

but are supplemented by a half-day Saturday session. All of these schools have canteen facilities (fees are income-related). Almost 98% of children aged three already attend '*écoles maternelles*'. This service is highly suitable for mothers who are employed during the opening hours of these schools (from 8.00a.m. to 5.00p.m), and allows them to be secure in the knowledge that their children are cared for by qualified staff.

However, since the beginning of the nineties, combined with women's increasing levels of labour force participation, the changes associated with increasing flexibility at the workplace have led to rising demand for flexible forms of child care arrangements. In a context of rising unemployment (in 1994, unemployment had reached a record high of 12.3 per cent for men and 14.5 per cent for women), the government (under the government headed by Premier Balladur, a member of one of the right-wing parties in power) therefore decided, in 1994, to exploit the job-creating potential of the childcare sector, and to dramatically increase both child care allowances and tax concessions to help families to meet the costs of 'individualised' child care arrangements. The government hoped to encourage families with young children to create employment and at the same time to bring more domestic workers into the formal economy.

*Since 1994, a move towards individualised child care arrangements*

As a matter of fact, to understand why the government adopted these measures in 1994 - despite their high cost for the CNAF (see Table 3) - one must go beyond the rhetoric utilised to legitimate this and put these measures in their political, economic and social context. Therefore, adopting the rhetoric of 'free choice for parents', and of 'diversification of childcare arrangements', the government decided, using a Family Law framework, to use family policy as a tool to fight unemployment.

Along this line, the amount of the ‘Allowance for Child Care in the Home (AGED)’ was doubled. At the same time, AGED was also extended to parents with at least one child under six years old (before it was only provided to parents with a child aged under three). As a result of the changes introduced, the number of AGED recipients increased dramatically from 21,000 in 1993 to 82,000 by December 1997. Families are eligible if both parents (or the lone parent) are economically active. The wage of the employee cannot be less than the official minimum wage (SMIC). In 1998, the socialist government decided to reduce the amount of this allowance, which was strongly criticised as it favoured well-off families. As a result, the number of AGED recipients has been decreasing since then, and had reached 61,000 by December 2000. This allowance currently covers part of the social security contributions which must be paid by a family who employs someone at home to care for their child(ren). The amount of this allowance is income-related and varies according to the age of the youngest child (aged under 6).

As with households that make use of a ‘service-voucher’ to employ a family carer, a home helper or a cleaner, recipients of AGED are able to deduct 50 percent of the actual costs of care from their income tax, up to a limit of around 4,430 Euros annually. Not surprisingly, upper-middle-income and well-off families represent the majority of recipients because 1) only those earning an income high enough to be taxed<sup>6</sup> can benefit from tax deductions and 2) this child care arrangement, irrespective of family income, is much more expensive than a childminder outside the home or a crèche (Table 2).

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<sup>6</sup> Only half of the families have to pay income tax thanks to the ‘Quotient familial’: within this family-based splitting system, the number of children is taken into account in calculating the tax liability. The total household income is divided by the number of family members, the relevant and progressive tax rate is applied to this income per adult equivalent (one ‘share’ for an adult, one ‘half-share’ for the first and second children), and the resultant sum then multiplied by the number of family members. As a result, for the same income level, a family with three children will pay less than a family with only one child.

The Balladur government also decided to increase the amount of the 'Allowance to Employ an Approved Childminder' (AFEAMA), which now covers the social security contributions to be paid by the employer of the registered childminder. An additional financial contribution is also given to families: its amount is income-related<sup>7</sup>. This allowance can be combined with a modest tax deduction (up to a maximum of 570 Euros). The number of recipients has increased regularly since 1994, reaching 546,000 by December 2000, compared to 219,000 in 1993. As a result of the dramatic shortage of places in *crèches* and also because it is more flexible, this child-care arrangement has become the most frequently used by dual-earner (and lone parent) families, with at least one child under three, who opt for 'formal childcare'. If AGED and AFEAMA facilitate middle-class and higher-waged women's access to paid work by helping families to meet the costs of child-care, they have the effect - particularly AGED - of being anti-redistributory measures, in contrast to public *crèches*.

