

Gender equality, labour-market mobilisation, or social inclusion? The European Social Agenda and policy discourses on reconciliation in Finland and the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s reconciliation policies have gained increasing prominence within the European Union's (EU) social agenda. Allegedly, such policies have been considered central for promoting gender equality, but they have also been framed as a way of increasing labour market participation of mothers as well as strengthening their social inclusion. According to the EU social policy model, as depicted in the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, two ambitions considering gender equality have received special attention, namely equal opportunities between women and men and the employment levels of parents through active and preventive approaches of social policy.¹ However, academic observers have argued that gender equality focus is increasingly losing ground in favour of employment imperatives (e.g. Jenson, 2009). Stratigaki (2004: 30) for instance, has described how the meaning of reconciliation of working and family life concepts inherent in the European Employment Strategy (EES) has gradually shifted from a gender equality perspective (sharing responsibilities between men and women) to a market-oriented objective (encouraging flexible forms of employment) (Lewis, 2006, Lewis et al., 2008, Graziano et al., 2011a). Moreover, the recent EU2020 strategy has framed the reconciliations issue in a new light. Through targeted investments in poor families and expected future returns through human capital investments in early childhood education and child care services (ECEC), a new EU-driven approach to reconciliation policies seems to be emerging (Lundvall and Lorenz, 2012). But what are the actual implications of these changing ideas for the discourses on reconciliation of work and family on a member-state level?

The aim of this article is to investigate government-level discourses on work/family reconciliation policies in two European countries, Finland and the Netherlands, since the mid-1990s, and to discuss the impact that EU ideas and policy recommendations have played for these discourses and policies suggested by the governments gaining the office. The term discourse denotes the ways that governments have interpreted the meaning of work/family reconciliation, and how such policies have been framed. Consequently, three research questions can be singled out. First, to what extent have work/family reconciliation ideas found their way into coalition agreements in the two countries since the mid-1990s? Second, do these national discourses relate mainly to gender equality, employment promotion, or social inclusion? Third, can the discursive developments be said to follow path-dependent traits or is there trace of growing convergence between the countries towards the European ideal? In order to analyse the national interpretation and implementation of reconciliation imperatives, national policy documents were analysed for a time period ranging from the Mid-1990s until present date.

This article contributes to the academic discussion in at least two ways. First, it deconstructs the usage of reconciliation policies in national policy discourses by identifying different policy objectives observed at EU level, such as gender equality, labour market mobilisation and social inclusion. While previous work have mostly focussed on the first two objectives, or only on social inclusion, few studies, if any, have investigated the role that these three objectives of discourse play within member-state policy discourses. Second, the article compares two European countries that, due to their high

female labour market participation, have often been praised as two very different model countries in terms of reconciliation, but that have seldom been subjected to comparison.

The paper is structured in the following way. The next two sections provide the theoretical framework for the analysis. The following section presents the data and methods used for the analysis and the penultimate section presents the finding. In the last section, the findings are discussed alongside a number of conclusions.

2. Background

2.1. Unravelling the different levels of reconciliation policy discourse

This paper draws on the theory of discursive institutionalism arguing that institutions and their inherent discourses provide means and rationales for certain types of political action while simultaneously blocking other types of behaviour. For example, Vivian Schmidt (2008) argues that ideas and elite discourses constitute the very core of policymaking since it generates cognitive ideas about what should be done as well as normative ideas, how these ideas can be put in action. Politics is, after all, as proposed by Hugh Heclo (1974), a game, where actors need to know what to do (cognitive ideas) and how to break opposition (normative ideas) to push forward the preferred solutions.

It has been suggested that the importance of dominant ideas set out by supra-national agencies, such as the European Union, has grown in the era of new welfare state politics (Heidenreich and Zeitlin, 2009). Policy ideas and policy discourses generated by the EU may assist policy makers in finding solutions to national problems (cf. Graziano et al 2011)². Previous research has shown that, also in the area of reconciliation policies, domestic actors may use of European ideas in framing domestic reforms in pursuit of their own agenda (Graziano et al., 2011a). Domestic actors may, furthermore, appropriate and redefine the European guidelines to advance their own agenda (Stiller and van Gerven, 2012, Heidenreich and Zeitlin, 2009), they can break opposition by using Europe (often as scapegoat) to legitimate their own political preferences (Stiller, 2006), or obtain EU resources to implement policy innovations that would otherwise be unaffordable (Verschraegen et al., 2011, van Gerven et al., forthcoming). The ideational effect of Europe has been considered salient in the current era of policy making where new social risks and the demographic transformation of European societies are compelling member states to change the focus of the welfare states. This 'post-national' constellation has increased the level of uncertainty and diminished the scope of national policy manoeuvrability. One solution in the recent years has been the European Union's social investment paradigm which has received wide attention on a national level (Morel et al. 2012). This agenda emphasises that social policies should focus on investments in human capital and aim for social inclusion and poverty reduction among families. Regardless of these omnipotent pressures catalysed by European integration process, welfare state literature has long advocated that the goals of national social policies are (and remain to be) formulated on the national arena, where domestic interest, resources and feedback mechanisms prevail. Particularly, reconciliation policies are suggested to follow existing (and differing) patterns of labour market behaviour and attitudes towards parental involvement in work and care (Lewis et al., 2008, Morgan, 2009). It is thus an empirical question, to what extent domestic discourse on reconciliation policies, and policy practices introduced mirror that of EU level, and how this varies in two welfare states with drastically different interests and traditions embedded in the reconciliation policies.

