

FAMILIES IN FRAGMENTS



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**WHY THE EU MUST BRING
BACK THE FAMILY**

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1. Executive Summary

- Families are important informal units within which the accumulated knowledge of generations is passed down and subtly changed.
- European Union policymakers often view families as a potential risk and seek to use them as tools for achieving their own goals.
- This has led to policies that separate and individualise family members, rather than recognising the family as a whole unit.
- European Union social policies related to work-life balance, equalities, childcare and support to children all promote fragmentation of the family.
- This approach has negative consequences, such as ignoring the choices some women make to prioritise family over work and has adversely affected lower income families.
- Individualisation of family members undermines the integrity of families and the authority of parents.
- It is crucial to recognise the importance of families as a cohesive unit and to include them as such in EU social policy.
- This will help to address the concerns and needs of families.

2. Introduction

Across the European Union, families are struggling. Over the past decade, living standards, employment, and the ability to put food on the table have become less secure. Many families worry that their future is under threat. Meanwhile in policymaker circles the family, as a medium through which cultures are transmitted from generation to generation, is increasingly seen as a problem—a site where outdated behaviours and beliefs are produced and reproduced.

This paper describes the way that social policy in the European Union views the family as increasingly fragmented and a secondary consideration to other objectives. The family becomes seen as an impediment, instrument or target for intervention, but rarely as a cohesive whole whose autonomy, continuity and comfort represent worthwhile objectives in themselves.

The European Union does not have a family policy so much as it has an anti-family policy: an approach that fragments families into discrete individuals, who in turn become seen as tools or problems to policymakers in the quest for often-conflicting goals. From this perspective, the family is not only conceived of in fragmented terms, but also as a target for interventions designed to break ‘cycles’ of social problems such as poverty and to root out unwanted values, beliefs and behaviours.

This report outlines the ways in which families, though subject to change historically and cross-culturally, nonetheless continue to play an important role in shaping our society. It reviews problems faced by families across Europe before turning to the current foci of social policy at the European level. We point to the EU’s *Pillar of Social Rights* proclaimed in 2017, which contains 20 principles guiding social policy of Member States, as indicative of the paucity of thinking about families in cohesive terms. This partitioning of the family within EU policy directives leads to family relationships being framed as increasingly antagonistic. We outline the way that this occurs across the following three areas of the Pillar and related strategies and documents:

Work-life balance: The overwhelming focus of the work-life balance agenda is on integrating women into employment. EU policy emphasises work as the main form of support via a dual-earner family model, while other means of supporting families are downplayed. This means that the full range of choices that women might make in relation to their families is neither recognised nor supported.

Equalities: EU policy conceives of equality as achievable mainly through market integration of women (rather than, for instance, through their ability to make a range of choices), while other forms of family support are in retreat. Families become subordinated to an equalities agenda, and family responsibilities, beliefs and behaviours are instrumentalised or denigrated in pursuit of this goal.

Childcare and support for children: Early childhood education and care were once seen as important for both children and families. While they continue to be seen as key to allowing parents to work, the focus of policy has shifted from parents to children. Early childhood interventions have also become central to policies aiming to address social inequalities and disrupt allegedly problematic behaviours and beliefs originating in families. This disregards potential sources of social problems elsewhere. The trend towards a ‘child-focused’ approach and its effect on family integrity needs to be discussed more widely in society and in future reports.

While most countries still approach family policy with adults in mind, there has been a retreat at the European level from a focus on the family as a bonded unit and a significant site for informal forms of socialisation. In its place, families are often viewed as a series of distinctive and sometimes antagonistic parts which form key points for policy intervention and the achievement of pre-determined agendas. This paper gives an overview of these policy trends. It argues for recognising the importance of families as cohesive units and not simply as sites for social engineering in European social policy.

3. The current situation

Even before the ‘cost of living crisis’ began to make headlines, families have been struggling. A recent survey carried out by Ipsos for Secours Populaire Français of 6000 people across six European countries (France, UK, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland), revealed large numbers struggling with rising bills, facing precarious futures and declining living standards.¹ According to the survey, 55% felt they faced significant risks to their economic situation in the coming months. A similar proportion saw a decrease in purchasing power over the past three years, with many cutting down on travel and home heating to make ends meet. A majority of those surveyed found themselves in highly precarious financial situations, unable to make further cuts to household expenses or cover unforeseen costs. Almost all respondents in Greece (88%) were in this financially delicate situation. Rising prices and drops in income from all sources were cited as primary reasons. Recent research shows incomes permanently ‘scarred’ since the 2008 financial crisis.² This does not take into account the shock from household energy prices, which increased by up to 62% in 2022.³

difficulties experienced by families into distinct issues. For example, as this report details in the sections that follow, poverty is portrayed as something that is experienced by children or passed down in families, but rarely something that is felt by entire families. Similarly, concern for ‘child poverty’ figures prominently on EU policy agendas, recognised as principle #11 of the Pillar which expressly states that ‘Children have the right to protection from poverty’.⁸ However, ‘family poverty’ is not accorded the same prominence, as though children experience these conditions on their own. As the next section details, it is crucial to understand that childhood and parenthood exist in relation to each other, and the problems experienced by families are not felt solely by the individuals comprising them.

