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# Public Attitudes and Gender Policy Regimes: Coherence and Stability in Hard Times

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*Drawing upon data from the European Social Survey on public attitudes and social welfare, this paper analyzes the extent to which attitudes toward gender equality in work and family life vary among 13 countries which represent different welfare regimes. The analysis also examines how these attitudes have changed with the onset of the economic recession in 2007. The findings suggest that public attitudes toward gender issues are largely consistent with welfare regimes, and most notably, reveal a clear direction of moving away from traditional views of gender, family and work issues in economic hard times.*

*Key words: Public attitudes, welfare regimes, gender equality, work, family life*

Although Gosta Esping-Andersen's (1990) path-breaking analysis of the *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* provided a useful typology for comparing and explaining welfare state differences and identified three distinct welfare regimes—liberal, conservative, and social democratic—its operational measures were soon seen as focusing too narrowly on income transfer programs for male breadwinners, which failed to capture how different welfare regimes affect women and family life (O'Connor, 1993; Orloff, 1993, 1996; Sainsbury, 1994, 2001). Over the last decade, gender-related issues have moved to the

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forefront of comparative research on welfare state policies and regimes. Broadening the analytic scope, Sainsbury (1994, 2001) introduced gender-related welfare states issues which brought a feminist perspective to bear on mainstream welfare state studies. This perspective contributed to welfare state research by documenting the inequalities between men and women embedded in work and social welfare policies, illuminating implicit ideologies of familial and gender roles, and focusing attention on policies designed to harmonize work and care (Gustafsson, 1994; Sainsbury, 1994; Siaroff, 1994).

Welfare state policy analysis from a gender perspective reveals considerable variation in social policies to mitigate the tensions and conflicts between work and family life among different countries (Daly & Lewis, 1998; Gornick, Meyers, & Ross, 1997; O'Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999). For example, in Scandinavian countries the extensive provision of childcare is part of an explicit policy designed to create a dual-breadwinner model and full employment. In contrast, public childcare provisions in Britain have been primarily for children who are in poverty or at risk, and in the U.S. childcare has remained essentially in the private sphere with limited public support, which has been increasing in recent years. Knijn and Kremer's (1997) comparative analysis of Britain, Denmark and The Netherlands reveals different patterns of organizing care in welfare states. Examining maternity leave policies and institutional childcare, they found that, due to the focus on care as a right of citizenship, the Danish welfare state came closest to creating a system of gender equality.

### Gender Policy Typologies: Alternative Measures and Regimes

The gender perspective on social policy has given rise to alternative conceptualizations of welfare state typologies based, for example, on the extent to which they allow women to form autonomous households, provide support for either a single-earner nuclear family or a dual-earner family, and reduce households' welfare and caring responsibilities. Lewis' (1992) exploratory analysis distinguishes among strong male-breadwinner states, modified male-breadwinner states and

the dual-breadwinner model. Britain is given as an example of the strong male-breadwinner model, which is marked by part-time labor force participation of women, limited child care services, and historically unequal treatment of wives in regard to social security. France is described as an example of a modified male-breadwinner state in which women have a higher full-time labor force participation rate than Britain and are afforded social provisions, such as maternity leave for mothers and public day care. Sweden is seen as a dual-breadwinner model which provides social entitlements to both men and women based on their participation in the labor market, generous parental leave benefits, and extensive childcare services. Sainbury's (1994) model of the male breadwinner, based on the traditional gender division of labor with men given employment priority, and the individual earner-carer, based on the shared division of labor and employment equality between men and women, is akin to Lewis's strong breadwinner and dual breadwinner classifications.

As gender-related issues have moved to the forefront of comparative welfare state research, the question arose as to what extent the prevailing typology of welfare state regimes—liberal, conservative, and social democratic—which was based in large part on an operationally defined index of the de-commodification of labor, might also reflect important differences in gender-related policies. Addressing this question, Esping-Andersen (1999) re-examined the welfare regimes through the analytical lens of de-familialisation—defined as “the degree to which households' welfare and caring responsibilities are relaxed either via welfare state provision or via market provision.” This concept is operationally defined with several empirical measures of social policies that promote shifting responsibility for family care to the state, as reflected in the levels of public expenditure on family services and the percentage of children under three in public child care. In comparison to policies that de-commodify labor by reducing workers' dependence on the market, the policies that promote de-familialisation reduce the individual's dependence on kinship, seek to reconcile work and family life and afford women more individual choices.