2.2. Linking governmental discourse with reconciliation policies

Previous research on reconciliation policies has shown that this policy area is rich with regard to its meaning, orientation and evolution (Graziano et al., 2011b, Knijn and Smit, 2009). At the level of national policies, reconciliation policies traditionally include a wide range of policy instruments, from maternity leave arrangements, cash transfers (i.e. child allowance) and recently also in-work tax benefits, to ECEC services. For reasons of analytical clarity, this article focuses on three principle areas of reconciliation policies (Graziano et al., 2011b: 36): **family-related leave, child care and provision of child care services (formal or informal care), and working conditions.** On the EU

level, reconciliation policies originate from policies related to equal treatment, but in the last decades the concept of reconciliation has been widened as to include also occupational equality and employment promotion (Graziano et al., 2011b). According to the EU 2020 agenda, also policy themes pertaining to social inclusion and social investment strategies have been increasingly viewed as central parts of the reconciliation concept (EC 2010.).

From the vast literature on gender equality we have constructed a theoretical model for the understanding of reconciliation of work and family discourses and their respective policy types that will guide the empirical analysis (table 1). The three dominant ideas of reconciliation diffusing from the EU level are 1) *equal treatment and equal opportunities*, 2) *employment/occupational equality and increasing female labour market participation*, 3) *social inclusion and investing in human capital*.

Table 1. Different models for the theoretical understanding of reconciliation discourses and policy practices

		Reconciliation as means of promoting		
		Equal opportunities and equal treatment	Occupational equality and employment promotion	Social inclusion and social investment
Key concepts of the discourse		Equal treatment and opportunities of women	(Equal) opportunities of women <i>at the labour market</i>	child-oriented perspective, Equality of parents through inclusion at the labour market. (targeted) investments for future.
Main arena		Private (household)	Public (labour market)	Private (individual/household) and public (labour market)
Main policy approach		Egalitarian	Work mobilisation and activation	Activation, targeted inclusion and, distribution of life chances and income over the life cycle for children by emphasising human capital formation
Family leave	Discourse	Equal treatment in sharing work and family responsibilities	Support of working mothers during (limited) absence from work	Support of working mothers during (limited) absence from work, the human capital maintenance (lifelong learning) of adults/parents
	Policy	Equal sharing of family responsibilities (anti-discrimination goal): option to (compulsory) sharing of paid parental leave and new leave arrangement for fathers	Create leave arrangements without disincentives for return to employment,	Leave arrangements, with strong emphasis on transition to early childhood education and child care facilities, life-long learning for parents
Child care	Discourse	Mother liberated from care (if preferred), supportive quality care provided	Women liberated for employment. Supportive care provide, emphasis on quantity of women make use of this	Support female labour market participation, good quality child care and investment in early childhood education
	Policy	(Full) Child care provision	Child care provision, flexible working times	Investments in child care provision, flexible working times
Working conditions	Discourse	Equal pay, equal employability at primary labour market	Job opportunities for women (at secondary labour market)	Job opportunities for women, with a goal of social inclusion and poverty (prevention or cure), life-long learning
	Policy	Gender fairness through antidiscrimination measures	Activation and flexible forms of employment	Activation, Flexible forms of employment, targeted measures to families at risk, training/retraining

The 'equal opportunities' discourse has been largely influenced by feminist ideas and strategies. From the onset of this discourse in the early 1970s, the focus was put most squarely on care workers' contributions to the national economy and to issues of gender inequality caused by women's disproportionate burden of child bearing and care (Stratigaki 2004). Very quickly, however, the tone towards gender equality was made to parallel to the imperative of reconcile work/family reconciliation. Although women's employment has been central in the discourse on equal treatment and opportunity, this framing addressed mainly the gender-based inequality within the primary labour market³ (Stratigaki 2004: 50). The ambition to achieve an equal sharing of family and domestic tasks between women and men, has mainly hinged on egalitarian arrangements that make parental leave transferable between mothers and fathers, increase quality of care provision (and access to it) and prevents any discrimination based on gender or family status.