“EU social policy fragments the difficulties experienced by families into distinct issues.”

These threats are felt particularly strongly by families. The Secours Populaire Français survey found parents sacrificed personal purchases and self-care to give their children a decent standard of living.⁴ Nearly half (48%) described depriving themselves of food to provide for their children.⁵ They described foregoing holidays and activities and worried about being able to meet their children’s future needs as their financial situation deteriorates. The organisation Growth from Knowledge (GfK) has reported vast divergences in purchasing power between the richest and poorest nations across Europe.⁶ Other research shows that within nations, the poorest families have seen their situation worsen.⁷

Despite this, it is notable how little these phenomena are considered at the European level in terms of their specific impact upon families. EU social policy fragments the

4. Why do families matter?

Both policy and broader social scientific literature tends to see 'the family' as a passé or even 'zombie' category.⁹ Authors of a 2019 report on gender equality for the European Commission felt the need to enclose 'the family' in scare quotes.¹⁰ Even 'family policy' itself is viewed with suspicion, as a smokescreen for a putatively regressive agenda as opposed to a proper focus on gender and other equalities.¹¹ However, while families have changed considerably, 'the family' still occupies a central place in most people's lives.¹² Sympathetic empirical and theoretical considerations of the family put forward a much more complex picture in which families are places of attention and care, as well as how societies and cultures pass on what they feel is important to the next generation.¹³

At its most basic, the biological facts of human life mean that societies are necessarily composed of new members coming into being while existing members pass away. The fact that individuals can only play a small part in the history of humanity means that a culture's accumulated experiences, practices and knowledge must be passed from one generation to the next.¹⁴ This is not a static nor one-way process. As members of each generation encounter the ideas and customs of their predecessors, they inevitably understand and reshape them in new ways. In turn, these novel understandings reverberate back through societies' other members. Processes of social development and change are affected by the new approaches each generation takes to the accumulated cultural heritage passed down to them.

Historically, families have played a key informal role in this transmission, but formal institutions such as education have increasingly acted to smooth the transition from childhood, as part of a family, to adult life, as an individual citizen.¹⁵ Nonetheless, a large portion of our knowledge of the world comes not through these formal and explicit processes but rather through implicit everyday interactions within families and with other members of the community.¹⁶ Moreover, around the world, families are experienced (or idealised) as a 'last refuge' from the principles that dominate wider society.¹⁷ For many, mutual interdependence within the family acts as a bulwark against the pressures

of life outside.¹⁸ European families are not just composed of collections or hierarchies of individuals, but also comprise relationships bound together in many different ways, drawing on emotions, feelings of intimacy and love, social norms as well as genetic and descent relations.¹⁹ The more intangible aspects of family life offer a sense of refuge from the calculating logic of the outside world, even for women who bear most of its costs and drawbacks.²⁰

"A large portion of one's knowledge of the world comes from implicit everyday interactions within families."

Childhood and parenthood cannot be understood in isolation but are rather fundamentally relational concepts. Becoming a parent is not the result of acquiring skills, but rather comes about through a developing bond with a child. Problems and successes echo through familial relationships, for instance in the experience of financial pressures or poverty and as family members pass through significant life phases. These relational experiences are often abstract and intangible yet have become increasingly concretised in social policy; for instance, in the notion that insecure attachments between parents and children can harm children, leading to an array of personal and social problems.²¹

Similarly, policymakers in many countries have been receptive to attempts to quantify so-called 'adverse childhood experiences', linking these to a range of social problems.²² This growing politicisation of parenting and childhood instrumentalises familial relationships, linking them to a series of risks, problems and goals. It also lays the blame for a wide variety of social problems at the feet of parents and families.

However, the relational nature of families means that they are more than the sum of their parts. Children's lives are closely tied to those of adults because they are experiencing society and events at the same time and from a shared location. It is through these common experiences that families forge common goals.²³ While conflicts certainly arise,

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these connections and goals are more often reciprocal. Indeed, human life itself is not an individual achievement, but is rather shared and interdependent, with families representing the key site within which this sharing and interdependence occurs across the life course for most people.