Employing these measures in a cross-sectional analysis

of data on family policy, Esping-Andersen finds a general consistency among the three standard welfare regimes and the degree of de-familialisation. That is, social democratic regimes exhibit the highest degree of de-familialisation, through generous family policies that advance gender equality and child well-being. The conservative welfare regimes in continental European countries show a modest level of de-familialisation, with family policies stressing the traditional role of family and underlying assumptions of the male breadwinner model. The liberal model, marked by the Anglo-American approach to family policy, has the lowest level de-familialisation through public welfare intervention among the standard welfare-state regimes originally delineated in *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. In addition to these three regimes identified in the 1990 study, Esping-Andersen (1999) introduces a fourth regime—Southern Europe—in his analysis of the relationship between family policy and welfare regimes. According to measures of public spending on family services as a percent of GDP, the Southern European regime has a level of de-familialisation below that of the liberal regimes. Beyond the general parallel between welfare state regimes and family policy efforts, Esping-Andersen suggests that the level of de-familialisation based on public provisions showed such a huge gap between the social democratic regimes and all the others, as to form a bimodal distribution.

In a similar vein, Walter Korpi (2000) distinguishes three models of gendered welfare states: (a) “dual-earner support” under which social rights are vested in policies that support women’s labor force participation and the dual-earner family model of gender relations; (b) “general family support” under which social rights are vested in policies that support the nuclear family and the traditional gendered division of labor; and (c) “market-oriented policies” under which market forces dominate the shaping of gender relations, with limited social rights and policies designed to support either the dual-earner or the traditional gendered division of labor. Various social policies—such as cash child allowances, family tax benefits, public day care for children of different ages, paid maternity leave, and home help to the elderly—are used to operationally define these models.



## Gender Equality in Different Policy Regimes During a Period of Financial Crisis

Since the early 1990s, the main body of research on models of gender-related policy in welfare states has involved descriptive analysis of how social policies—such as child care, parental leave, maternity leave, family-related tax expenditures, children allowances, household services, payments for caregivers, and social security—promoted equality in gender relations in the family and the labor force (Anttonen & Sipila, 1996; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Korpi, 2000; Lewis, 1992; Montanari, 2000; Sainsbury, 1999). Studies have also examined the degree of gender policy convergence among models associated with different welfare states (Avdeyeva, 2006; Guo & Gilbert, 2007; Kautto, 2002). Most of the research on these issues draws upon data regarding dimensions of policy such as expenditures, benefits, and eligibility criteria. And nearly all of these studies were conducted within the context of an expanding economy and sustained economic growth—prior to the onset of the financial crisis in 2007.

The socio-economic context within which most gender-related policy analyses to date have been conducted bears consideration. Between 1994 and 2007, the total real growth of GDP for the Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development (OECD) countries increased by an average of 2.6% annually. Although the average level of public social welfare spending remained relatively flat from 1993 to 2005, the actual amount of social expenditures continued to rise rather substantially, from \$2946 in 1990 to \$6294 in 2005—as seen when the measure of spending shifts from the percent of GDP to per capita expenditures controlled for purchasing power parity (PPP). The OECD total growth rates are averages for the individual countries weighted by size and converted to dollars using PPP (OECD, 2009b). It is well recognized that these levels of spending change when the “gross public social expenditure” measure is adjusted for taxes, tax expenditures, mandate and voluntary private benefits. A critical assessment of these measures is offered in Gilbert (2010).

At the same time, the rate of unemployment in the EU peaked around 1993 and then started to decline through 2007.

Not only did the unemployment rates in Europe fall after the mid-1990s, but the proportion of the working-age population in the labor force increased among the OECD countries from 63.9% in 1993 to 66% in 2006.