Whereas the equal opportunity approach strives at equal treatment and opportunities of men and women, or at least to correct grievances for women in the primary labour market, the discourse embedding the occupational equality and employment promotion approach stems from a mounting public need to increase the capacity of women to work (at the secondary labour market) (Stratigaki 2004: 45). Here the dominance of economic priorities seems quite central. Also higher labour market flexibility is a central starting point in these kinds of policies. Policy solutions no longer include measures extending family leaves; rather they advocate accessible and affordable care (with implicitly emphasising the criteria on quantity of care places) and flexible working conditions.

The discourse on social inclusion centres around equality of opportunity through increased investments in human capital as well as more enabling and preventive social protections systems. Such a discourse is proposed to be more child-oriented than oriented towards mothers (Esping-Andersen and Vandenbrucke, 2002). It focuses primarily on distributing life chances and income over the life cycle for children by emphasising human capital formation (ECEC), and only secondly on the human capital maintenance (lifelong learning) of adults/parents which is also something that is seen as essential for the social inclusion). Increasing employment rates for women and the social inclusivist discourse which is inherent in reconciliation policies has a two-fold aim. First, the reconciliation of work and family policy is seen as means for combatting poverty and social exclusion of women. Secondly, life-course investments in human capital are central for reaching the EU-wide shared ambition to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. Policy measures attained to this discourse are preventive and targeted policies against social exclusion and (state) led support to invest in early childhood education and childcare services (Morel et al. 2012: 2).

To empirically analyse the impact of these kinds of ideas on national-level discourses is naturally not straightforward. Not only is hard to determine the actual degree of impact of such ideas, but they are often also overlapping. For instance, as Jenson has argued recently, in context of the EU social investment strategies, an ambition to create stronger work incentives for women has been framed as a way of improving gender equality (Jenson 2009). Furthermore, both occupational equality and social investment discourses prioritise labour market participation, activation and flexibilisation of the labour market. Nevertheless, the three theoretically derived paradigms outlined in table 1 can serve as a heuristic tool for analysing national discourses on reconciliation of work and family life since the mid-1990s. The qualitative differences between each model sketched in Table 1 guide us in our analysis to what extent we can establish these three distinct (yet sometimes overlapping) models or reconciliation discourses at the level of the two welfare states.

3. Methods

Institutionalist-driven analyses often focus on the systematic comparison of a small number of country cases as well as the contextualisation and holistic interpretation of social phenomena within these cases (Ragin, 1987). In this article Finland and the Netherlands serve as cases for assessing reconciliations discourses. Regardless of the fact that these countries are often portrayed as success stories of high female employment rates, the two countries in fact represent different welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990) with rather different ways of understanding the relation between the family

and the labour market as well as the need for reconciliation practices (Pfau-Effinger, 1998). Finland has traditionally supported a dual-earner model with high levels female full-time work through a broad coverage of public care services, but also acknowledged the right for mother to choose to stay home with their small children. In contrast, the male-breadwinner model has traditionally had a stronger foothold in the Netherlands, yet recently the part-time work has become a norm for many mothers. Due to these differences, the two countries can serve as a fruitful starting point for assessing the role that national welfare institutions and policy legacies play for the adoption of influential ideas on family policies.

In order to analyse country-level discourses on reconciliation and to elucidate the impact of ideas and policy recommendations from the EU, coalition contracts ranging from the mid-1990s until present date were analysed. As a way of putting the analyses into context, we also discuss the main policy changes that have taken place in each country.

The method used for our analysis is qualitative content analysis, which Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defines as a 'research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, p. 1278). This is a rather unproblematic way of analysing textual contents that allows both qualitative interpretation as well as quantification. We have used a deductive variant of the method, which means that the analyses of programs were conducted on the basis of three discursive paradigms displayed in table 1, that is, to what extent and in which ways elements from the paradigms could be found in coalition programs.

The collected coalition programs consisted of five Finnish and seven Dutch coalition agreements ranging from the Mid-1990s until present date. Due to sheer volume, the focus of the analysis is placed squarely on the political elite level, i.e. the government level. This allows us to draw only a general picture of the changes in political elite discourses on reconciliation, and to merely conduct a general assessment of the ideational impact that the EU level may have had on these discourses. Moreover, the analysis cannot say anything about the effects that these discourses have on actual policies or policy outcomes.

4. Results

The Dutch reconciliation regime

Regardless of the reforms introduced in the last decades, the Dutch conservative model of male breadwinner family remains strong. To support the working parents, The Netherlands has combined short parental leave with provision of (part-time) child care services. The maternity leave period is also short (currently 16 weeks), which causes many parents, predominantly mothers to either stop working or work less hours after the maternity leave. As Thévenon (2011: 72) has observed, the Dutch tax system is not designed to encourage full labour market participation of both parents.

