

# **Austerity, the Public Sector and the Threat to Gender Equality**

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*Abstract:* Europe is in the grip of austerity policies. Some governments regard this as a medium term cyclical correction but others seek a long term shrinking of the social state. This shrinkage applies particularly to the state's social roles as: a source of income support; a provider of free or subsidised public services; a direct employer; and a defence against the marketisation of society. All four areas have specific significance for women such that we cannot envisage progress towards gender equality in Europe, understood as a socially progressive objective, without a reversal of the austerity trends and an active social state.

### I INTRODUCTION

The aim of austerity is to cut public sector deficits, to be achieved primarily through reduced public expenditure combined with more limited raising of taxes. From favouring expansion of public expenditure to stabilise the economy in the initial phase of the financial crisis, European policy has switched to a policy of strict austerity, as public profligacy has replaced finance sector misbehaviour as the apparent key problem. In some member states austerity policies have been imposed by the Troika but political and market pressures have also required other member states to follow suit. Some member states – notably the UK – have also taken the opportunity of austerity to push for a permanently reduced role for the social state (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). Moreover, even those political parties still critical of cuts are

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pessimistic about prospects for restoring cuts, let alone developing the social model to meet expanding social needs.

All of this is relatively well known. What has not been widely articulated is the argument made here, that austerity is incompatible with a progressive move towards gender equality. The multi-dimensional shrinkage of the public space and public support systems in Europe has major negative impacts for all citizens but particularly for women. Here we follow Pearson's argument that the state plays a crucial role in shaping gender outcomes:

...the ways in which women's labour power is reproduced and made available for employment in global supply chains is hugely shaped by state policies, which have the potential either to channel collective resources and services to support the reproduction of labour power, or to provide freedom for capital to consume women's labour with no responsibility for replenishing or recompensing the individual bodies, families and communities that supply that labour (2014, p. 20).

The failure to identify the gender equality consequences of shrinking the state coincides with a general reduction and almost disappearance of Europe's commitment to gender mainstreaming of policies. In the UK, the Fawcett Society took the UK government to court for failing to gender audit the 2010 budget proposing huge cuts; they lost the case even though the government admitted not following the requirements of the gender equality duty (Fawcett Society, 2013). Its case was later further justified by the findings of the Institute for Fiscal Studies that women and particularly lone parents were the main losers from the cuts (Browne, 2011). Ireland has also dismantled its gender mainstreaming machinery (Barry and Conroy, 2014) so that the public sector cuts have apparently not been systematically appraised for gender effects. Most notably the European Commission has not undertaken any gender mainstreaming of the policies imposed through its Memorandums of Understanding on bailout countries. This is important for shaping the gender outcomes of cutbacks: to state the obvious, cutbacks in defence will have different gender effects from cuts to care services.

Three points of clarification need to be made. First our concern is primarily with the effect on long term capacity to move towards a more gender equal society. Thus the short term argument made by some (Flanders, 2010) that the gender impact of the public sector cuts has to be considered against the gender impacts in the private sector and in the financial crisis is not relevant. The issue is not who bears the immediate burdens of crisis and austerity. Furthermore, in making a case for equal burdens, the problem of gender inequality is sidelined and women's claim to equality is put on hold to

an unspecified future time when it is “affordable”. Meanwhile women are expected to shoulder the same or higher burdens than men in adjusting to the new conditions.

The second issue to clarify is that although gender equality, in the sense of minimising the impact of gender on average life chances, could in theory be achieved in a society without a supportive social state, the outcome is unlikely to be gender equality as conceptualised and fought for over the decades. The one societal model that is pointed to which has moved towards greater formal gender equality with a notable absence of public support is the United States. However, the narrowing of gender gaps, for example in gender shares among low paid labour, has been achieved through downgrading for men rather than upgrading for women. Women’s success in higher level jobs is also based on reliance on low paid labour, mainly female, to substitute for public services and support social reproduction in a weak social state (Mandel and Shalev, 2009). Furthermore the United States is a highly marketised society with limited space for the alternative values that the feminist cause has espoused.

The third clarification is that austerity is only one but an important factor in calling into question the survival of the European social model. Many reforms started before the crisis and austerity may at most be accelerating reforms already in the pipeline. However, austerity may further legitimate plans for a future for Europe without a strong social model. Indeed Draghi, shortly after becoming head of the European Central Bank in 2011, claimed that the European social model had already gone (*Wall Street Journal*, 24 February, 2012). Leaders of European institutions may no longer see the need for Europe to have a social face and it is in this longer term perspective on the future of Europe where the main threat to gender equality lies.

The shrinkage of the state does not apply to all the state’s activities and the state’s role in controlling our everyday lives is not diminishing. Even on the expenditure side, the state’s capacity to pursue wars is not doubted even when its capacity to support pensioners and children is put in question. It is the social state that is subject to shrinkage in relation to all its four main roles;

- (i) as a source of income support,
- (ii) as a provider of free or subsidised public services,
- (iii) as a direct employer,
- (iv) and as a defence against marketisation of society.

Each of these four areas has specific significance for women and progressive gender equality and in each area measures are being taken which limit the prospects for a more gender equal society, with particular intense effects in those member states where the social state is underdeveloped, from a

gender equality perspective. Austerity is about cutting relative to current provision, not adjusted according to any European standard of a social state. However, there are obviously differences among countries in both the intensity and the form of austerity policies but the aim of this paper is to bring out some key implications of austerity rather than discuss the nuances of each countries' policy change.