All this has changed with the rise in unemployment and the contraction of economic growth that began at the end of 2007. New data from EU show that by January 2010 the unemployment rate for the euro area (EU 16 countries that have adopted the Euro) was 9.9%, up from 8.5% in 2009 and from 7.2% a year earlier, although these averages mask a wide range of variance (OECD, 2009a). For example, Spain had one of the highest levels of unemployment at 18.8% and Denmark had among the lowest with 4.2% unemployed. In 2009, the GDP in OECD countries declined by an average of 3.4%, ranging from 5% in Germany to 2.2% in France.

### Public Attitudes Toward Gender Equality and Policy Regimes: Analyses of Coherence and Stability

Although the focus on gender-related aspects of social policies since the 1990s provides quantitative measures of government actions in support of gender equality, which can be tied to various policy regimes, these measures do not necessarily gauge the degree to which citizens in the different gender-related welfare regimes support the objectives of gender equality in family life and employment. When citizen views on the employment rights and family obligations of women are considered along with the changing socio-economic context after 2007, several interesting questions emerge about the coherence and stability of relationships between public attitudes towards gender equality and types of gender-related welfare regimes in different countries. Specifically:

In comparing different countries, to what extent do their public attitudes regarding preferences for gender equality in family life and employment coincide with their gender-related welfare regimes defined by quantitative policy measures?

Do men and women express similar attitudes regarding preferences for gender equality in the different gender-related regimes?



To what extent and in what direction have these public attitudes toward gender equality changed after the onset of the financial crisis?

These questions are addressed in this paper through a comparative analysis of data collected in Rounds 2 (2004-05) and 4 (2008-09) of the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS Round 2 includes 26 European countries and Round 4 includes 30 countries. Covering residential populations, the country surveys have a minimum sample size of 1,500 (or 800 where population is under 2 million). In this paper, we analyze the data available on the same survey questions from rounds 2 and 4 about attitudes toward gender equality in family life and employment. The sample includes responses from thirteen countries (on which data were available) which represent four regimes under Esping-Andersen's (1999) typology: Social democratic regimes (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden), Continental Europe (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and Netherlands), Liberal regimes (Ireland and UK), and Southern Europe (Portugal and Spain). As noted earlier, this grouping of countries closely coincides with their classification under other gender policy regimes.

The unemployment rate has been increasing since some time in 2008 across these European countries. It is considered a "lagging indicator," since during an economic downturn it usually takes several months before the unemployment rate begins to rise. But the economic downturn and decline in growth was widely signaled by the end of 2007. As the stock market tumbled in 2008, individuals started to feel the impending sense of economic hardship before the increase in the official unemployment rate. Hence, the economic recession and the sense of job opportunities growing scarce were palpable when the ESS Round 4 was conducted between late 2008 and early 2009.

The survey questions used to reflect public attitudes toward gender equality in family life and employment involve the statements: "Women should be prepared to cut down on paid work for the sake of family" and "Men should have more right to jobs than women when jobs are scarce." On each statement, respondents were asked whether they "agree strongly,

agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, disagree strongly." On these items we measure the overall disagreement and agreement with the traditional views that women should sacrifice employment to meet their responsibilities for family life and that men should be privileged over women in access to employment. Disagreement was gauged by combining the percentage of respondents in each country who answered strongly disagree and disagree; similarly, overall agreement was calculated by combining those who strongly agreed and agreed with these views. For each welfare regime, the overall agreement with these statements was calculated by averaging the percentage of agreements for countries in the welfare regime after adjusting for the design weight and population weight.

#### *Coherence Between Public Attitudes Toward Gender Equality and Gender-policy Regimes*

To what extent do public attitudes related to gender equality in family life and employment vary among the sample countries and between different gender-policy regimes?

The findings illustrated in Figure 1 show each country's response in 2004 to the statement that "Women should be prepared to cut down on paid work for sake of family;" the countries are ordered by their percentage of agreement. Similarly, Figure 2 shows the degrees of agreement and disagreement with the statement "Men should have more right to jobs than women when jobs are scarce." In both cases, the findings reveal an observable, though not exact, parallel between public attitudes toward gender equality in different countries and the gender-policy regimes associated with these countries. Thus, for example, countries associated with the social democratic regime (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway) have the lowest levels of agreement with traditional views that uphold gender inequality in work and family life. Less than 30% of respondents in these countries agree that women should be prepared to cut down on paid work for sakes of families and less than 15% show any agreement with the view that men should have more right to work than women when jobs are scarce. At the other end of the typological continuum (illustrated in Table 1) public attitudes in the Southern European regimes (Portugal and Spain) express the highest

degree of agreement with the statements supporting the traditional perspective. By and large, the countries representing Continental European regimes and Liberal policy regimes fall respectively in between these two extremes.