Most important reforms 1990-2012

The Dutch government started to develop formal child care provision at the end of the 1980s via subsidies to providers of childcare (Lewis et al 2008: 272). In the early 1990, largely as an answer to the increasing entry of women to the labour market (see also Visser, 2002), a formalisation of the child care provision was achieved by The PvdA (labour) party (Regeerakkoord, 1998). The law, however, passed the parliament only under the Christian Democrats-Liberal coalition with Christen Democraten (CDA), Liberals (VVD) and populist Pim Fortuijn Party (LPF) in 2002. As van Hooren and Becker (2012: 99) have explained, the law radically changed child care provision as subsidies no longer went from municipalities to day care centres, but directly to parents who could choose between a guest parent or a private (or non profit) organisation organised day care facilities. From 2007 employers were made responsible for bearing parts of the costs of child care together with their employees and the state. As parental payments declined to 19 % of real child care costs (in average) in 2009, the use

of child care increased substantially in the second half of the 2000s (van Hooren and Becker 2012: 99). Very soon the cost of childcare extended those anticipated and the Balkenende IV government with Christen democrats (CDA), Liberals (VVD), Christen Union (CU) (2007-2010) – who also had implemented the law, implemented cutbacks in childcare policy. The Rutte I (2010-2012) government continued the hard line of its predecessor. The measures implemented included further cuts in child care subsidies (Staatsblad van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden, jaargang 2011, nr. 424). Reductions were made to subsidies to guest parent care as well as to those of formal day care (from to maximum hourly rate of €5) to families with high income. The cuts were justified by referring to the skyrocketing prices of the day care since the expansion of rights and raising the subsidies from 2007.

The Flexibility and Security Act entered into force in 1999 and coined the attempts in the past to introduce more flexibility to the labour market. The Netherlands had already been rather successful in the mid 1990s in its attempt to increase the labour market participation of women. In the era that Visser and Hemerijck (1997) refers to as the period of Dutch miracle, employment indeed rose by average of 1.8 % over the period of 1990 and 1998. This growth was predominantly caused by the rise of the number of part-time working women (Visser, 2002). From 2001 onwards, all employees are able to request either a reduction to part-time to an increase to full-time hours. This law resonated with the governmental scenario ‘Combination scenario’ whereby both men and women would engage in paid and unpaid work (Commissie Toekomstscenario Herverdeling Onbetaalde arbeid 1997). A parental leave policy followed in 2001 (Work and Care Act) and although it left the parental leave unpaid for most workers¹, take-up (of part-time care leave) among fathers has been relatively high (19 per cent in 2005) (Lewis et al 273). Government introduced also in 2006, a new Life course savings scheme, that was supposed to encourage parents save of their wages to take time of caring for their children. The take-up of the programme was low from the commence of the programme (Lewis et al 2008: 274), and despite the good intentions of equal treatment of genders, it proved to be a failure after one and half years of its existence (Bovenberg and Conneman 2007). In 2010 the government extended the legal parental leave (from 13 to 26 weeks for each parent), but left it unpaid.

The reconciliation discourse of the Dutch Coalition agreements

Table 2. An overview of main discursive threads in Dutch coalition agreements 1994-2012

Agreement	Coalition parties	Discourse	Specifics
1994 ‘keuzes voor de toekomst’	Pvda, VVD, D66	Employment promotion	Encouragement of entry of women
1998 ‘kracht’	PvDA, VVD, D66	Gender equality and employment promotion	Good economic growth, investment
2002 ‘werken aan vertrouwen’	CDA, LPF, VVD	Employment promotion (with a freedom to choose)	Decreasing economic growth, participation
2003 ‘meedoen, meer werk, minder regels’	CDA, VVD, D66	Employment promotion (with a freedom to choose)	Lowering growth, more responsibility
2007 ‘samen werken, samen leven’	CDA, PvDA, CU	Employment promotion (with a freedom to choose), gender equality	Millennium goals, participation
2010 ‘vrijheid en verantwoordelijkheid’	CDA, VVD (PVV)	Employment promotion (with a freedom to choose)	participation and responsibility
2012 ‘bruggen slaan’	VVD, PvDA	Employment promotion, some elements of (general) equal treatment and social investment	

Note: CDA= Christen Democrats, PvDA = Labour, VVD = Liberals, D66 = progressive democrats, CU = Christen Union, PVV= Party for Freedom, LPF = List Pim Fortyin