## II THE STATE AS ALTERNATIVE INCOME SUPPORT TO THE FAMILY AND MARKET

Citizens have three main sources of income support: their employer, their family and the state. Women traditionally have been expected to rely on family income support when not employed or employed at wages below their own needs, with the state in many countries acting primarily to subsidise the male breadwinner. Only the Nordic countries have long established individualised and citizen-based state support. Gender equality implies reduced female dependence on the family where support is discretionary and may be conditional on domestic labour services (see O'Reilly and Nazio, 2014 for an overview of the gender contract). Reliance on the family has also become more difficult: decreases in the family wage and in male job security together with increases in divorce and life expectancy are all reducing the availability and reliability of family support. The traditional reproductive bargain (Pearson, 2014) based on a sole male breadwinner and a female full-time carer has in fact broken down. Women are increasingly supporting themselves through the labour market but are less able than men to secure sufficient labour market support due to more breaks from employment, shorter working hours due to domestic roles and lower pay for the same qualifications and experience (in part due to penalties for interruptions and part-time work). Employers also often contribute less to supporting women for non-work periods in female-dominated occupations and workplaces where the male breadwinner legacy of employer-provided family support is weaker. For example, Kalleberg (2003) found that both women and non-standard workers are more likely not to receive health and retirement benefits in the US and in the UK many part-timers received no holiday pay until it became mandatory under European law. The main exceptions are female-dominated public sector organisations, as discussed further below.

The outcome of these developments is to leave women now often more dependent on state income support than men and thus vulnerable to austerity. The Fawcett Society (2014) estimates that in the UK women rely on benefits for on average 20 per cent of their income compared to 10 per cent for men.

This vulnerability stems from the gendered life-course which both limits women's involvement in the labour market and reinforces the low valuation and low de-commodification of female wage labour. The vulnerability is reinforced by changes in family structures, in women's willingness to seek family support and in the capacity of families to offer support. Women's longer life expectancy further exacerbates this dependency, particularly as women have less wealth which provides the main alternative support to pensions in old age and also because pensions deteriorate in real and relative terms the longer they are in receipt due to less than complete upgrading. Although life expectancy is narrowing between men and women, for the foreseeable future women will constitute over two-thirds of Europe's over 65 population, making the ageing society very much a gender issue (European Union, 2012).

It is through this frame that the changes in welfare income support systems associated with austerity need to be considered. There are four areas of concern:

- Support for social reproduction costs of children.
- Support for non-employment or underemployment in prime age.
- Support for continuity of employment in prime age.
- Support for old age.

With respect to support for the costs of children, child-related subsidies have important impacts on women's incomes and budgets, especially when paid directly to the main carer although the level of subsidy is highly variable among European countries. Where European countries are failing to generate jobs offering living wages – including some contribution to the costs of dependants – these subsidies are vital to protect against child poverty. Evidence suggests that child poverty is increasing across Europe due to cutbacks in benefits and family support (Bradshaw and Main, 2014; Karamessini and Rubery, 2014, p. 340) as well as labour market downturns, and these cutbacks are increasing burdens on women to manage household budgets.

Income support for non-employment or underemployment in prime age is needed for those unable to work due to lack of demand, care responsibilities or disability. The first group has traditionally mainly involved men due to lower activity rates among women and lower benefit entitlements due to means testing in some countries. Women have been increasing their continuity of employment and thus should have more access to unemployment benefit but this still falls below that for men in 13 out of 18 member states, with particularly large gaps in Austria and the UK (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Registered Unemployed from 1 to 2 Months with Access to Insurance or Social Assistance as Percentage of All Unemployed by Gender 2012*

	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Gender Gap</i>
European Union (28 countries)	39.1	35.5	-3.6
European Union (27 countries)	39.2	35.5	-3.7
European Union (15 countries)	43.3	37.9	-5.4
Czech Republic	51.1	53.0	+1.9
Denmark	44.8	39.3	-5.5
Greece	41.5	39.5	-2.0
Spain	47.9	44.7	-3.2
France	47.2	44.9	-2.3
Croatia	23.4	25.6	+2.2
Italy	12.8	9.3	-3.5
Cyprus	29.4	23.5	-5.9
Luxembourg	34.1	26.3	-7.8
Hungary	39.6	40.6	+1.0
Austria	55.7	40.6	-15.1
Poland	16.6	16.7	+0.1
Portugal	32.4	31.3	-1.1
Romania	10.7	16.7	+6.0
Slovenia	33.2	27.8	-4.4
Finland	49.2	45.1	-4.1
Sweden	28.3	20.2	-8.1
United Kingdom	37.0	23.3	-13.7

Source: ELFS data Eurostat database lfsa\_ugadra

Austerity is leading to cuts in benefit levels: for example in the UK the uprating of these benefits has been fixed at 1 per cent for three years with a promise of a freeze for two years if the Conservatives are re-elected in 2015. Men may be more affected as more receive benefits and benefits of a higher value in countries with earnings related benefits. However, increased means testing has more negative effects for women, for example in Portugal where women previously had independent access to benefits (Ferreira 2014). Cuts have also been made to subsidies to underemployment or underpayment, such as tax credits in the UK. If the cuts involve higher clawback rates the impact may be to increase disincentives to second income earners in the household. This will apply in the UK under the proposed new universal credit system, justified on the grounds that the government's priority is to move primary earners off benefits and the reactions of second income earners is of lower importance (Department for Work and Pensions, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This briefing note states "Given constraints on the affordability of the system, incentives for first earners have been given priority over second earners, for example by investing in higher disregards for many working households, rather than creating a specific earnings disregard for second earners" (DWP, 2011, p. 1).

Lone parents dominate those dependent on state benefits in prime age due to care responsibilities. In the UK lone parents, most of whom are women, have borne a very high share of income support cuts (Browne, 2011) while also facing increased pressure to undertake employment, whatever its quality. Here the state is seeking to reduce its commitment to support women who are not able to draw on family support. Efforts to make absent fathers pay the cost have often failed (University of Wisconsin, 2000) so that policy options tend to be restricted to either support from the labour market or the state. Denial of state support may increase women's vulnerability, reducing family break-ups but exposing women to violence, while enforced take-up of poor quality jobs may compromise the care they can offer their children unless there is affordable and reliable childcare.

Cuts are also being made to disability benefits. In the UK these represented the main non means-tested benefit but now contributory benefits have been limited to 12 months after which women who are still unable to work but have a working spouse will have no independent income. These problems apply to men too but more women have working spouses.