Figure 1. Public Attitudes in 2004 to the First Statement

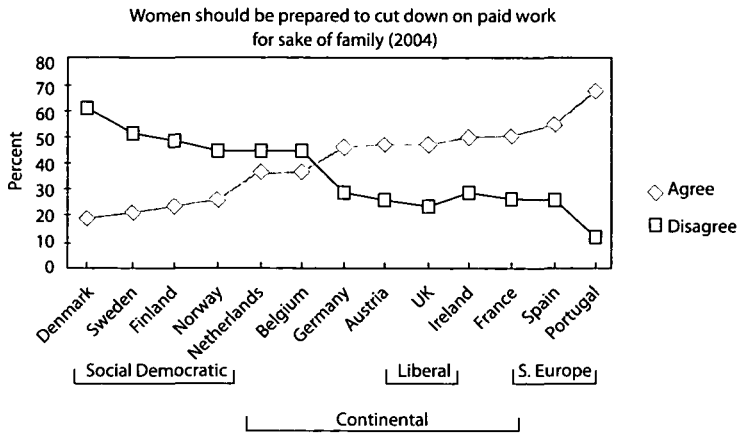
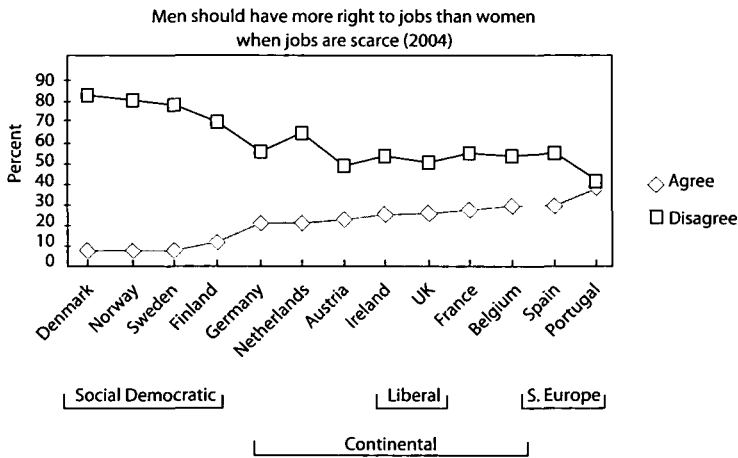


Figure 2. Public Attitudes in 2004 to the Second Statement



The findings suggest a degree of coherence between public attitudes and gender-related policy regimes. The rank order in levels of agreement with traditional perspectives on gender relations among different countries generally corresponds as

expected to the type of gender-policy regime with which the countries are associated. However, the correspondence is not exact, since France, a Continental regime, ranks somewhat higher than the Liberal regimes in agreement with the view that women should be prepared to cut down on employment for the sake of the family, and the Continental regimes, both France and Belgium, rank higher than the Liberal regimes in agreement with the traditional view that men should have more right to jobs than women.

Moreover, when the responses are examined in terms of magnitude rather than rank order, the results show that in seven countries associated with the Southern European (Spain and Portugal), Liberal (UK and Ireland) and more than half of the Continental regimes (Germany, Austria, France), more people agreed than disagreed that women should be prepared to cut down on employment for the sake of the family. It was only in the Social Democratic regimes plus the Netherlands and Belgium that the preponderance of respondents disagreed with this traditional view. In contrast to the public attitudes expressing preference for women's traditional obligation to family life over employment, respondents in all 13 countries disagreed by a substantial margin with the view that men should have more right to jobs than women when jobs are scarce. The differences here may indicate an authentic preference for gender equality in relation to opportunities for employment over concerns for gender equality in family life. However, they might have been influenced by the way the two statements on gender equality were phrased; employment was cast in terms of men and women having equal "right" to a job; the role of gender in family life, the question about "being prepared" to cut down on paid work for the sake of family was a bit ambiguous. It could be interpreted to mean that in response to family emergency women should be prepared to leave work. Without asking whether men should be equally prepared to cut down, the issue of gender equality in this statement is not as explicit as in the one on equal right to a job.