¹ The civil servants received 75 percent compensation, others not

From start of the period of the analysis (1994) to date, the main discourse prevailing in Dutch coalition agreements has been that of employment promotion. Under periods of reasonably favourable economic conditions in the 1990s, most of the attention was directed towards an elimination of the structural bottlenecks hampering women to enter the labour market. The early employment promotion discourse was predominantly framed from the equal treatment perspective: Men and women need to have equal rights to be economically independent (1994 p.28). In the coalition agreement, the governing parties (The PVDA, VVD, D66) called upon measures to increase the number of jobs between segments of minimum income and the lowest collective labour agreements scales (p.6). This was the part of the job market, where particularly women could easily enter and this was facilitated by the government by providing job opportunities (such as so called Melkert job) at the secondary labour market (in line with our conceptualisation of labour promotion category). The gender equality perspective was subordinate to this discourse. The gender equality perspective does, however, tend to occur in the documents only prepared by a coalition including the Labour Party (PvDA) under a separate heading of emancipation.⁴

Central to the Dutch female employment discourse is thus the idea of flexible labour markets and that citizen must be enabled to adapt their labour market participation in different phases of life. This was embodied in the life course perspective that was actively promoted in the coalition documents between 2002 and 2007. Such intention to maximise the choice of the individual remains typical for the Dutch reconciliation policies to date, as will be discussed later. The analysis of coalition agreement shows that the freedom to choose to work (or, not to work) is highlighted in the documents prepared under Christian-Democratic (CDA) rule. Here, the employment promotion is called upon vis-à-vis with protection of traditional family norms. For example, the coalition agreement of 2002 posited that men and women should have the freedom to choose to have different roles in life cycle, especially in relation to paid and unpaid work decision. This discourse driven by CDA resonates with its' traditional norms and values that family is the corner stone of the society and consequently, in sake of the children, women should be able also to choose not to work.

The decline of economic growth from the 2000s onwards and the surmounting Eurozone crisis does not seem to have largely changed the reconciliation discourse in the Netherlands. The emphasis has remained on the employment promotion of women, vis-à-vis favouring cash over services and maximising the choice of the individual in matter of reconciliation of family and work. Participation is increasingly at the core of the governmental discourse from the early 2000. Yet, not only gainful employment is understood under this term. Active participation of (grand)parents at schools and provision of informal child care are examples of 2010 coalition agreement how people should to find a good balance between paid work, care responsibilities, voluntary work, training and free time. Furthermore, flexible working times and working forms are underlined to provide enough possibilities to enable people to combine work with other activities. As example, flexibility was suggested in the document of 2010 by introducing more telework and home work to help parents to combine work and care responsibilities (coalition agreement 2010: ADD pages).

From 2010, self-responsibility of families became increasingly highlighted. In the midst of cuts in childcare provision, 2010 coalition agreement (ADD pages), for instance, posited that the cabinet thinks that child care supplements (by state to parents) should not weaken the own responsibility of the parents. And that more responsibilities are to be designed for parents (also financially) to the improvement of language proficiency of their children (2010: ADD pages). These tendencies go somewhat against the broader European trends towards state investments in early childhood education. In fact, the 'social investment' discourse has not yet found its way to the reconciliation discourse in the Netherlands. During the economically flourishing period (mid 1990s), governments announced several measures to increase child care services to improve the quality of child care and to liberate women to the employment in line with the employment promotion discourse. For instance, in 1998, the government announced an intensification programme to improving quality of education and increasing numbers of child care and after school care. (p.12). With a fourfold growth of the day care capacities, and with focus on after school care supply, the coalition agreement (1998: 27) claims to have taken an important step towards better response to the current need as well the need in the future of day care services.

Even after the decline of economic growth and surmounting Eurocrisis, education was seen as one of the focal points of the governments. However, emphasis on freedom of choice plays the first violin in this debate aiming at improving the quality of education: central state is seen to bear the responsibility to set the framework, where schools are free to make up their own substance. In the coalition agreement of 2003, straight references was made to acknowledge the importance of education for the society and economy at large, but no reference is made to the need to invest in the early childhood education. In 2007, investment in quality is highlighted, yet its interpretation stems from the need to provide freedom to choose for parents and children, more freedom to school to decide on the substance and ways of teaching: and in case of good performance of the schools, school may win more freedom from state (less strict monitoring). Only in the document of 2012, references to early child hood education and its importance for the society as a whole are included in the government strategy. This, however, is posited towards more stringent testing of pre pre-school children for their language proficiency and the necessity to invest more means to schools to improve the language education for the group of children. In many case these are targeted measures toward poor families, and especially those with migration backround. The targeting towards migrant families started already in 2002, when the populist Pim Fortyin party changed the political climate towards migration policy and multiculturalism. Ever after this, coalition agreementw refer to targeted inclusion of migrant families. For example, in the document of 2007 children (of migrant families) with lacking language proficiency, are suggested to be guided to day care or peuterspeelzaal (a preschool play school) or in pre-school education (at the age of 4). These measures should be integrated with measures that aim at parents's integration (2007: P. 28). Social investment paradigm has thus not gain urgency at the Dutch governmental discourse, and under the current economic dire straits will remain a silent letter in the nearby future.