As far as the proportion of children in day care is concerned, France is now levelling with the Nordic countries. However, measures geared at working parents are being implemented in tandem with incentive for mothers to stop working. As a matter of fact, with the aim of decreasing the unemployment rate, the government decided, in the same Family Law of 1994, to encourage economically active mothers having a second child to opt for 'staying-at-home', after the birth and maternity leave by providing them with a flat-rate benefit (*Allocation Parentale d'Education* - APE, Child Rearing Benefit) on the condition that they stop working, seeking work or work on a part-time basis. Before, APE was only provided to parents with a third (or higher rank order) child. Its amount is 478 Euros (on a full-time basis) per month in 2002. This benefit is provided until the child reaches the age of three, and parents having a second child are eligible if they have worked (or have been registered as

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<sup>7</sup> In 2002, its amount may vary from 590 Euros to 386 Euros per quarter, for a child aged under 3 years.

unemployed) for at least two years out of the five preceding the birth. This scheme is very successful among low paid or low qualified mothers. Of course, the changes in APE eligibility have contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of recipients, reaching 541,000 in 2000 compared to 154,000 in 1993, thus contributing to a huge increase in expenditures devoted to this 'stay-at-home' option (Table 3). Not surprisingly, the economic activity rate of mothers with two children, the youngest aged less than 3 years, has decreased from 69 per cent in 1994 to 53 per cent in 1998. It has been estimated that between 1994 and 1997, about 110,000 working mothers with two children have retired from the labour market to take advantage of APE (Allain, Sédillot, 1999).

However, a survey conducted among former recipients (Gallou, Simon, 1999) has provided evidence that the vast majority of mothers who were employed before the APE period, resumed their jobs when the child reached three years of age.

**Table 3: Public Expenditure Devoted to Individualized Childcare Arrangements:  
Evolution 1994 – 2000 (in units of Constant Million Euros)\***

	<b>1994</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>% of increase</b>
<b>Child-rearing Benefit (APE): Stay- at- Home Option</b>	942.35	2,799.43	+197
<b>Allowance to Employ an Approved Childminder (AFEAMA)</b>	685.58	1,694.95	+147
<b>Allowance for Child Care in the Home (AGED)</b>	85.49	134.60	+57

Source: CNAF, Bureau des prévisions, C. Boissières, 2002

\* Paid by the Social security (all schemes)

In total, almost half of all children aged under three years are now either looked after at crèches or are covered by individualised childcare subsidised by public funding. Outside nursery schools, there are around 310 000 jobs (full-time equivalent) which are currently subsidised, taking charge of and looking after children while their parents are at work.

The outcome of such a policy that mainly supports working parents is that most mothers in France are able to combine a job with family life, even if many of them still have to cope with difficulty in managing their daily lives, in particular when they have variable or atypical working hours.

## **II. Tensions and dilemmas: what is at stake?**

*The development of flexible working hours*

As a matter of fact, fewer and fewer people hold jobs with fixed, daytime schedules and flexible work hours are gaining in prominence (Boisard, Fermanian, 1999). The development of flexible working hours, in particular, is not a recent phenomenon but the 35-hour law has largely contributed to reinforcing this phenomenon. However, the « risk » of working non-standard hours or days is not randomly distributed across the labour force. Less educated mothers are more likely to work non-standard hours and days than are better educated mothers (Bué, 2002). These new working patterns have a strong impact on childcare arrangements and sometimes reinforce the difficulties low paid mothers are confronted with in combining paid work and unpaid work. Indirectly, it has also contributed to the increase in the demand of flexible childcare arrangements.

As a result of the development of flexible working hours at the workplace and the changes in working conditions, there is a growing lack of synchronisation in families' social time. Moreover, *creches* and nursery schools are not accommodating of varied employment schedules, and the operating hours of these public facilities don't match the flexible working hours of a growing number of economically active parents.