As shown in Table 2, there are significant differences among the composite scores for welfare regime types (based on weighted averages of member countries) on attitudes toward gender equality in work and family life. What stands out most sharply among these differences is that, in Social Democratic

regimes, the observed levels of agreement on both attitude statements were substantially lower than in the other regimes. This huge difference in the extent to which public attitudes support gender equality in Social Democratic regimes compared to the other three types of welfare regimes corresponds to what Esping-Andersen suggested was a bimodal distribution between the Social Democratic and other regimes in the level of de-familialisation based on public provisions.

Table 2. Difference of Public Attitudes across Welfare Regimes

	Percentage		
	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
Women should be prepared to cut down on paid work for sake of family			
Regime type			
Social-democratic	22.8	25.3	52
Continental Europe	48.2	22.3	29.5
Liberal regimes	45.5	28.2	26.3
Southern Europe	58.1	18.9	23.1
$\chi^2 = 32.8, p < .001$			
Men should have more right to jobs than women when jobs are scarce			
Regime type			
Social-democratic	9.4	12.7	77
Continental Europe	24.8	19.7	55.5
Liberal regimes	25.2	22.2	52.6
Southern Europe	32.1	15.2	52.7
$\chi^2 = 22.4; p = .001$			

Note: ESS2-2004, ed.3.1, Weight: Design weight combined with Population size weight

Additionally, we analyzed whether women are more likely than men to hold gender egalitarian attitudes. As shown in Table 3 and Table 4, there are several differences between men and women's patterns of response on the attitudinal statements toward gender equality in the 13 countries.

In response to the statement that “women should be prepared to cut down on paid work for the sake of family,” the data show that generally in Social Democratic regimes and continental European countries, proportionately more women tended to disagree than men, while the pattern reversed in Liberal regimes and Southern European countries. The differences were statistically significant in five countries—Finland, Norway, Germany, Austria and U.K..

Table 3. Gender Difference on Responses to the Statement: “Women should be prepared to cut down on paid work for the sake of family”

Country	% Agree		% Neutral		% Disagree		Phi & Cramer's V
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Denmark	19.1	20.4	19.5	17.9	61.4	61.7	.024
Finland	25.8	23.2	29.6	24.5	44.6	52.3	.078**
Sweden	19.7	23.6	28.6	25.3	51.7	51.1	.052
Norway	26.1	27.2	30.8	24.6	43.1	48.2	.071*
Netherlands	39.6	35.5	15.7	18	44.6	46.5	.045
Belgium	36.9	38.2	19.7	16.5	43.4	45.3	.041
Germany	50.3	48.7	26.8	21.6	22.8	29.7	.086**
Austria	48.5	45.6	29.7	27.3	21.8	27.1	.062*
France	50.6	52	22.6	19.9	26.8	28.1	.033
UK	42.2	48.4	31.7	25.9	26.1	25.7	.071**
Ireland	45.2	49.2	22.5	18.7	32.3	32.1	.051
Spain	53.6	58.1	18.9	18.9	27.6	23.1	.054
Portugal	66.7	68.5	19.5	18.1	13.8	13.4	.021

Note: ESS round 2 data. Phi & Cramer's V coefficient values are shown in the table. \* indicates  $p < .05$ , and \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . Numbers in bold mark the higher % for either male or female in each response category.

Regarding the second statement, “men should have more right to jobs than women when jobs are scarce,” results revealed statistically significant differences by gender in responses in 11 of the 13 countries. Clearly, women were more likely to disagree with the statement than men across the various welfare regimes, who were more likely to agree with the statement. Interestingly, on both statements the patterns of

response showed that men were more likely than women to equivocate—choosing “neither agree nor disagree.”