The Finnish reconciliation regime

The Finnish system for work/family reconciliation has focussed mainly on employment promotion of mothers through publicly-funded child day-care services, but it has also aimed at higher gender equality between parents as well as equal treatment of women and men in working life. This has brought with it a relatively high full-time female employment rate, approximately around 66-67 per cent of the whole female workforce, and a relatively low part-time female employment rate (below 20 per cent).

Most important reforms 1990-2012

The Finnish reconciliation system did not become fully developed in a 'Nordic' sense until 1996 when the childcare system became truly universal and started to cover all children under school-age. The main motive behind the expansion of public childcare provision was to facilitate mothers' employment in accordance with the European Employment Strategy, but also to curb the tendencies of rising child poverty among families with children (cf. Hiilamo, 2002). Simultaneously, in the early 1990s cutbacks in family transfers were made as a part of the reform package seeking economic recovery and state financial sustainability. Among other things, the replacement rate of parental insurance allowances was lowered. It has been suggested that this reform was a part of an ideological shift from a 'transfer-oriented' towards a 'employment-oriented' paradigm within Finnish family policy during the 1990s, and that this shift was fuelled by the heyday of (European) third-way Social Democracy and the Finnish membership in the EU (cf. Nygård 2010). A year later, in 1997, the childcare reform was accompanied by the introduction of a whole new transfer to families with children, the private care allowance for children, which was meant to increase parents' freedom to choose between public or private childcare. Interestingly, Finnish parents already had the chance to opt for home childcare instead of public day care through the so-called home care allowance system that was originally instituted in 1985. Originally this benefit was advocated by the Centre Party as a 'mothers wage' compensating mothers for their domestic work, but in the 1990s it was increasingly seen as a way of relieving municipalities in their responsibility of providing public childcare to parents (Hiilamo and Kangas, 2009). The introduction of the private care allowance thus strengthened parents'

choice of freedom in matters of childcare, but underneath it also drew heavily on employment promotion as well as an ambition to boost market-based childcare provision in Finland. Since the 1990s, the Finnish reconciliation system has developed in a rather incremental way through piecemeal reforms of the family transfer system and the enactment of anti-discrimination legislation in 2004. The reforms conducted in the family transfer system, notably the parental insurance and the child benefit system, have largely aimed at two objectives; to increase the level of gender equality within the parental leave system through a larger up-take of fathers' leave and to enhance the social inclusion of (poor) families with children, notably single-parent and multi-child families, through improvements of child benefits and child benefit supplements for single parents. The background for these reforms was the devaluation of purchasing power of families and the rising child poverty rate among families in the late-1990s and early-2000s (Lammi-Taskula and Salmi, 2010). This caused the Centre-left coalition led by Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen, formed in 2003, to launch a series of 'poverty packages' consisting of piecemeal improvements of family transfers in 2004 and 2005. But alongside these improvements there was also a prolongation of the father's leave to 30 weekdays under the condition that the father used 12 days of the mutual parental leave (Kuivalainen and Niemelä, 2010). At the same time (in 2004) the Parliament enacted the Law of equal treatment (2004/21) which prohibited all discrimination on the basis of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and age. The backdrop to this legislation was the policy imperatives set in motion by the EU Council directives on equal treatment (2000/43/EC) and on discrimination (2000/78/EC).

Since the mid-2010s, the reforms conducted in the Finnish reconciliation system have continued to aim for higher female employment, gender equality and social inclusion. The ambition to enhance female employment is represented by the Finnish government's attempts to start a renegotiation of the legal rights to public day care for every child under school age, and the idea of a restriction of the home care allowance so that it only applies to children under two years of age. As to gender equality, the 2007 improvements of the parental insurance system aimed at increasing the uptake of fathers' leave by making the system more flexible, and in 2010 the fathers leave was extended to 36 days (STM, 2009). Among the reforms aiming for higher social inclusion of families, the piecemeal improvements of the child benefit system serve as good examples, where (Kuivalainen and Niemelä, 2010).

The reconciliation discourse of the Finnish Coalition agreements

Since the mid-1990s, the Finnish government discourse on reconciliation policy has been strongly framed by employment promotion as a way of stabilising the Finnish economy in the aftermath of economic recession. The government programme launched by the Social Democratic coalition in 1995 was firmly set on economic growth as well as structural reforms of the social protection schemes, notably unemployment benefits, in order to make the system more activating. At the same time the need to make family policies and working life more 'family friendly' was emphasised through for example flexible working arrangements and flexible parental leaves. Furthermore the government programme drew on EU principles in promoting gender equality within Finnish working life as well as family life.