The third area, support for continuity of employment, includes paid leave for parents. This form of state expenditure increased in many countries over the decade prior to the crisis and has been an important source of improvement in women's job quality as it enables them to stay attached to the labour market. Some countries have continued to increase support – e.g., in Poland (Plomien, 2014) – but in the immediate reactions to the crisis some cuts in income support were made, thereby reinforcing dependency on the family (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2013; European Women's Lobby, 2012). More frequent cuts or postponements have been imposed on paternity leave, obviously considered even more a luxury good than leave for mothers (Karamessini and Rubery, 2014, p. 335)

The fourth area, income support for old age is of prime concern to women as not only do they account for two-thirds of pensioners (EU, 2012) but the current gender pension gap is estimated to be 40 per cent (Bettio *et al.*, 2013). Pension reform has been a central plank of austerity measures even though they often have limited immediate impact on expenditure, suggesting that austerity is being seized on as an opportunity for reform to reduce future debt (Degryse *et al.*, 2013). Various elements of these reforms are likely to have negative impacts for gender equality, for example:

- Increased contribution years (women already faced a deficit due to interrupted careers).
- Increased reliance on second and third pillars (women have less access to second pillar due to differences in patterns and place of work and have more limited resources for private pensions).

- Reduced benefits for current pensioners (women predominate but limited to date except in Greece).
- Reduced future benefits in line with life expectancy (women main recipients of benefits and expected to reduce their standard of living in line with life expectancy).

Some other reforms may have more gender neutral or even positive gender equality effects including:

- More contribution credits for childcare and part-time work periods
- Cuts in higher level pensions and/or raising or introducing minimum pension income guarantee.

The overall direction of reforms according to European Commission evaluations is that “... the last decade of pension reforms had made the adequacy and sustainability of pension systems far more contingent on outcomes in the labour market and in financial markets. This does not just imply new risks in general, but risks that weigh particularly to the detriment of pension adequacy for women” (EU, 2012, p. 84).

This review also notes that there are two routes to fill the gender pension gap, one by compensation for care periods and the second by raising women’s employment rates and reducing their tendency to work part-time (EU, 2012, p. 85). Although the need for extended care infrastructure to allow women to make this move is recognised, there is no discussion of how this is compatible with current austerity but the focus on activating women for more hours and longer is immediate. The gender pension gap is regarded as reflective of inadequate contribution records which women now need to rectify even in a context of cut to care infrastructures and with no mention of changing men’s behaviour with respect to care. Instead the report focuses on *significant redistribution from men that die earlier to women that live longer* without reference to other significant redistributions among the sexes, for example in unpaid care time and in men’s higher earnings premiums. Furthermore, these apparent benefits for women do not lead to higher annual incomes. Indeed women often face deteriorating annual incomes over their longer life times as pensions tend not to be fully uprated with age. This analysis represents the problems that can result from superficial gender mainstreaming when the redistribution issue between the sexes is viewed from a narrow single issue and single time perspective. Indeed, the overall approach to women’s pensions could be said to be to expect them to “work like a man” while still “caring like a woman”.

Overall the decline in political will to fund income replacement to support citizens over the life course has strong implications for gender equality.



Access to state benefits provides women with vital alternatives to family support, particularly as they still face disadvantage in the labour market and still take on more responsibility for children which reduces their involvement in wage employment. Cuts may have more immediate impacts on men, particularly if they affect those receiving higher benefits most, but the trends towards household means-tested benefits and to reduced support for lone parents have significant negative impacts both on women's rights to economic independence and to their rights to care.

### III PUBLIC SERVICES AS SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Public services are an essential element in any progressive reproductive bargain that enables women to undertake wage employment without this being simply an additional burden on top of their domestic roles. Public services are vital for gender equality in at least three respects. First, they provide the main alternative to unpaid domestic labour which is still done primarily by women. No country examples can be found where the impetus to women's integration into wage employment has come from a significant sharing of unpaid domestic labour between men and women. Second, public care services are critical to ensure that the outcome of integration is neither major care deficits or downwards pressure on wages paid to those providing care in the private services sector. Third public services provide a major source of demand for female wage labour, as discussed in the next section.

The services that have most immediate impact on women's capacity to engage in wage labour are childcare and eldercare. Public childcare tends to offer higher guaranteed quality and is also often subsidised. The problem with too high cost childcare is that decisions on whether to continue in employment are often based on short term financial benefits. Consequently women may interrupt their employment careers even when the costs of this interruption over the life course is very substantial (Rake, 2000; Davies and Joshi, 1991), much higher than the costs of the private childcare. The outcome is not only negative for gender equality but also results in underutilisation of talents and foregone taxes and pensions contributions. Eldercare services again provide an alternative to domestic family labour, an increasing necessity as families become more fragmented, as well as important for women's labour market opportunities. European welfare states have different traditions with respect to the provision of childcare and eldercare – with some countries having more generous provision for one than the other (the UK for example scored well on eldercare but not childcare (Anttonen and Sipilä, 1996).

Prior to the crisis there was a general trend toward public provision and defamilialisation of care, induced in part by the EU adopting targets for

childcare at the Barcelona Summit and by the increased needs of more working parents and an ageing population. While private alternatives do exist and are used, public service provision is the main form that is not strongly associated with the “exploitation” of cheap labour, often female, as the categorisation of care regimes by Simonazzi (2009) makes clear (see Figure 1). Thus where public services were lacking, in several European countries there was a move to use cheap female migrant labour to provide care services. Similar trends may be found for childcare though less well documented, although more self-help groups and informal childcare arrangements among friends and family is another model of provision less applicable to eldercare.

Figure 1: *Comparative Analysis of Care Regimes*

	<i>Care Regimes</i>			
		<i>Formal Market</i>	<i>Mixed</i>	<i>Informal Market</i>
Labour supply	Native	Sweden, France	Germany	
	Mixed	UK	Austria	
	Immigrant			Mediterranean countries

Source: Simonazzi (2009), Figure 1 (modified by current author).

