rights based on both care work in the family and in the informal labour market. The aim here is not, as with labour market integration, to bring women into line with the respective (male) norm of gainful employment, but to reduce the costs of the difference (ideally the costs would be zero) if care work were truly equal to gainful employment. However, because care work rarely fills the entire period of one's active working life, it needs to be supplemented by permeability to the labour market, especially in the form of part-time jobs (Kreimer, 2009).

According to Kreimer (2009), the caregiving parity model has the advantage that women have a comparatively smaller overall burden and that the excessive male norm is abandoned because the work done by women in the informal sector of the economy is given greater prominence, although this model is also associated with some disadvantages. The biggest one is the associated establishment of a gender-specific division of labour. There could be a difference between mummy-tracks (dominated by women) and breadwinner-track-jobs (dominated by men) instead of a partnership-based division of labour. Fraser (1994) therefore concludes that "neither caregiving parity nor universal breadwinner promotes the full, equal participation of women in economic, political and social life and none of the models supports changes by men in the sense of taking over previously female fields

of activity” (Kreimer, 2009: 220). Fraser (1994) proposes a universal care work model as a third way forward: “A third possibility is to include men to become more like most women are now – that is, people who do primary care work...” (Fraser, 1994: 611).

Should there be caregiving parity for everyone now? Kreimer (2009) considers the freedom of choice debate in this context:

In the sense of a comprehensively defined citizenship concept, the welfare state should not provide any incentives in the direction of a single care model. A new care arrangement for Austria could focus on caregiving parity due to the great importance of informal care work, in order to significantly improve the lack of social security and the scarce income situation of caregivers. But it cannot be limited to this, but must also improve the framework conditions for those who do not wish to make use of the right to care. (Kreimer, 2009: 222)

Dominant models of masculinity, such as the model of hegemonic masculinity in which masculinity is based on unequal power relations (the ‘patriarchal dividend’ vis-à-vis women, but also on intra-gender patterns of superiority and subordination) (Connell, 1995), have proved to be detrimental to equality and inclusion (Scambor et al., 2013), especially since these models usually accompany gender-typical models of the division of labour. Yet it should still be pointed out that a hegemonic version of masculinity always faces the task of integrating and dealing with tensions in gender relations: “... tending to stabilize patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 853). Every change on the part of women (e.g. an increase in the employment rate and in tertiary education) has effects on men in the gender system. What used to work yesterday no longer necessarily works today. Hegemonic masculinity is challenged

... through the efforts of the women’s movement ... among generations in immigrant communities, between models of managerial masculinities, among rivals for political authority, among claimants for attention in the entertainment industry, and so on. The contestation is real, and gender theory does not predict which will prevail – the process is historically open. Accordingly, hegemony may fail. The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not rely on a theory of social reproduction. (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 853)

According to Connell and Messerschmidt, it is also theoretically conceivable that a hegemonic masculinity may emerge that democratises gender relations out of the necessity of the situation, reduces the power

imbalance and is open to gender equality instead of reproducing hierarchy. Such a 'positive' hegemonic masculinity would ultimately bring an end to itself, according to the optimistic implications outlined by Connell and Messerschmidt. Indeed, Connell's works in particular are characterised by fundamental optimism with regard to possible constructive changes in gender relations and corresponding possibilities of political action (Bergmann et al., 2014b).

New patterns of action and new social practices of men and women are changing gender relations, gender orders and gender hierarchies: the model of '(caring for) masculinity' is developing as an alternative model to hegemonic masculinity (Elliott, 2016). In English, the term "caring masculinity" is now established. It includes caring components and is already part of the everyday life of many men when they take over care and nursing activities, primarily in the family, but also within the framework of female-connoted occupational fields (e.g. kindergarten). According to Scambor et al. (2013), the taking on of these different roles may be regarded as a contribution to gender equality. Childcare tasks only comprise part of the broad spectrum said to be covered by the English word "care". Used in this way, the word also includes 'caring for oneself' (health awareness, emotional issues, deeper friendships, less risk-taking, etc.), that directly benefits men (and women).

Based on a study that examined the conditions for actual 'freedom of choice', the article now discusses factors that promote a gender-equal share of (child)care as well as work-life balance and – in that sense – build the basic conditions for caring masculinities in practice.

Conclusion

Traditional attitudes and gender roles as well as structural inequalities stand in the way of greater male participation in domestic work and childcare. Beyond the level of individual choice, many social, political, economic and cultural levels – such as a lack of income equality, vertical segregation, the glass ceiling – are at work that influence the division of paid/unpaid labour between couples. Referring to our initial question about what "freedom of choice" means, it has become clear that its meaning depends on two fundamental assumptions:

1. the analytical framework: Do we see people's decisions as a voluntary expression of themselves, or do we locate them in the social setting?
2. the normative position: Do we prefer a policy and social change leading towards a more gender-equal distribution of resources, paid and unpaid activities – or do we accept or support inequality?

The ideological position while campaigning for the “free choice” of individual couples to decide on how they distribute paid/unpaid work between them overlooks the very gendered nature of the frameworks surrounding these choices – and thus on the inequality in the choices’ foundations and outcomes. Workplace policies at the organisational level, equality policies and welfare state regulations on the national policy level are the biggest drivers: maternity leave arrangements, working time regulations, tax systems and state childcare facilities can either help or hinder the fostering of gender equality. A mere individualistic approach fails to allow any real freedom to choose between family care and labour; not least because it ignores what is most needed to facilitate this: men’s participation in caring responsibilities so as to support gender equality in the distribution of work.

We see that Austria does not provide adequate conditions for men’s involvement in family care. The measures introduced for involving fathers in parental leave may be characterised as being halfway through a paradigm shift since other conditions are lagging behind. For instance, measures in male dominated work areas aimed at better paternity and work–life conditions, including childcare institutions and cultures of addressing care issues, should be reconsidered: So long as kindergarten teachers automatically call the mother if the child is not well one can declare that gendered barriers are in place to care and not to care.

The “caring masculinities” concept should be reflected in the development of policy, for example in welfare regulations that open up space for the re-distribution of care work, with leave days set aside for fathers (‘daddy’s month’), based on ‘use it or lose it’ concepts – and income compensated. Therefore, coherent gender equality policies are needed which provide measures for gender equality that do not neutralise each other.

Last but not least, we need more knowledge about variations in actual gender equality and caregiving, focussing on the diversity of masculinities – not only but, above all, in terms of urban vs. rural residence, ethnic or class background.

If such support is lacking and the state and/or economy continue to support unequal family models, the process leading towards greater gender equality will be delayed, making it more costly for the individual, families and society as a whole; namely the very opposite of what can be called ‘freedom of choice’.

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