Table 3. An overview of main discursive threads in Finnish government programs 1995-2011

Agreement	Coalition parties	Discourse	Specificities
1995 'Työllisyyden ja yhteisvastuun hallitus'	SDP, KOK, LW, GRE, SPP	Employment promotion Gender equality in working life and family life	Activation through a more spurring social protection scheme
1999 'Oikeudenmukainen ja kannustava - sosiaalisesti eheä Suomi'	SDP, KOK, LW, GRE, SPP	Employment promotion, gender equality, social inclusion and anti-discrimination policies	Parents' right to choose with regard to childcare
2003 'Työllä, yrittämisellä ja	CEN, SDP, SPP	Employment promotion, gender equality in working	Introduction of 'fathers' month' within the parental

yhteisvastuulla uuteen nousuun ⁷		life and family policy, social inclusion through anti-poverty measures and investments in human capital	leave system
2007 'Vastuullinen, välittävä ja kannus-tava Suomi ⁷	CEN, KOK, GRE, SPP	Employment promotion, gender equality, social inclusion, investments in human capital	More flexibility and incentives in family transfers and welfare services
2011 'Avoin, oikeudenmukainen ja rohkea Suomi ⁷	KOK, SDP, CHR, GRE, LW, SPP	Employment promotion, gender equality	Flexibility in childcare services and
Note: SDP=Social Democrats, KOK=Conservatives, CEN=Centre Party, GRE=Greens, SPP=Swedish People's Party, LW=Left-Wing Party, CHR=Christian Democrats			

This discursive thread was followed up by the next government which came into office in 1999 and was constituted by the same parties as its predecessor. Also in this programme gender equality in working life as well as in family life was put forth as an objective for the government, but it also contained a strong emphasis of the role of public welfare services for the overall employment rate as well as for the social inclusion of (poor) families, that is, work was considered the best remedy for child poverty. In this sense, this programme entailed a somewhat stronger emphasis on social inclusion than its predecessor, since day-care services and active labour market policies were not only seen as important for the labour market participation of parents, but also as a way of fighting poverty. The 1999 government programme was the first of the programs after the 1990s-crisis to openly acknowledge child poverty (Nygård and Krüger, 2012). The programme also acknowledged the role of the anti-discrimination directive enacted through the Amsterdam Treaty as a way of preventing gender inequality. The parental leave system was seen as one of the areas where the objective towards gender equality should be put to test by granting fathers a 'daddy quota' and thereby shifting care responsibilities more evenly between parents.

In 2003 the coalition base shifted when the Centre Party regained office after eight years in opposition. However, by and large, this centre-left government followed in the footsteps of its predecessor by emphasising employment promotion and by pinpointing the role of reconciliation policies in this respect, especially when parental employment was concerned. The programme also accentuated the importance of gender equality in working life and saw the enactment of a new anti-discrimination law as one major step towards this goal. But also in family life the need to accomplish gender equality was seen as central, and the way to achieve this was seen to induce fathers to take longer leaves with their children and to redistribute the financial burdens of the parental insurance system more evenly between female- and male-dominated employment branches. Notwithstanding the fact that preschool education had been introduced already in 2001, the creation of human capital among children through welfare services and educational services were now seen as ways of achieving social inclusion and better life chances for children over the life cycle. Furthermore, piecemeal improvements of the child benefit and home-care allowance systems as well as the parental insurance allowance were seen as central for curbing poverty among families, notably lone-parent households.

Also the centre-right government coming into office in 2007 drew heavily on reconciliation as an instrument for employment promotion, gender equality and poverty reduction, but the focus on human capital formation in terms of preschool education and childcare as well as activation through more flexible and effective family transfers were somewhat more accentuated in this programme. Like its predecessor also this government saw the exclusion of poor families as devastating to society as a whole and the economy in particular, which is why piecemeal improvements of the family transfer system were called for. But also the public childcare system was seen as being in need of reform. Not only should the system allow parents to choose the form of child care they think is best, but the flexibility of part-time care was to be improved in order to facilitate a smooth balance between work and family life.

The Conservative-led six-party coalition coming into office in 2011 strongly set out to strengthen the financial sustainability of the Finnish welfare state in the wake of the financial crisis by

increasing the overall employment level and prolonging working lives of Finns. Similar to previous programmes, reconciliation policies were given a central position in the realization of these ambitions, but they were also seen as crucial for the achievement for gender equality. The accentuation of reconciliation policies was in fact stronger in this programme than in any of the previous programmes studied here. Early childhood education and care were seen as crucial not only for the combination of work and family life, but also for raising the overall employment levels and thereby securing the long-term financial sustainability of the welfare system. Although the legal right to public childcare was defended, there were also claims for making the system more flexible, notably when it comes to part-time care. Also the use of child home care was seen in a somewhat more critical light than before since it was mentioned that the system ought to be made more flexible and encouraging for parents to take up part-time jobs. Allegedly, the system was thought of as a potential obstacle to parental employment, although this was not said out loud in the programme.