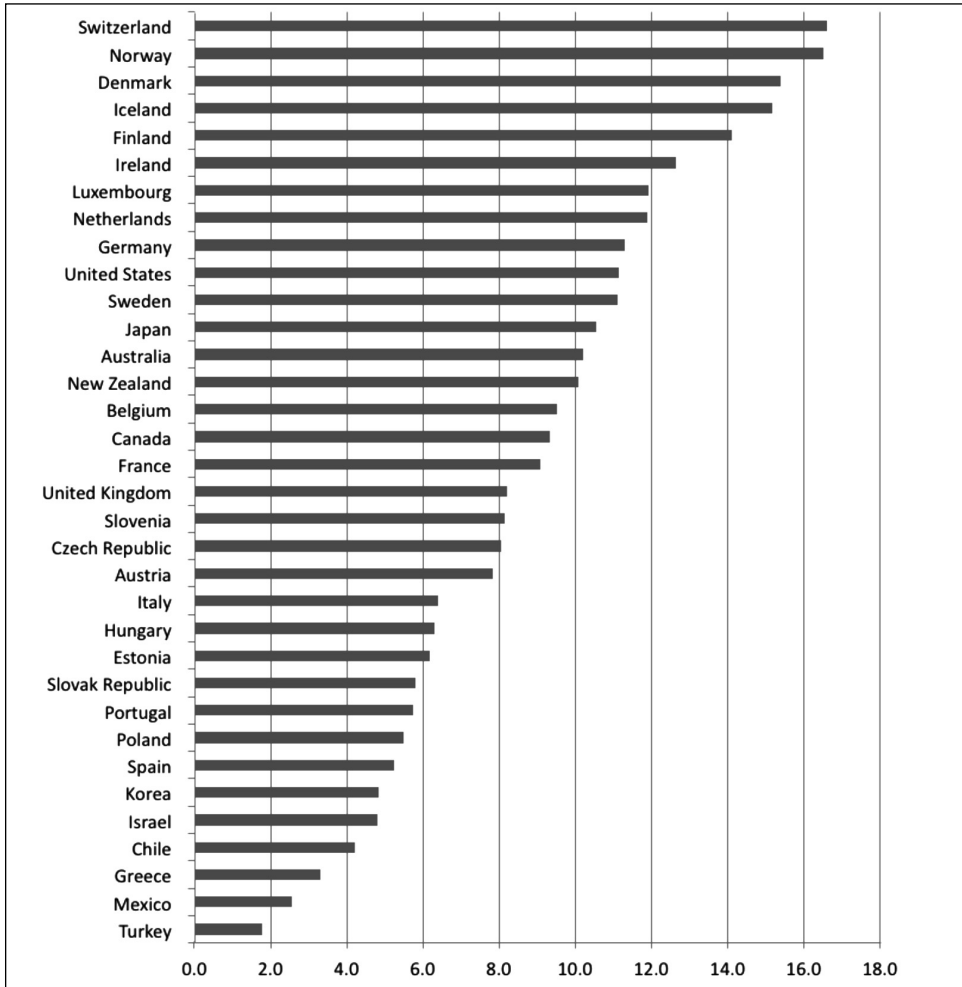
Although most countries were expanding these services prior to the crisis the development was still patchy. Nevertheless some important developments were in the pipeline which have been postponed or cancelled since the crisis. In particular in Spain for the first time elderly people living with their children were to be eligible for home care services. However, the crisis has led to stalled and postponed implementation (see Karamessini and Rubery, 2014, p. 340). Similar problems have beset childcare programmes in Italy and Spain although those in the pipeline in Portugal have been implemented. The UK cut and then partially restored some support for childcare but this is through subsidies more than direct provision. Eldercare provision clearly needed to grow in most places to meet rising needs but instead has been cut back or not expanded in line with demand. The consequences of cutbacks will be both to leave a care deficit for elderly people – and this mainly affects women as users who constitute the majority of the elderly living to very old age and without partners – and an increased pressure on the family to support the elderly, much of which is likely to be absorbed by women.

The outcome is at least a stalling and in some cases a partial reversal of the defamilialisation of care. This has been accompanied by very limited debate over the implications for Europe’s commitment to higher female

employment rate, even though the EU's pension report underlined its continued importance for "pension adequacy". This inconsistency in approach is also evident in a recent initiative by the EU to put social investment back on the European agenda through its social investment package (EU, 2013) which focuses on investment in children's early years, in part through nursery education and childcare, without any clarification of how this investment is to be funded under the austerity programmes. Although welcome in its own terms, it also puts into question whether early years childcare is focused on the educational benefits for children alone or on assisting women to enter employment. Many educational initiatives provide for too short care for this to be practical for women's employment (Jenson, 2008). Early years care provision should embrace both objectives, rather than leaving women to manage the incompatibilities between work schedules and early years care schedules.

Women are also strongly affected by cuts in the core public services of education, health and housing, either directly as users or through their support for other family members who are users. With respect to health care there are major differences among European countries in the extent of nursing care provided and the expectation of family involvement in care of people in hospital (see Figure 2 on nurses per capita and Yi and Jezewski (2000) on the problem of Korean nurses adjusting to working in the US as expected to provide the intimate care provided by family members in Korea). The need to supplement hospital provided care with domestic labour will have increased due to the cuts in health personnel in many Troika countries such as Spain and Greece. Early discharge from hospital to reduce costs is also increasing burdens on families and thus women to provide more support in the home. Health care coverage is also falling in some Troika countries such as Greece and this suggests that the family may be having to cope with people who are sick but unable to seek treatment, thereby also increasing the care burden. Reduced availability of cheap housing and reduced support for higher education is also increasing the share of young adults staying in the family home until they are in their late twenties and even thirties, thus often extending the period over which mothers undertake domestic work for their children (Anxo *et al.*, 2010). More and more older women are also staying in the labour market so that these care burdens are being combined with higher wage work activity.

The alternatives to public service provision for care services range from reduced and low fertility, use of private services by the minority of women in high paid jobs (and employment of other women at low wage rates to provide these services) (Korpi *et al.*, 2013). A similar hierarchy applies to the elderly with those who can afford it hiring low wage and often migrant women while other families face the prospect of care deficits or major burdens on the family.