This sense of one's family as a site of mutuality and refuge is reflected in the activities that families undertake to make their lives 'worth living', both in the present and across generations.²⁴ Indeed, people often make sense of their anxieties about their livelihoods in familial and intergenerational terms. Commonly repeated anxieties such as whether one will be able to afford children, whether one's children will find jobs or a home, or broader concerns about younger generations being 'lost', highlight the importance of families and intergenerational continuity to how many people make sense of and giving meaning to their aspirations.²⁵

Through appreciating the centrality and relational nature of families, the problems they face gain greater clarity. Individuals within families worry not only about their own wellbeing, but about the integrity and continuity of their relations. Yet in European social policy, the family is considered in increasingly fragmented and, at times, oppositional terms. To understand the effects of policies, directives and broader economic trends fully, they must be considered, where relevant, within familial contexts. Doing so opens up opportunities to speak to people in terms of their own perceived needs and desires.

5. Why do families matter to policymakers?

From a policy outlook that has become prevalent over the past three decades in the European Union and globally, families matter because they are a key site from which problems allegedly emerge and thus where they must be solved. As many social problems have resisted policy solutions, the family's role in socialisation has made it a central focus of governments in the search for solutions that 'work'.

Rather than being a key informal site through which societies perpetuate (and subtly change) themselves over time, the passing on of accumulated knowledge across generations is now often seen as a process through which unhelpful attitudes, values and behaviours are perpetuated. Policy logic thus dictates that a central focus for the achievement of progress toward specified social objectives should be on intervention into families and the individuals comprising them.

"The EU sees family life as a process through which unhelpful attitudes, norms, values and behaviours are perpetuated."

As touched upon in the previous section, the need for societies to continue themselves through socialisation of new members has become more formalised and instrumentalised. That is, since many individual and social problems are understood as emerging from the passage of erroneous behaviours and beliefs from one generation to the next, socialisation of societies' new members is viewed as something best overseen by trained professionals in formal settings such as education and childcare or in the provision of parenting education. Since the 1990s, policymakers in Europe have seen the need for 'parenting support' in the form of the provision of 'parenting skills' as key to solving a range of problems, but especially reducing poverty and social exclusion.²⁶ These trends have been at least partially driven by the conviction that poverty and social exclusion are cyclical, passed down from parents to children.²⁷ Disrupting such 'cycles' has become a key focus of policy. Cyclical understandings of disadvantage tend to see poverty as improvable by behaviour management at the individual level, downplaying deeper and more

intractable economic issues that persistent inequalities in society reflect.²⁸

Similarly, broader social issues like gender inequalities are seen as resulting from stereotyping originating in gendered familial roles. Yet social policy also tends to see parental behaviours as powerful determinants of children's future success and therefore a key focus for social engineering projects. Mothers in particular have tended to be portrayed as 'critical yet incompetent and risky', requiring a range of supports and professional expertise to attend to an ever-broadening and ever-more important range of parenting expectations.²⁹

For women, who are also expected to work full-time as a prerequisite for starting a family, this produces a situation in which they are pulled in multiple directions by competing and intensifying responsibilities.³⁰ However, policymakers have tended to ignore these contradictions, seeing differences in workforce participation between women and men as a straightforward result of gender stereotyping which can be remedied by further intervention into family life. This is evident, for instance, in official encouragement of men to undertake caring responsibilities and upkeep of the home in order to model positive behaviours for the next generation and head off the perpetuation of stereotypes.³¹ In practice, these policies are less about gender equality than increasing the amount of time that both parents spend with children, who are viewed as highly vulnerable and in need of intensive 'quality time' with parents.³² The result is not so much the end of gender stereotypes as spreading the experience of a 'time crunch' to men as well as women.

In these ways, policymakers view social engineering in the form of 'expert-led' childhood and parenting interventions as a key—and much simpler—path to solving social problems. However, the effect is to produce new problems by failing to see families as coherent wholes, exacerbating competing expectations placed upon mothers and fathers as workers and as parents. There is also a tendency to place blame on parental behaviours, deflecting attention from deeper and more difficult economic issues and giving little consideration to how such behaviours

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may 'make sense' in different familial contexts.

Feeding these trends is a growing field of expertise on 'parenting', a word emerging in the mid-twentieth century in many countries and growing in prominence since.³³ 'Parenting', now understood as something requiring specialised knowledge, has in turn been increasingly subject to scientific quantification, so that parental behaviours are described in terms of how well they correlate statistically with long-term goals such as educational outcomes.³⁴ Instrumental approaches to family life and education are advocated, in which children are provided with the 'right' environment, one built on middle-class norms and assumptions and requiring considerable investments in 'time, space and equipment'.³⁵

"Family life is viewed as a way in which 'undesirable' values are learned and therefore where policies must be targeted."