To meet the demands of families confronted with atypical working hours, the Ministry of Family Affairs is currently encouraging local authorities to develop more flexible childcare services. In many cities (Paris, Vannes, Lorient, Lanester, for instance), some *creches* already operate until late in the evening. However, staff working in public childcare facilities (mostly women) are very reluctant about these changes which impact on their own daily lives.

Moreover, childcare policy has to tackle a lot of tensions and to cope with a conflict of interests within the family.

*French family policy's dilemmas: how to cope with conflict of interests within the family?*

Taking into account that the issue of gender equality is high on the political agenda, decision-makers have to deal with the fact that the interests of children do not always coincide with the promotion of gender equality at work. Therefore, public measures to assist in the reconciliation of work and family appear to be facing the following tensions and dilemmas: 1) either they must make it a priority (for the sake of gender equality on the labour market, for example) to enable parents – in particular, women - to adapt to the realities of the world of work so that they can keep their jobs or pursue a career, but draw a veil over the fact that the effects of certain work constraints on family life and the children's well-being could prove to be contrary to the principles on which family policy is founded;

2) or, for the sake of protecting the interests of the child (for example, keeping in tune with its biological rhythms), they must refuse to rubber-stamp and support changes in working conditions, particularly the development of atypical and flexible working hours which are contributing to the growing lack of synchronisation in times within the family. However, they will then be taking the risk, in view of gender relations, that they will be helping to penalise certain categories of mothers in occupational terms, particularly the most poorly skilled, or even helping to exclude them from the labour market altogether, and this is a risk that is extremely problematic at a time when access to employment is a vital component in exercising true citizenship.

### **III. Recent changes in Family Policy: Is Family Policy at a Turning Point?**

In this context, the socialist government, headed by Premier Jospin, has introduced changes in family policy over the last five years. As a matter of fact, surveys and public opinion polls have provided evidence that many working mothers had to deal with many difficulties in

organising child care, and that a growing proportion of parents were complaining about the shortcomings and shortage of services and public facilities.

Therefore, the government wanted to give priority to issues of work/life balance which were high on the social and political agenda. Moreover, a spate of literature had argued that fathers play an important part in the emotional and cognitive development of children (Frydman, Szejer, 1998, Le Camus et al., 1997, Neyrand, 1999). Many experts also put emphasis on the necessity of a father's presence at home after a birth. Along this line, Ministry Ségolène Royal, in charge of family affairs, firmly stated that it was important to promote equality at home and to provide men with the opportunity to look after their toddler if they wanted to.

#### *The creation of a statutory paternity leave*

- In this context, the right of fathers to make a commitment to family life has made its mark on the social and political debate: fathers have now been granted (since January 2002) two weeks' statutory paternity leave (before it was only 3 days), on full pay (up to a ceiling of 2,352 Euros per month by 2002, paid by the social security)<sup>8</sup>. From a symbolic point of view, it is a turning point in the history of French family policy: for the first time the issue of fathering has come to the forefront of the family policy arena (Castelain-Meunier, 2002). This is a social recognition of the important role fathers are assumed to play in the family, and it will contribute to supporting the idea at the workplace that a man is not only a worker but also a father. It also illustrates growing public awareness that in order to achieve equality at work, it is necessary to encourage the equal sharing of family obligations and domestic work. However, the announcement of the two-weeks of paternity leave was strongly criticised by employers, whose attitudes mirror the fact that the issue of reconciling paid work and unpaid work is still not high on the economic agenda.



Moreover, maternity leave remains much more generous: mothers are granted 16 weeks (26 weeks in case of a third child), which contributes to the enduring asymmetry between the sexes in family involvement.

- To take into account that working parents might be sometimes confronted with unexpected day care problems, a special leave to look after a sick child has also been established<sup>9</sup> (*'Congé de présence parentale'*): very similar to the parental leave scheme, it allows a father or a mother to stop working or to reduce his (or her) working time to take care of a disabled or deeply injured or very ill child (any child aged under 20 years old). The duration of the leave can be up to 4 months and can be renewed twice, up to a maximum of 12 months. During the leave, which is not paid, the work contract is suspended but employees continue to be entitled to work-related social benefits (health insurance). Under certain conditions, the leave-taker can be provided with a flat-rate benefit (*'Allocation de présence parentale'*, APP), which is similar to the APE (*'Child-rearing benefit'*). After completing his or her leave, the employee must be reinstated without a reduction in pay in the same position or in a similar one, and is eligible for retraining with pay.