Figure 2: *Practising Nurses per 1,000 Population 2012*

Source: OECD Health statistics 2014 <http://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/health-data.htm>

Data for 2012 except 2011 for France, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland and 2009 for Denmark and Greece.

What is not likely is for women to spontaneously return to full-time domestic labour in the household and such a strategy would in any case be inadequate for addressing the major problems of eldercare. It is not yet clear if Europe is ready to accept these care deficits but so far it has stood by and allowed universal health care in Greece and to some extent in Spain to recede, even though universal health care has been a central principle of the European social model.

#### IV PUBLIC SECTOR AS EMPLOYER

The public sector as an employer is important for gender equality for four reasons.

- It employs a high proportion of women in employment, especially the higher qualified.
- It often offers significantly better pay and conditions for women than the private sector.
- Work-life reconciliation policies tend to be more developed than in the private sector.
- Equality policies are often more far reaching than in the private sector.

##### 4.1 *The Public Sector as a Major Employer of Women*

Public services, the closest approximation available for the public sector (see Table 2), in 2010 accounted for nearly three-fifths (57.4 per cent) of all women in employment with tertiary education in the EU 27 compared to only 32.1 per cent for men. These high ratios of higher educated women in public services are found in most European countries with the share only falling below 50 per cent in two countries (Cyprus and Romania) but equal to or higher than two-thirds in six countries (Denmark, Portugal, the Netherlands, Sweden, Greece and Italy). The absorption of men with higher education into public services is also substantial, only falling below 30 per cent in five EU countries. The share of all women in employment found in public services is more than twice the share for all men (40.3 per cent compared to 17.8 per cent for EU 27) although the concentration is lower than for higher educated women. There are only three countries where public services account for under a third of all women in employment and seven countries where the share exceeds 45 per cent. In contrast there are only eight countries where the male share exceeds one-fifth.

Current cuts in public services across Europe could significantly reduce demand for qualified labour, especially women. Many qualifications for work in the public sector are primarily sector specific – such as teachers and nurses – and any long term cutbacks in hiring will lead to wasted qualifications. The immediacy of the effect depends in part on the job security for existing public sector workers. Some countries such as the UK are making public sector staff redundant while others are only restricting new hires (for example, replacement hires limited in Greece and Spain to between zero and a maximum of 20 per cent Karamessini and Rubery, 2014, p. 331).

A key issue is whether absorbing higher educated staff especially women into the public sector is a productive use of their talent. Contributions by Wren

Table 2: *Gender, Educational and Country Differences in the Shares of Public Services in Total Employment in 2010*

	<i>Share of Employed Women with Tertiary Education in Public Services</i>	<i>Share of Employed Men with Tertiary Education in Public Services</i>	<i>Share of All Employed Women in Public Services</i>	<i>Share of All Employed Men in Public Services</i>
EU 27	57.4	32.1	40.3	17.8
Austria	62.5	32.6	35.1	16.8
Belgium	59.7	32.6	50.2	21.7
Bulgaria	53.8	34.1	29.2	14.5
Cyprus	40.3	31.7	25.2	17.9
Czech Republic	61.7	34.3	34.1	13.4
Germany	60.3	31.1	38.8	17.8
Denmark	72.2	40.5	50.0	21.0
Estonia	52.5	27.6	36.3	12.2
Spain	55.3	35.2	38.0	21.2
Finland	57.1	24.8	47.3	13.8
France	51.6	29.5	45.7	21.0
Greece	67.1	54.4	40.2	24.9
Hungary	63.0	37.0	38.6	16.3
Ireland	56.4	26.8	43.9	17.9
Italy	66.7	49.0	38.2	18.9
Lithuania	52.9	28.4	38.7	15.9
Luxembourg	50.1	32.8	43.4	27.9
Latvia	57.4	31.8	38.3	15.1
Malta	65.4	43.2	40.7	22.5
Netherlands	68.9	40.1	50.8	22.3
Poland	59.8	35.2	39.1	14.1
Portugal	69.9	46.8	38.8	18.9
Romania	45.6	31.1	28.9	14.1
Sweden	68.4	37.8	55.1	18.5
Slovenia	54.0	31.5	35.0	13.8
Slovakia	64.5	37.6	37.7	14.7
United Kingdom	64.3	31.9	49.0	19.5

*Source:* ELFS data, based on NACE O,P,Q covering public administration, education, health and social care.

and colleagues (Wren, 2013) aimed at updating the varieties of capitalism approach to include a stronger focus on services have classified public services as non-dynamic, that is not leading to a knowledge society and enabling creative developments which enhance productivity in a strong service economy. They argue that good quality graduates will only enter public employment when there is wage compression in the economy, which reduces

the advantages of entering dynamic services, mainly financial services, and when higher education is subsidised rather than funded by individuals. This analysis is “gender blind” as women do tend to enter the public sector in all countries and the possibility that good graduates may choose to make contributions in public services rather than seek higher pay in “dynamic” private services is discounted.

Within feminist debates there are also concerns that a large public sector coupled with strong rights to parental leave and flexible working may both tempt women not to move to the private sector and deter employers from hiring women due to their strong rights. Thus while these features enable more women to enter employment, as is found in the Nordic countries, according to Mandel and colleagues they may also serve to restrict women’s access to higher level private sector jobs (Mandel and Semyonov, 2006). The empirical and theoretical bases of their analysis has been challenged by Korpi and colleagues (2013) who dispute the data on stronger glass ceilings. Moreover, as Mandel and Shalev (2009) also argue, in the absence of public services, as in the United States, low paid women workers are needed to provide private services to support those women breaking private sector glass ceilings.

An alternative to direct public sector employment is outsourcing to the private sector but, as argued below, this often involves lower wages and conditions. Overall, public sector employment must thus be considered a very important contributor to gender equality, in providing not only a large volume of employment but also a very high share of the skilled work that women undertake. Austerity and its rhetoric of the smaller state puts this contribution at risk both long term and for the immediate generations of qualified women entering the labour market.