These shifts have produced a number of consequences including the subjection of poorer and working-class families to growing levels of suspicion and surveillance and the undermining of parental authority and autonomy in the making of decisions in relation to their children.³⁶ The transformation of family life into a series of behaviours and techniques linked to a succession of targets and outcomes contrasts sharply with the ways that many people experience their families precisely as havens away from the calculations of public life, and subjects even the private sphere of the family home to a series of key performance indicators.

As problems persist, faith in the ability of families to live up to the behaviours supposedly required of them has dwindled, and intervening in other institutions has become increasingly seen as necessary. For instance, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) saw education at all levels as key to preventing problems such as radicalisation and achieving shared values across Europe, including particular notions of equality. In this respect, actions taken by many countries, as early as preschool, to 'dismantle gender stereotyping' have been praised and further steps towards 'a change

of mindsets, starting early in the socialisation process' suggested.³⁷

For policymakers, the nature of children as 'unfinished' presents an apparent opportunity to control the future, which entails greater policy focus not just on education but also on the families and familial relationships within which children live.³⁸ These sites become central in social engineering projects aiming to solve a variety of problems. Not only do these efforts ignore other possible causes of problems, but they also produce new moralities that demand allegiance not to tradition, but to new and constantly evolving practices and attitudes.³⁹ 'Such systems seek the explicit management of interactions between the generations, and frame the knowledge and practices of older generations as outdated, unhealthy, and dangerous.'⁴⁰ Both formal and informal means through which societies reproduce themselves are thus viewed as both highly significant for the solution of social problems and highly fraught as potential sources of new risks.

6. Conceptual Autonomy

This transformation of families into locales for policy solutions is often accomplished by according their constituent elements ‘conceptual autonomy’.⁴¹ In sharp contrast to the more relational view described above, this approach seeks to uncouple individuals (usually women and children)⁴² from the assumptions of the private sphere and, in the case of children, the adult world.⁴³ This approach produces a number of separate and autonomous foci for research and policy—women/gender, children/childhood, parents all come to be viewed as increasingly autonomous and as sources of potential tension and conflict. For children, this move frequently entails the ‘centring’ of children’s specific experiences as well as according or enabling their supposed capacities for agency and decision making apart from the family and adult society.⁴⁴

These trends are reflected in top-down policy and institutional moves to give children greater voice and opportunities for political participation. Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union on the rights of the child⁴⁵ is a key moment in recognising children as ‘independent and autonomous holders of rights who have needs and interests which are different from adults.’⁴⁶ However, implementation of EU agendas to concretise these rights, including via fostering greater child participation in decision making,⁴⁷ have been slow to materialise across Member States, with the European Commission citing tensions between adult/parental rights and countries’ ‘restrictive public attitudes towards the child’s place in society’ as key obstacles.⁴⁸

In many ways, conceptual autonomy allows for greater consideration of children’s perspectives, avoiding children’s viewpoints and unique positioning being swallowed up by adult concerns. However, as families become more and more reduced to a series of parts at which interventions can be targeted, it is inevitable that the family comes to be seen as a source of increasing tension and antagonism, as agendas and strategies come into conflict. The intense focus upon the specificity of children’s worlds as distinct from adults and the tendency to see these spheres as increasingly autonomous can produce perceptions of children as being in opposition to adults. Indeed, the privacy

of the family itself (Article 7 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union)⁴⁹ is increasingly seen as being in contradiction to the best interests of the child, such as when parents choose to use mild forms of corporal punishment to correct their children.⁵⁰ In other cases the allegedly deficient parenting practices of often poor and working-class parents are seen as a detriment to the development of children’s human capital.⁵¹ Scholars working in the fields of parenting culture studies and childhood studies increasingly recognise the ways in which the legacy of conceptual autonomy has led to this oppositional thinking, with ‘children’ counterposed to ‘adults’ or even ‘parents’ against ‘non-parents’ as communities composed of informal relations of social reproduction lose their meaning and significance.⁵²

“A ‘child-centred’ approach may not necessarily be best and indeed can produce a number of unintended effects.”

There has been growing recognition that conceptual autonomy’s favouring of a ‘child-centred’ approach may not necessarily be best and indeed can produce a number of unintended consequences, such as the abovementioned promotion of an ideal of ‘intensive parenting’.⁵³ An increase in the number of children removed from the family home by authorities has also raised alarms that the focus on diffuse notions of ‘child wellbeing’ and overzealous expansion and promotion of children’s rights have produced demonstrably negative outcomes, particularly for immigrant, minority and poor and working-class families.⁵⁴

While there are undoubtedly conflicts between generations and within families, the tendency to see the family as a source of antagonism and friction among relatively autonomous and constituent parts can deflect attention from its relational and reciprocal aspects and the ways that families share in the common cause of making life worth living. There is therefore a need to redevelop ways of viewing family relationships in the context in which they

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are lived and through which people make sense of their aspirations. However, when one turns to the ways in which social rights and other agendas have been interpreted by EU policymakers, trends run in precisely the opposite direction.