Table 4. Gender Difference on Response to the Statement: “Men should have more right to jobs than women when jobs are scarce”

Country	% Agree		% Neutral		% Disagree		Phi & Cramer's V
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Denmark	9	7.7	12	5.3	79	87.1	.125**
Finland	13.5	11.4	21.1	13.5	65.5	75	.111**
Sweden	7.7	9.8	16.4	10.1	75.9	80.2	.097**
Norway	8.6	8.2	13.4	9.1	78	82.7	.069*
Netherlands	22.2	21.8	14.4	12.6	63.4	65.7	.029
Belgium	29.2	32.2	19.2	12.3	51.5	55.4	.095**
Germany	23.5	20.9	28.2	19.7	48.3	59.4	.119**
Austria	25	18.8	31.6	24.9	43.4	56.3	.129**
France	27.3	30	16.7	14.1	56	55.8	.041
UK	23.4	27.1	27.6	17.4	49	55.5	.122**
Ireland	25.9	22	23.2	16.7	50.9	61.3	.106**
Spain	29.4	31.5	16.2	11.1	54.3	57.4	.074*
Portugal	39.1	38.7	26.1	18	34.8	43.3	.108**

Note: ESS round 2 data. Phi & Cramer's V coefficient values are showed in the table. \* indicates  $p < .05$ , and \*\* indicates  $p < .01$

### *Attitudes Toward Gender Equality and Policy Regimes in Hard Times: A Return to Traditional Values?*

There are competing hypotheses about the impact of economic hard times on public values toward family life and gender roles. Will the economic crisis rejuvenate attitudes in support of traditional perspectives on the role of women in work and family life or accelerate the regard for egalitarian relations in the home and workplace? Will the intensity and direction of the impact vary in countries with different gender-related policy regimes? One hypothesis suggests that hard times may increase the acceptance of women as equal breadwinners and of men as parents and homemakers as a functional response to the need for flexible labor to insure the odds of economic survival. A competing view is that the scarcity of jobs in hard times may reinforce traditional roles of the male breadwinner model, under which women engage in

household production and men receive preference for paid employment, which satisfies their emotional (or socialized) needs to be the primary provider. There is initial evidence that in recent times divorce rates in the U.S. have declined from 17.5 per 1000 in 2007 to 16.5 per 1000 in 2008. In some cases, this decline may simply reflect couples who postponed their divorce until they could sell their house or find new jobs. But another view is that some spouses are developing a renewed appreciation for the traditional virtues of family life—financial, social and emotional support (Wilcox, 2009).

To assess the impact of the recession that began in late 2007 on public attitudes toward gender equality in family life and work and the extent to which it varied under different gender-policy regimes, we compare the percentage of agreement on the ESS questions concerning gender equality in 2004 with responses to the same questions in 2008 for all the countries on which the data were available on both periods. Since survey data on Austria and Ireland were not available in 2008, only 11 or the initial 13 countries are included in this section's analysis.

As illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, the overall trend of pre-to-post-recession comparisons in attitudes toward gender equality in the realms of family life and employment is highly consistent. On both issues and across all the policy regimes, public attitudes moved away from support of traditional gender roles toward more egalitarian relations. In all but one country (Spain), there was a substantial decline in agreement with the view that women should be prepared to leave paid work for the sake of the family. Regarding the overall magnitude of agreement in each country, in 2004 more people agreed than disagreed with this traditional view in a majority of countries, including U.K., Germany, France, Portugal and Spain, as well as Austria and Ireland (shown in Figure 1). By 2008, only the two Southern Europe countries (Portugal and Spain) have more people agree than disagree with the traditional view. Similarly, agreement with the view that men should have more right to jobs than women when jobs are scarce declined and disagreement with this position increased substantially in all countries after the onset of the recession. The rank order of the agreement and disagreement with the view is consistent with the one in 2004, but the changes of magnitude indicated a further move away



from the traditional view on gender roles in family and work life.