#### 4.2 *The Public Sector as Provider of Good Pay and Conditions*

The public sector is generally regarded as paying higher wages than the private sector and offering better conditions such as pensions, alongside more job security. It is these supposed privileged conditions that have legitimated cuts to public sector pay and conditions under austerity packages (see Table 3), particularly as public sector pay tended to be more protected in the initial financial crisis. There are, however, two major problems with these depictions of the public sector. The first is that the practice of paying higher wages only applies in some countries and in others there is even a wage penalty especially for higher qualified staff. The second is that the higher pay mainly applies to women and the premiums may be explained by lower discrimination in the public sector then by excessive generosity.

Table 3: *Wage Cuts and Wage Freezes in the Public Sector in EU27 2008-13*

<i>Category of Measures</i>	<i>Troika/IMF Countries</i>	<i>Other Countries</i>
General wage freeze	Greece, Spain, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, Hungary, Portugal, Romania	Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, UK, Netherlands
Pay cuts up to 10 per cent	Spain, Ireland, Italy, Portugal	Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovenia, Slovakia
Pay cuts between 15 per cent and 30 per cent	Greece, Latvia, Hungary, Romania	Lithuania
Abolition of bonuses and special benefits	Greece, Spain, Hungary, Portugal, Romania	Denmark, Estonia

*Source:* ETUI (2014), Figure 5.2.

Although public sector pay premiums are for the most part positive, this is not universal and even among the countries with positive premiums the size of the premiums have been found to vary significantly. Research by the European Central Bank using *Survey of Income and Living Conditions* data provided ample evidence of highly variable premiums for public sector employees (Giordana *et al.*, 2011, Figure 1): for example Italy, Greece, Spain, Ireland and Slovenia all had positive premium of between 20 to 40 per cent with Portugal registering an even higher premium at over 50 per cent. In comparison France, Germany and Belgium all had slightly negative ratios and Austria a low positive ratio circa 5 per cent. In all cases the highest premiums were found for women, particularly for the lower skilled but women still earned less than men for all qualification groups in all countries. Table 4 underlines the need to relate public sector pay premiums to the actual structure of pay levels not only across the public/private divide but also by gender and working time for three countries. The first column compares public/private hourly pay for the three categories of male and female full-time and female part-time workers. This shows variations across the three countries with premiums for full-timers highest in the UK, followed by France with zero or negative premiums in Germany. Premiums for female part-timers show similar variation but are higher than for full-timers. The next two columns compare pay for the public and for the private sector for each of the three groups relative to average pay for male full-timers in the private sector (Grimshaw *et al.*, 2012, Table 3.2). This reveals much larger pay gaps in the



private sector for female part-timers in the UK and to some extent Germany than is the case in France. In the UK working in the public sector reduces the gap between female part-timers pay and male full-time private pay from 57 per cent to 80 per cent, that is to a similar level to the male/female full-time gap in the private sector. In France female part-timers already earn 80 per cent of male private sector pay in the private sector but their pay in the public sector rises to 97 per cent of male private sector average pay. In contrast working in the public sector in Germany only raises female part-timers' pay from 68 per cent to 73 per cent of male full-time private sector pay. Where large differences prevail between public and private sectors the incentives to outsource public services are greater (Grimshaw *et al.*, 2012).

Table 4: *Public and Private Sector Hourly Pay for Men and Women Relative to Average Male Earnings in the Private Sector*

		<i>Public/Private</i>	<i>As a Percentage of Male Private Sector Full-Time Pay</i>	
			<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
France	Female full-time	1.13	0.98	0.87
	Female part-time	1.22	0.97	0.80
	Male full-time	1.10	1.10	1.00
Germany	Female full-time	1.01	0.80	0.79
	Female part-time	1.08	0.73	0.68
	Male full-time	0.95	0.95	1.00
UK	Female full-time	1.25	0.99	0.80
	Female part-time	1.44	0.82	0.57
	Male full-time	1.15	1.15	1.00

Source: Grimshaw *et al.* (2012), Table 3.2.

One of the issues for public sector pay is that many of the occupations are dominated by a single employer, thereby providing scope for social choice with respect to relative pay levels. Data for relative pay of teachers and public officials as provided by the OECD (OECD, 2012, 2013,) demonstrates the scope for social choice in determining pay levels. Table 5 shows average pay levels relative to earnings for tertiary educated workers in that country. It should also be noted that many of the low values for teachers are found in ex socialist countries where women have long dominated these occupations regarded as “unproductive” in the previous regimes, in part explaining their colonisation by women. What is significant is that many of the cuts in public sector pay applied as much in low public sector pay countries as in high public sector pay countries. In short the changes to pay and conditions were not

Table 5: *Social Choices in the Determination of Pay for Public Sector Workers: Teachers, Middle Managers and Secretaries*

<i>Salary Ratios</i>	<i>Ratio of Salary to Earnings of Full-Time Full Year Workers with Tertiary Education Aged 25-64 2011</i>		
	<i>Lower Secondary Teachers</i>	<i>Central Government Middle Managers</i>	<i>Central Government Employees in Secretarial Positions</i>
>2		US , UK, Australia, Portugal, Poland, France, Belgium	
1.9-1.99		Spain	
1.8-1.89		Korea, Italy, Denmark	
1.7-1.79		Netherlands, Israel, Germany	
1.6-1.69			
1.5-1.59		Sweden, Finland	
1.4-1.49		Slovenia, Greece,	
1.3-1.39	Korea, Spain	Norway	
1.2-1.29			
1.1-1,19	Portugal		
1-1.09	Canada, Germany, New Zealand	Slovakia, Estonia, Austria	
0.9-0.99	Australia, Denmark, England, Finland, Israel		Spain, Korea
0.8-0.89	Belgium, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Slovenia, Sweden		Poland, Israel
0.7-0.79	Chile, Norway, Poland		US, Norway, Netherlands, France, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Australia
0.6-0.69	Austria, Estonia, Italy, US		Sweden, Portugal, Germany
0.5-0.59	Czech Republic, Hungary		Italy
0.4-0.49	Slovak Republic		UK, Slovenia, Estonia, Austria
<0.4			Slovakia

Source: OECD (2013), Table D3.2; OECD (2012), Figures 5.8 and 5.12.

linked to actual profligacy by the public sector but to fiscal consolidation requirements. Thus in some cases low pay has been intensified, leading for example to problems of retaining the highly feminised medical labour force in many eastern European countries (Rubery, 2013; Vaughan-Whitehead, 2013). Austerity is thus undermining the public sector's reputation as a good employer where that prevailed but also intensifying problems of underpayment where that situation prevailed. The experience of eastern Europe, together with the US where public sector pay for professionals such as teachers is also too low to attract and retain staff (Borjas, 2002), also suggest that "undervaluation" of public sector jobs is not always or necessarily reversed, in part because fiscal constraints take precedence over adequacy of services.