As a whole, although being considered important to employment and gender equality already in the 1990s, reconciliation policies became increasingly and explicitly emphasised as drivers of economic growth, gender equality, social inclusion and family friendliness in the 2010s. Mostly they have been associated with employment promotion and gender equality, whereas reconciliation policies became seen as drivers of social inclusion only in the 2010s. There seems to have been no major differences between the governments as to their ideological composition, instead the discursive framing of reconciliation tend to have been quite stable over time and conditioned more by contextual factors such as soaring poverty rates or sluggish growth.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to investigate government-level discourses on work/family reconciliation in two European countries, Finland and the Netherlands, since the mid-1990s. On the basis of our research questions and the theoretical framework the following conclusions can be made.

First, regarding to the question to what extent have work/family reconciliation policies found their way into coalition agreements in the two countries since the mid-1990s, it was found that in both countries, reconciliation policies are of importance for the governmental strategy for sustainable welfare states and a necessity for economic growth.

Second, regarding to the question whether these national discourses relate mainly to gender equality, employment promotion, or social inclusion, it was found out that, by and large, employment promotion is the main discourse across countries as well as across time. Both countries strive at high(er) labour market participation of women and reconciliation policies are a crucial instrument to achieve this. The countries show, however, differences with respect to the underlying principles that guide the employment promotion practices. Whereas Finland strive to inclusion of women to the primary labour market by means of promotion of equal treatment of women and men, the Netherlands promotes the freedom of choice of the parents flexible working arrangements and (part) time care. The policy instruments coming out of these political discourse thus tend to be circumscribed by established policy traditions in each country.

Therefore, and regarding to the third question examining whether the discursive developments follow path-dependent traits or whether there is traceable convergence between the countries over time towards the contemporary European ideal (of social investment), it can be concluded that both countries have adopted the EU's ambition of rising labour market participation rates, but national flavours on how reconciliation of family and employment responsibilities are still very much prevalent in the policy documents. The Dutch aim at organising flexible arrangements for mothers, and follows thus very much the continental one and half breadwinner model, whereas the Finnish tradition based on universal social democratic model centres around the equal treatment of men and women. Hardly any references were made to European Union in these contexts.

It appears, however, that party politics play a role in the discourses, particularly in the Netherlands. In Dutch government coalitions where the Labour party have been present, more attempt have been made towards formalisation of public day care and emancipation of women, following the social democratic tradition. At the same time, coalitions including Christian democrats have predominantly emphasised the freedom of choice (to stay at home with children). Following the leftist

political leaders within European Union (predominantly the French president Holland), the Labour party in the Netherlands has also recently attempted to raise the issue of social investment on the political agenda. In the Dutch context, however, most of the social investment tends to be targeted towards migrant families, as legacy of the Pim Fortuin's backflash towards (inadequate) migration policies in the Netherlands. A child-centred approach, as central to the EU's understanding of social investment strategy has thus not been adopted in the Netherlands as a national (universal) strategy. In Finland, early childhood education has been on the agenda for decades. It is, however, evident from the documents analysed that the current social investment strategy tends to materialise as selective policies: extra investments are targeted to low income families.

The three perspectives to reconciliation discourses sketched in our theoretical section are not without problems as some of them tend to overlap (as in the Finnish case where employment promotion and gender equality are difficult to separate from each other). It, however, was useful for conceptual purposes and application of it allowed us conduct a comparative analysis of two countries with common goal, but very different values and norms underlying the reconciliation policies. Furthermore, the social investment is still a rather recent agenda and it has not yet had time to materialise in the member state's discourse and policy practices.

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¹Between 1998 and 2002, the annual employment guidelines posited four pillars for member state to follow in their modernisation process; namely adaptability, entrepreneurship, equal opportunities and employability. Gender equality was also embodied by the gender mainstreaming policy commitment of Article 8 TFEU 'In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities and to promote equality between men and women'.

² EU has become an important actor in the area of work and family; primarily due to the active lobbying of feminist groups and the continuing effort of European Commission to expand the competences of the EU (Morgan, 2009: 52).

³ The primary labor market generally consists of high-wage paying jobs, longer lasting careers and the workers are covered with generous social security arrangements. This in contrast to the secondary labor market, which consists of low-wage paying jobs, limited job-mobility, and the workers's social protection is poor if existent.

⁴ In these documents (1994, 1998, 2007) emancipation is framed more broadly than just catching up women of men at the labour market.⁴ Emancipation is seen by Labour governments to necessitate changes in division of tasks between men and women. With a reference to UN Womens' treaty, and to the report of commission Groenman, 1998 coalition agreement (by PvDA, VVD, D66) for example called for gender equality by remarking that the increasing labour market participation of women has not been compensated with increasing participation of men in the unpaid caring tasks.