Figure 3. Pre-to-post Recession Comparisons on Public Attitudes to the First Statement

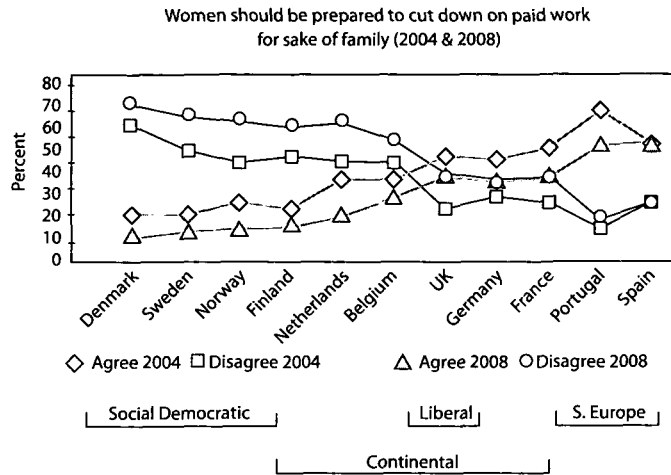
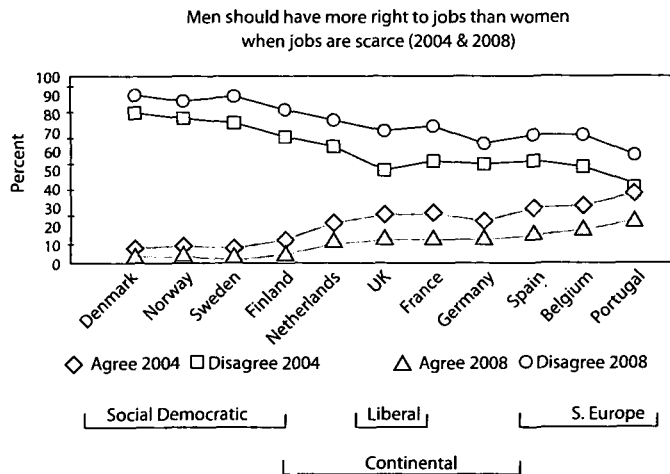


Figure 4. Pre-to-post Recession Comparisons on Public Attitudes to the Second Statement



## Conclusions

In sum, our findings show a degree of coherence between the attitudes of citizens toward gender equality in work and family life and the political tendencies and objectives of the gender-related policy regimes in their countries. Although this suggests that policy makers may be indeed sensitive to public opinion on these issues, cause and effect are difficult to untangle. Just as public opinion may influence the course of gender policy, the establishment of policies that promote gender equality may come to influence public attitudes on these issues.

Although the data reveal a general relationship between rank order of agreement on questions of gender equality and different types of gender policy regimes, there were statistically significant differences in public attitudes toward gender equality among alternative gender-related policy regimes. Social Democratic regimes appear significantly different from other types of regimes in the extent to which public attitudes reject the traditional view on gender roles and accept gender equality.

Interestingly, while a competing hypothesis suggests that the economic recessions may encourage a return to traditional values, our findings show that in the current period of economic hardship, public attitudes toward gender and work issues have moved further away from the traditional perspective. To the extent that understanding public attitudes toward gender and work can help inform public officials about the development of gender-related policies, the consistency and direction of change in public attitudes toward gender issues in the current recession might help justify policy that advances measures to harmonize work and family life and the sharing of domestic responsibilities.

Countries such as Norway, Sweden and Finland, which register among the most positive attitudes toward gender equality, also have the most highly developed array of policies designed to facilitate child-rearing in two-earner households. These countries have generous policies of parental leave, which range from 263 days in Finland (with an additional optional "father's month") to up to 280 days in Norway to 480 days (anytime during the first eight years) in Sweden. Parental leave is then augmented by highly subsidized daycare programs. The publicly subsidized day care in Sweden, for example, amounts

to about 10,500 euros (approximately \$15,500 ) per year. As an alternative measure, these countries have developed cash-for-care programs, which provide cash payments to families who do not use public daycare services. (In Sweden about one third of the municipalities have initiated cash-for-care payments.) These programs have generated controversy in regard to their impact on gender equality—some see them as an incentive to return to traditional roles with women staying home and caring for children, while others suggest that they represent a sign of cultural change which recognizes the real market value of care work performed at home (Sipila, Repo, & Rissanen, 2010). These programs are of particular interest in times of high unemployment, since they can be seen as an alternative form of paid work when jobs are scarce in the marketplace.

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