Changes in the status and pay of public sector occupations is not a new trend; fiscal concerns have hit different countries at different time periods and have led to the erosion of relative pay in the public sector (for example in France and Germany in the decade before the crisis (Grimshaw *et al.*, 2012)). Moreover, the introduction of new public management principles in many countries, involving more external competition between public and private providers, more performance-related pay and more use of non-standard employment, has contributed to changing the nature and status of public sector employment over the past two decades (OECD, 2012; Kirkpatrick and Martinez-Lucio, 1996; Grimshaw *et al.*, 2012). The employment of women has often been central to this restructuring; the share of women in non-standard employment (Audier *et al.*, 2012) and in outsourced work tends to be even higher than their overall share of public services employment. Austerity marks an increase in the intensity of these developments in many Troika countries, involving not just erosion of real and relative pay levels and imposed longer working hours but also pay cuts (see Table 3). The importance of public sector pay for the gender pay gap is obvious once the high share of all women and particularly highly qualified women employed in this area is taken into account. However, the austerity programmes have not undergone any gender pay stress test. EU documents still admonish countries for not stepping up efforts to close the gender pay gap, while at the same time the Troika calls for reduced minimum wages and public sector pay, two policies likely to widen the gender pay gap. Likewise in some countries public sector employment is important in closing the gender gap in pensions, currently 39 per cent at the EU level, but austerity is recommending reducing public sector pension advantage, thereby likely widening gender pension gaps.

#### 4.3 *Public Sector Employment and Reconciliation Policies*

The public sector is also recognised as often providing better opportunities for work and family reconciliation than the private sector. This includes more

family-friendly working time arrangements and more opportunities to maintain continuity of employment over the period of childbirth. The advantages of public sector work depends upon mandated state policies and upon the general conditions and norms in the labour market. Where mandatory state leaves are either short or poorly paid, public sector employers often offer longer leaves and better pay. This facilitates women's return to employment in the same job as too short leaves may encourage labour market quits, while the higher pay facilitates women's economic independence. Where these arrangements are mandated for all firms the impact of the public sector is much weaker. However, if the public sector offers more family-friendly working time this may also enable women to return earlier to employment in those countries, mainly in Eastern Europe where the mandated leaves are very long, up to three years per child. This is beneficial for, if used to the full, these long leaves may result in women becoming disconnected to the labour market. Thus more family-friendly working time does not necessarily imply part-time work, but also flexible working hours and limits to full-time working hours. Where part-time work is uncommon it is also infrequently used in the public sector but the public sector may still provide for better work life balance by offering regular full-time hours, not excessive in length. Where part-time work is an accepted employment form, the public sector tends to offer more part-time working opportunities and in a wider range of jobs including those which may be normally done by full-timers. These are often reduced hours jobs in standard full-time work: for example, France with its right to *temps choisi* involving a free Wednesday in the public sector, Germany with the right to work part-time and return to full-time or the greater frequency of granting flexible work options in the public sector in the UK. Also by offering longer part-time work, rather than marginal mini jobs, part-time work in the public sector often provides for better working conditions and more limited pay penalties. The public sector offers more opportunities to work part-time in higher level jobs than the private sector, even if there is still room for improvement. Over recent years some public sector employers have substituted flexible part-time work for more costly full-time jobs and overtime pay but nevertheless, the pay comparison with the private sector is still positive, particularly in those countries where there is a major gap between full-time and part-time pay for women in general.

What has happened under austerity is that in some countries the "reasonable" full-time hours have been arbitrarily increased for public sector workers in general and/or for specific groups such as teachers. Hours of full- and part-time workers have been cut as an alternative to redundancies rather than for reconciliation and jobs have been outsourced to the private sector where flexibility rights for employees are less likely to be applied. In addition

public sector job cuts are increasing work intensity also leading to pressure to work longer hours (see Karameesini and Rubery, 2014, p. 331).

4.3.1 The Public Sector as Promoter of Gender Equality

Table 6 provides examples of countries where the public sector has either been subject to an explicit policy requirement to promote gender equality over and above the private sector or where as a “good employer” it has more effectively implemented gender equality policies that in principle apply to the whole labour market. However, in other countries promoting gender equality is not seen as a part of public sector duty and no specific gender initiatives could be identified (Rubery, 2013). Austerity has certainly deflected attention from these practices even if they have not been officially dismantled. A more major threat is where public sector employment is either shrunk or outsourced which will reduce the share of women’s employment covered by these gender equality initiatives. Furthermore, provision for gender equality on promotion committees and the like have limited impact if promotion routes are frozen due to hiring freezes and gender pay audits can do little to offset the pay cuts or freezes imposed on this largely female workforce.

Table 6: *Examples of Stronger Equality Policies in the Public Sector*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Gender Equality in the Public Sector</i>
Germany	The Federal Equality Act for the Public Sector covering recruitment, promotion, flexible working and equal opportunity plans.
UK	All public organisations have a duty to promote gender equality.
France	Requirements for gender parity in recruitment committees. 2008 charter to promote equality in the public sector.
Sweden	Each organisation in both the public sector and private sector must have a gender equality plan (gender pay monitoring).
Netherlands	The 2001 Work and Care Act placed responsibility on all employers to facilitate work and care but public sector tends to take the lead.
Spain	The 2007 Gender Equality Act requires promotion of equality in the public sector with respect to employment and training, gender balance in recruitment committees, gender equality monitoring etc.