7. A Fragmented Pillar

The tendency toward family fragmentation and individualisation in policy discourse is particularly marked in the EU's *Pillar of Social Rights* and related strategies and documents. The Pillar sets out 20 key principles and rights that the European Parliament, Council and Commission see as central to building a 'Europe that is fair, inclusive, and full of opportunity'.⁵⁵ While the Pillar is concerned with a broad range of social rights that impact upon families in many ways, families do not represent a singular, distinct dimension. Indeed, the Pillar's 20 principles give scant sense that Europeans live in families at all. In what follows we consider the ways that this fragmentation reveals a profound ambivalence towards the family as a relational unit and informal site of social reproduction across three broad aspects of the Pillar: work-life balance, equalities, and childcare and support to children. Across these three concerns, the above-described themes remain clear: a tendency toward conceptual autonomy that frames family relationships as antagonistic, and social policy that sees families as an afterthought and even an impediment to the achievement of other agendas.

7.1. Work-Life Balance

In the Pillar's conceptualisation of social rights, principle #9 on work-life balance is the closest one comes to a family policy. Cutting across other principles such as those relevant to equalities and childcare, it forms the most enduring focus of what might be called a quasi-family policy at the European level. Yet where families are mentioned in this and related documents, it is often in the context of the need for women to work outside of the home, targeting the familial arrangements, stereotypes and behaviours that might enhance or impede this goal.

The overarching ideal is of the dual-earner family as a contributor to broader goals such as economic growth and increasing overall labour market participation. These goals become particularly important in the face of the retrenchment of other forms of family support in competitive markets that demand lower taxation and which put pressure on welfare systems.⁵⁶ In the past, family policies were often designed to address inequality among families or between families and childless individuals. However, with the

Lisbon Strategy, the European Commission placed a greater emphasis on supporting the integration of both parents into the labour market. This was seen as integral to the stability and wellbeing of families, with both parents' economic engagement conceptualised as a key pre-requisite and foundation for families.⁵⁷

“The idea that some women may make a conscious choice to leave or forego work in favour of family life is rarely considered.”

In this context, many of the traditional points of focus for family policies (such as family allowances, survivor pensions, tax-relief, and maternity leave) have receded in favour of the dual-earner model. With its emphasis on work-life balance and workplace focused equalities, the trajectory of EU social rights feeds this rollback, as integration into the market becomes the main means through which women's advancement and the conditions of families are to be improved.

Along with this move have come a series of rhetorical shifts. Principle #9 on work-life balance states:

*Parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services. Women and men shall have equal access to special leaves of absence in order to fulfill their caring responsibilities and be encouraged to use them in a balanced way.*⁵⁸

It is notable that while there are 'parents', 'women' and 'men', and there are 'people with caring responsibilities', there are no 'families'. Moreover, in the main text of the Pillar and in the press release for the related directive on work-life balance, while there are fathers, there are no 'mothers'.⁵⁹ While parental leave had historically been framed in terms of the health of the new mother and baby, European Commission rhetoric has gradually shifted from 'mothers to parents' and from 'mothers to fathers'.⁶⁰ Proposals speak of 'parental, paternity and carer's leave'⁶¹ but not of

A Fragmented Pillar

'maternity leave'. Men are encouraged 'to take up parental and caring responsibilities' and to support 'women's participation in the labour market.'⁶² Men become 'fathers' or 'parents' and mothers become 'women' who must be supported in parenthood primarily with the aim of facilitating participation in the labour market.

"In EU documents, there are 'parents', 'women' and 'men', and there are 'people with caring responsibilities'. But there are no 'families'."

Parental leave thus becomes highly instrumentalised. Paternity leave provisions are motivated by a variety of objectives beyond simply making life easier for families, including observations that shared parental leave foreshortens the time a woman is out of work and thus increases the likelihood of her return.⁶³ They are also about challenging alleged gender norms by encouraging men to take on a greater role in childcare and the home. In this way, proposals for work-life balance legislation are justified as providing incentives for 'parents' (fathers) to 'participate in family life'.⁶⁴ The 2019 EU Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers offers attractive entitlements to fathers driven by studies showing that fathers who take parental leave tend to be more involved in childcare, particularly in the early weeks of a child's life, and that parental leave policies are effective at promoting fathers' involvement in childcare and domestic work.⁶⁵

Although the directive on work-life balance released in 2019 refers to mothers, fathers and even families in the longer description of new rules for Member States, here too, family life is often portrayed in an antagonistic relationship to the interests of women.⁶⁶ Rule changes intended to encourage men to take up leave/flexible work are communicated in terms of reducing 'the relative amount of unpaid family work undertaken by women and leaving them more time for paid employment'.⁶⁷ The family calls her away from work, sometimes forever,⁶⁸ and this is straightforwardly interpreted as a problem to be overcome.

