

Project 4: Work, Family and Education in Europe: Challenges of Globalization and of Gender

Project Leaders:

Myra Marx Ferree (UW-Madison, Sociology, Women's Studies, and Director, Center for German and European Studies)

Kristopher Olds (UW-Madison, Geography and Campus Coordinator UW World Universities Network)

Elizabeth Thomson, Emerita (UW-Madison, Sociology and Stockholm University, Demography and Sociology)

Project Rationale

Advanced capitalist societies such as the US and Germany are all undergoing transformation in the direction of more flexible labor forces, family forms, educational systems and gender relations. Despite their varieties of political economies, these countries are all dealing with global processes that encourage more flexible forms of work and family relations for both women and men, and that demand life-long learning and transnational skills. Such changes are so sweeping that they have been labeled respectively the "second industrial revolution" and the "second demographic transition."

While such increased flexibility offers advantages, it also imposes strains. Challenges arise not merely within each system taken separately but through their articulation. Policy-makers are struggling with choices about how to deal with work restructuring (e.g. independent contracting and telecommuting, access to pensions), family restructuring (e.g. changing rates of marital dissolution, dual-career families, childlessness, and longevity) and educational restructuring (e.g. responding to global demands for knowledge in the information economy and individual needs for life-long learning). All of these restructurings intersect each other and the equally significant restructuring of gender relations on terms of greater equity and individual choice. These interconnected social transformations are occurring in the context of greater political integration in Europe, more competition among educational and economic institutions globally, and heightened concern for environmental sustainability.

We therefore aim to develop integrated theories and appropriate skills in dynamic, cross-national analysis, combining statistical analysis of quantitative data sets with focused comparative case studies focused on Europe. Our various European partners offer specific models and skills that complement our own depth of expertise on this campus. Transatlantic cooperation also provides mutual access to nationally-based datasets and continuing supervision of students as they carry out field research in multiple sites. We will draw on interdisciplinary expertise in political sociology, economics, demography, education, stratification, and geography. By looking closely at transformations happening in Europe and extending outward to other parts of the world, we intend to develop theoretically advanced and methodologically sound analyses of intersectional social change, and substantively will consider the role of gender as it crosses all these areas.

a. Toward More Integrated Theories of Social Change
(Coordinators: Myra Marx Ferree and Elizabeth Thomson)

The legacy of a model of “separate spheres” for men’s and women’s activities has produced a theoretical gap. On the one hand, family demography and policy studies have focused on women’s behavior, and on the other hand, labor market analysis and stratification research have developed their models based on men. The deep and rich pools of knowledge in these domains are still inadequately theoretically connected. When labor migration, educational opportunity and population aging, for example, are treated as issues specific to only one domain, the crucial connections among them are obscured.

To enlarge and strengthen theoretical connections among economic transformations, family change and gendered social policy requires training researchers whose focus is directed at these connective ‘tissues’ from the start. By bringing together researchers who not only offer particular strengths in each area but also are committed to cross-domain, cross-national research, we will be able to highlight such interactions, and challenge welfare regime typologies that still are oriented more to men’s life-course and undervalue the impact of differences in family and gender policy. For example, the Mediterranean region has a different experience with family and household flexibility than more northern European states like Germany and the Netherlands, and north European countries place notably different emphasis on gender equality. Sweden and the US are more alike in this latter dimension, despite their enormous differences in economic and other social policy; unlike them, Norway and Germany emphasize supporting women’s distinctive family roles.

The internal heterogeneity among states in policy emphasis may have different consequences when considered in terms of cross-domain effects than when seen only in one domain at a time. For example, the US emphasis on liberalism in family and gender policy and its workplace strategy of credentialed professionalism interact in ways that may help explain its observed successes in gender-integrating higher management. European family leaves also may have very different effects on women’s careers depending not only on their duration but the degree of unionization, the flexibility of seniority systems and access to life-long education that is typical for particular sectors of each economy. Such hypotheses can only be explored through a cross-domain approach.

b. Methodological Emphasis on Cross-National Policy Analysis (Coordinators: Kristopher Olds and Elizabeth Thomson)

We emphasize placing work-family-education-gender relations into a comparative framework of analysis, which is an ideal way of exploring the interaction between social policies both across and within differing welfare states. On the one hand, across different types of social policy regime, the implications of work-family flexibilities for gender relations (e.g. the relationship between wives’ wage levels and husbands’ unemployment duration and increased or decreased gender inequality) would be expected to be different.