Source: Rubery (2013).

V THE PUBLIC SPACE AND PUBLIC REALM

For Wickham (2005) the distinguishing difference between the United States and Europe is the belief in and support for the public space or public

realm. This distinctive and cherished feature has been put in jeopardy for several decades now by the increasing pressure to market test all areas of the public sector, to outsource and to reduce and limit the provision of services that are regarded as simply good for citizens' quality of life, not just because they are investments for future productivity in the market place.

The public space and public realm has importance for both sexes but take on specific importance for gender equality for three reasons. First, some of those bemoaning the marketisation of society hark back to a past when the family and community was outside the market and provided the social glue that is lacking in the current marketised world (Streeck, 2009). This analysis follows Polanyi's (1957) prediction of the double movement of capitalism; marketisation increases while also provoking a movement to re-establish a social order that provides space for other values. However, the reactivation of the family as the alternative to the market brings with it the continued problems of female subordination and male dominance. The space for non-market values thus needs to be reconfigured into different arrangements that move beyond patriarchal family structures and the private and invisible subordination of women. Fraser (2012) labels this a third emancipatory movement to complement Polanyi's double movement. This emancipatory movement is unachievable without the active agency of the state to mediate between markets and families. Moreover, the alternative of a move back to a traditional family value system is being rejected by men as much as by women. The increase in births outside marriage is not only or primarily related to women's attitudes and preferences but also to men's changed attitudes towards families and commitments (Knijn *et al.*, 2006). The fragmented family model thus leaves women as primary carers even more exposed to risks of poverty and insecurity and, therefore, more in need of protection from the state.

A second related reason why preserving the public space is central to gender equality, is that feminists have never considered that gender equality can be reduced to equality in the market. At a minimum it also requires equality in the valuing and sharing of care. Care services provided by public sector or not-for-profit organisations are more likely to allow caring values to take precedence over profits. Furthermore, some care still needs to be provided through caring relationships, however generous the public service provision. Thus citizens' rights to care for their families also need protecting. This may mean rights for leave, for flexible working or even for full-time support on benefits, and these rights need to be guaranteed by the state and demonstrated by the good practice of public sector employers. In short there needs to be space for more than market values, for rounded citizens who want to both work and care, possibly for the universal care giver (Fraser, 1994). In

the past the space for care has been guarded by the family but at the expense of women's access to the market; a gender equal society needs to provide opportunities for both these values to be held simultaneously by all citizens as we move not just to the universal breadwinner but also the universal carer (Fraser, 1994).

A third related reason why gender equality requires the preservation of the public space is that it enhances the capacities of parents – and women still dominate parenting – to support child development. Parents' ability to foster the quality of children's lives depends in part on the availability of public facilities and infrastructure – from museums, theatres, community parks and groups but also including accessible and affordable transport and available local services to reduce the time spent on the more mundane social reproduction tasks. Progressive gender equality is concerned with the quality of the social reproduction tasks and not just with their equal sharing with fathers.

Austerity poses three main threats to the public space. The first is its attack on the aspirations of the welfare state. Rather than the welfare state being promoted as a force for equality and good, austerity rhetoric emphasises its apparently regressive effects, for example, regressive redistribution across the generations in relation to pensions. While intergenerational problems need to be addressed, the implicit argument that leaving social welfare such as pension provision to the market is more progressive needs to be resisted.

The second threat is the cut in resource. This public realm requires public expenditure to employ professionals and skilled workers. Talk of the big society and the role of volunteers to maintain the public space harks back to a society where many women were inactive and had the time and implied resources to provide free labour. Volunteering can be a valuable adjunct to professional services and for both sexes but not as a substitute for paid work or as part of a workfare programme.

The third risk is the continual reinvention of public goods and values as market goods. Thus a good childhood becomes an investment in market productivity for the future, and motherhood is reinvented as an agent of capitalist human development. Women's right to education has so far not been questioned in Europe but the promotion of education as an investment in future earnings may eventually lead to some undermining of those rights when women are unable to realise the expected earnings expectations due to discrimination and care responsibilities. Currently it is estimated that around 45 per cent of students in England and Wales will not pay-off loans before they are written off after 30 years but that share is 30-40 per cent for men and 70-80 per cent for women (London Economics, 2011).

Perhaps most fundamentally citizenship rights are being marketised in some countries such as the UK, with access to law and to rights to marry subject to a market test, whether this is ability to pay fees to access employment tribunals, to pursue fair family settlements post divorce without legal aid or to be allowed to live with one's spouse. New laws do not allow those earning below a new market threshold of £18,600, some £2,000 above female median earnings, to bring in a non-EU spouse to live in the UK. This threshold excludes over 55 per cent of women in work and around 45 per cent of all UK people in employment.<sup>2</sup>

## VI CONCLUSIONS

Austerity without end would certainly mark the end of a progressive gender equality agenda. The outcome would not be that women would return to the household to become primary carers. The need to take into account the gender revolution in attitudes and behaviour has not yet penetrated the thinking of the austerity architects. If austerity policies are not reversed it is not yet clear whether Europe is willing to accept the implied deficits in both public and private life. The squeeze on public support for care will leave older people vulnerable and without care as women are often unable – due to geographical distance and work pressures – to provide substitute care. Children may be cared for informally or in overcrowded nurseries<sup>3</sup> or even become a new generation of latch key kids- but the other alternative is for fertility rates to plummet further, exacerbating the demographic problems. Even so there will be a significant care deficit that Europe at a political level may not be able to tolerate due to citizens' expectations. Despite the rhetoric of the Troika and others, state interventions are not as unpopular in Europe as in the US and governments are still likely to be held to account when vulnerable people – especially children – are affected by the cuts. The continuation of austerity is thus not inevitable but could be reversed through the ballot box. We need to start to reinvent as well as preserve our public space if there is to be a future for gender equality in Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> According to 2012 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings data.

<sup>3</sup> One proposal by the UK government to save costs in childcare that was finally blocked was to reduce staffing ratios in nurseries.



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