While this undoubtedly reflects a real antagonism, there is an assumption (and implicit imperative) that equality is only achieved through integration and progression

within employment. The idea that some women may make a conscious choice to leave work or forego integration in the labour market in favour of family life is insufficiently considered and supported. Moreover, across OECD countries, while middle- and upper-class women tend to benefit from policies seeking to balance work and family life, particularly in terms of childcare expansion, lower-class women and families have suffered.⁶⁹ The retreat of other forms of family support has pushed many families and women in particular into poorly-paid and insecure employment,⁷⁰ worsening situations for poorer families. In this way, while documents associated with the European Pillar continually highlight work-life balance as important for women's gender equality, the result might be to worsen inequalities among women.⁷¹

7.2. Equalities

It is therefore somewhat ironic that work-life balance should be so integral to the EU's equalities agendas. While there is no specific 'family' dimension of the Pillar, an entire section consisting of four principles is dedicated to equal opportunities and equal access to the labour market. Principles #2 and #3 promise greater equality between men and women in terms of employment participation, terms and conditions and career progression,⁷² and mentions of the family thus tend to be subordinated to these principles.

In discussions of equality in the Pillar, families are an afterthought—important to the extent that they present obstacles to equalities or become sites of intervention and behaviour management. For instance, in the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019, the fact that many women live in families becomes significant in relation to stereotyping, domestic violence, and the need to encourage men to share 'responsibility within the household'.⁷³ In 2018, the European Commission organised seminars with member state representatives on gender equality which featured 'promoting fathers' involvement in family work'.⁷⁴ Again, families become important when they or their members' behaviours are alleged to impede other goals.

On the other hand, while families are accorded little recognition within the Pillars, they reappear in the 'Union of Equality' agenda in relation to LGBTIQ families. In a strategy foregrounded in European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's 2020 State

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of the Union Address, family ties are portrayed far less antagonistically as 'rainbow families' seek to cross EU internal borders:

*"Due to differences in national legislations across Member States, family ties may not always be recognised when rainbow families cross the EU's internal borders. The Commission will bring forward a legislative initiative on the mutual recognition of parenthood and explore possible measures to support the mutual recognition of same-gender partnership between Member States."*⁷⁵

The difficulties experienced by diverse families in maintaining their integrity as they move across borders do require greater discussion within nation states. However, that the language and valorisation of families should be side-lined except in such instances highlights that policymakers think little of families except when opportunities arise to make statements about other agendas—in this case, equalities.

"The goal is to remake families into forms conducive to governance along pre-determined lines."

In fact, policy approaches that some scholars characterise as 'neoliberal' have little difficulty according recognition to diverse family forms.⁷⁶ The desire to stipulate a family's shape pales into insignificance in comparison to dictating what happens within them. In this way, little is said about the makeup of families while policy directives as well as treaties and conventions on children's rights go into detail about how children should be listened to and approached by society. The goal is to remake families into forms conducive to governance along pre-determined lines. From this perspective, the characteristics of individual members are of little concern.

Within equalities agendas, 'the family' and even 'family policy' are viewed with suspicion. In 2018, the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs commissioned a report tracking a perceived backlash against gender equality and women's and girls' rights in six EU Member States.⁷⁷ The authors identify what they view as several worrying trends including suppression of civil society mobilisations and gender equality movements,

as well as a turn toward traditional forms of security in the family, nation, and religion. While the rollback of civic freedoms should raise concerns, there is a danger that foregrounding the interests of families can be swept aside as straightforwardly reactionary or 'regressive'. Indeed, summarising the six-country policy survey, the co-author of another report prepared for the European Commission summarises actions taken by a number of governments, including 'redefining institutions and policies from a focus on women (or gender) to a focus on "the family"' as a 'profoundly anti-egalitarian strategy.'⁷⁸ Moreover, family policy is viewed as offering a cover for highlighting 'men's movements'.

The fragmented vision of families can lead to the assumption that family policy means that men and women must compete for recognition. Groups in society who may be members of families can require protections, particularly in instances where conflicts and even dangers arise. Yet caution should be exercised in viewing family and equalities agendas as necessarily antagonistic, with one needing to subsume, subordinate or sideline other concerns. To move forward, dialogue must be opened up between the extremes to make space for less polarised perspectives and to make room for more relational views of the family.

7.3. Childcare and Support to Children

In a similar manner to the repositioning of women as active subjects capable of exercising their own agency outside of the family unit, children's specific life worlds and capacities have been accorded greater recognition apart from those of adults and outside of the private sphere of the family. This has come with an attendant centring of children's experiences in policy and scholarship. This is evident in several dimensions of the Pillar and in other pronouncements made at the European level. While some of these require greater attention in future work, the final section of this report sketches the tangible influence and implications of according increased conceptual autonomy to children so that families are secondary to the needs of and concerns for children.

The Pillar singles out as principles childcare and support for children and work-life balance, but there is little sense that these things happen within a unit called 'the family'.

A Fragmented Pillar

Principle #11 of the Pillar, 'childcare and support of children' abstracts children from any familial context:

*'Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality. Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.'*⁷⁹

Previously, childcare had been seen as a benefit both to parents and to children. However, this view has been gradually eroded. The EU Social Investment Package issued in 2013 drew attention to 'intergenerational transmission of disadvantage' and advocated early intervention to disrupt these allegedly problematic family ties.⁸⁰ From this perspective, childcare was seen as primarily benefitting children with its benefits to families accorded a secondary concern.

In the European Pillar, families retreat even further. Now, childcare is an intervention of benefit only to the young. Childcare, the key instrument through which family policy achieved its dual objectives of supporting children's development and the employment of their parents is no longer seen explicitly as serving this double purpose.⁸¹

However, it is in a more tacit concern for socialisation that the EU's attitude toward families is most visible. In frameworks such as the previously mentioned Education & Training Strategy 2020, education of all types and at all levels represents an important site for changing putatively regressive social norms and values. For instance, the European Parliament condemned 'in the strongest possible terms' a Hungarian Parliament decision to ban teaching of LGBTIQ content in schools, urging the European Commission to impose punitive measures such as withholding EU funds. The Hungarian Parliamentary ban was condemned as an affront to human rights while the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, defended it as necessary protection ensuring parents have a say in the sexual development and education of their children.⁸²

While this incident was controversial for many reasons, the extreme responses betray the degree of antagonism and polarisation that has built up across equalities, children and family agendas. Moreover, the strength of the EU response reveals the assumption

that without intervention, informal kinds of socialisation oversee the reproduction of regressive attitudes and are insufficient for progress to prevail.

"The EU's Social Investment Package advocated early intervention to disrupt allegedly problematic family ties."

In terms of material supports, the Pillar adopts the above-described 'cycles' of poverty and social exclusion model, through which poverty and social exclusion are passed on intergenerationally and governments are enjoined to 'break the cycle'.⁸³ The *Pillar of Social Rights* Action plan accords centrality to 'breaking the intergenerational cycles of disadvantage' by improving poorer children's access to services, fostering equal opportunities, and preventing 'children in poor families from becoming adults at risk of poverty'.⁸⁴ Poorer children are accorded a central focus and their problems are increasingly to be attended to using policy instruments that bypass the family unit.⁸⁵ Families and communities become necessary in instrumentalised terms, to ensure 'children's wellbeing and development'⁸⁶ and to avoid social problems that these children might cause in the future. In other words, families are essential, not in the ways described at the outset of this report but as a means to tackle social problems at their assumed roots—in families.

8. Children's Rights

A final aspect of family fragmentation is evident in the discourse about children's rights, central to Council of Europe statements since at least the mid-2000s. The impact that this has had on family integrity and autonomy is vast and will require attention in subsequent reports. However, for the present purposes it is useful to draw out notable aspects of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee, which are policy initiatives forwarded by the European Commission to 'better protect all children, to help them fulfil their rights and to place them right at the centre of EU policy making.'⁸⁷ Both initiatives were 'informed by extensive consultations with citizens, stakeholders and, most importantly, more than 10,000 children.'⁸⁸ The description of these initiatives continues:

'The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child has been developed for children and with children. Children should have access to information provided in a child-friendly way so they can clearly know what their rights are and, in this case, what the EU plans to do for them.'

Here at least rhetorical moves toward recognising children's autonomy and separation from the familial context are evident. The EU's keenness to underscore the extensive engagement with children highlights that similar engagement is not sought with families. Moreover, individuation of children,

coupled with the inflated importance accorded to early childhood experiences in causing broader social problems, frames relations between parents and children as combative.

Many associated documents were produced in formats accessible to children, and explanations are offered in simple descriptions and images. Within these, there are scant portrayals of children in the context of families. Where there is imagery of families, it is sometimes antagonistic (see example, left).⁸⁹

Like the 'rainbow families' discussed above, when highlighting other agendas, families are portrayed more harmoniously (see below):

Of asylum applications to the EU in 2020

1/3
were children



Out of **119,400**, **2,850** were unaccompanied

1/2

of children worldwide
are victims of violence
each year



Principle #11 of the Pillar formulates children's protection from poverty as a 'right': 'Children have the right to protection from poverty.'⁹⁰ Whereas in the past, support had been directed at families to prevent the poverty of the family and reduce inequalities between families, now 'child poverty' is seen as something that somehow happens outside familial contexts. For instance, children from low-income families are described as at 'higher risk of severe housing deprivation or overcrowding, and are more exposed to homelessness.'⁹¹ This focus on child poverty leads to ambivalent support for the integrity of families. Children's 'right' to be protected from poverty alludes to the possibility that

Children's Rights

families who fall into poverty are not suffering as a unit, but that parent(s) are potentially depriving their children of a right. This is alluded to where the Commission says, 'Poverty should never be the only reason for placing children in care', in which it is tacitly admitted that poverty may be a reason, though not the only reason.⁹² Lifting families out of poverty is an afterthought on the pathway to achieving another objective, such as meeting children's needs or preventing child labour.⁹³ This contrasts with more traditional forms of family policy in which the aim was to prevent the family unit as a whole from falling into poverty. Now there are parts that should not and parts that must not.

9. Putting the Pieces Back Together

Conceptualising family members as autonomous individuals has helped to overcome problems in which women were placed in positions of dependence and children's needs sidelined. But there is a danger that the importance of more holistic approaches is forgotten and 'the family' comes to be viewed as antagonistic to other agendas and thus as a self-evidently regressive unit. Moving from an anti-family policy will require a shift to an approach that views family members in relation to each other. Scholars are increasingly probing the limits of conceptual autonomy and have begun to question trends towards the separation of parents and children in family-related discourses and policy. Children's lives are entangled with those of adults through their common experiences and, in the vast majority of cases, their common causes.

Families are important sites through which cultures pass on the accumulated knowledge of generations. This passing on tends to happen in informal ways. Intergenerational transfer of knowledge and practices is not a static process but can be the source of significant change as new generations (and the diversity that exists within those generations), encounter this knowledge, understand it and fashion it in new ways. This process of encountering new and old, continuity and change, thus acts back on older generations and other aspects of society.

However, modern industrial societies have tended to displace more of this process onto formal institutions such as the education system, so that informal aspects of socialisation through the family are viewed with increasing suspicion. Policymakers around the world, not just the EU, frequently see informal means of transferring information and behaviour between generations as key processes through which social problems and inequalities are instigated and perpetuated. Familial bonds come to be problematised as sources of risk. In response, the constituent parts of the family are accorded 'conceptual autonomy' and viewed as having agency and unique experiences apart from each other, the family, and society's other institutions. Policymakers mobilise them in a bureaucratic project to serve agendas that are increasingly alienated from the desires and aspirations of the populations they target.

This paper has attempted to show the ways in which this fragmentation has led the EU to frame family relationships as antagonistic and sometimes problematic, in pursuit of broader agendas evident in the *Pillar of Social Rights* and related initiatives. Scholarship is increasingly recognising the problematic nature of conceptual autonomy. Society is not simply composed of unattached individuals with their own discrete agendas. Fragmented concepts lead to fragmented approaches that in turn exacerbate competing expectations placed upon family members when viewed as individuals. These policies are ill-equipped to deal with the problems that people across Europe articulate in the terms through which they articulate them. We must bring the family back in to European social policy.

10. Recommendations

- Bring back the family to the heart of social policy. Politicians should talk openly and confidently about the impact of proposed initiatives on the family.
- Research and listen to how difficulties and hardships are experienced by families – with a focus on understanding the day-to-day struggles families face and the hurdles they have to overcome.
- Discuss and debate openly the tensions between the traditional goals of family policy and the equalities agenda.
- Change the narrative that insists there is a simple, antagonistic relationship between individual family members and between the family and other social roles (e.g. parents vs children, parents vs workers). Stress instead the organic links between family members and the family and society.
- Recognise and support a wide variety of educational and childcare choices. Traditional, stay-at-home parenting is no less valid a choice than paid or state-provided labour.
- Stop the incessant reshaping of education and childcare into tools of social engineering. Social problems cannot be solved by such methods.
- Put the impact on the family at the heart of educational and childcare policy and consider how to improve informal ties between the family and other policy areas.
- Critically evaluate the current discourse around 'children's rights'. The current focus risks diminishing parental authority and complicating family life.

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Ashley Frawley is a sociologist and author of two books, *Semiotics of Happiness: Rhetorical Beginnings of a Public Problem* (2015) and *Significant Emotions: Rhetoric and Social Problems in a Vulnerable Age*. Her expertise is in the public presentation of social problems and the increased policy focus on individuals, families and emotions as a route to solving them. She is a fervent defender of family autonomy and has campaigned to stop the policy encroachment into parental decision-making, which lowers the bar for often punitive interventions into family life. Originally from Canada and a member of Nipissing First Nation, she is the mother of two small children. Her hope for MCC Brussels is to open up a space for critical questioning of regressive policies that are dressed in the language of progressivism.



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