- In childcare policy, some improvements have taken place: funding in favour of *crèches* has been increased (see Chapter 1) and, in 2001, the government also decided that AFEAMA (*'Allowance to Employ an Approved Childminder'*) would be income-related. The amount of this child-care allowance, provided to low and middle-income families, has been increased: this reform was based on the principle of solidarity. However, in some urban and residential areas (in particular in central and rural areas), it remains very difficult to find a registered childminder. After-school activities aimed at school-aged children have also been developed.

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<sup>8</sup> 21 days if they are multiple births. This leave cannot be divided, 11 days must be taken in a row and within a four month period following the birth (art. L. 122-25-4 du Code du travail). All economic active fathers are eligible.

<sup>9</sup> Established by the law on Social security funding passed in 2000 (J.O. from December 24, 2000)

- Moreover, in order to encourage recipients of APE to resume their job (or to look for a job), it was decided that for two months they could still obtain this benefit at the same time as being employed. A mother or a father can draw these two incomes simultaneously only if they re-enter the workforce at least six months before the third birthday of the child (but they are not eligible if they re-enter the workforce before the child is 18 months old). The aim of this reform was to create incentives for mothers to shorten the duration of their parental leave and to go back to paid work before their youngest child reaches the age of three (the age limit beyond which the parent is no longer eligible for APE) in order, on one hand, to reduce the costs of this benefit for Social Security (see Table 3) and, on the other hand, to enhance employment opportunities for women.

- Other piecemeal measures have been taken: as far as employees in training programme are concerned, part of their childcare costs will have to be funded. The Ministry of Family Affairs also wants to promote innovative practices in the workplace: along this line, some companies have already put into place 'family-friendly' flexible working hours or have provided their employees with the opportunity to work from home (IBM, for instance). Recently, a guide<sup>10</sup> (elaborated by a trade-union under the supervision of an expert committee and funded by three ministries) has been published: it is aimed at providing information about the legislative framework of family policy to companies. This guide also tries to encourage them to implement 'family-friendly' measures. However, employers often state that it is not up to them to fund childcare for their employees, because they already fund part of family policy through social contributions, they also frequently complain about the red tape surrounding the implementation of this policy.

Let's now turn to the new law that mandates a 35-hour week: has the reduction in working time (RTT) had a positive impact on the daily life of working parents?

#### **IV. The New Law that Mandates a 35-Hour Week: Does it Make it Easier For Parents to Combine Paid Work With Family Responsibilities?**

The 35-hour law (in reality it is a 1,600 hours a year law), established in 1999, redefined working time regulations. Against a background of high unemployment (around 12 per cent), its main objective was to create employment. However, at a rhetoric level, the French adoption of a 35-hour working week was also part of the search for a better work-life balance.

##### *More Flexible Working Hours in Return for a Reduction in Working Time*

For a better understanding of the impact of this law on the strategies elaborated by working parents to combine their job and their family life, it is important to put emphasis on the economic context and on the trade-offs and compromises that have been made between the state and the employers<sup>11</sup>. Firstly it is important to keep in mind that most of the employers were very reluctant about this law and strongly opposed the view of the government when the law was passed by 1999 (they argued this would make it more costly for any company seeking to rationalise its operations to face up to globalised competition). However, they have been obliged to come to terms with the implementation of the law. In exchange they have benefited from a decrease in social contributions based on low wages and in many collective agreements wages have been frozen for a certain period of time. Moreover, the legislation on working hours has been made more flexible.

Against the background of imbalanced power-relationships between employers and employees, employees have sometimes been obliged to accept flexible working schedule and

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<sup>10</sup> 'Entreprises et articulation des temps familiaux et professionnels', March 2002.

<sup>11</sup> By June 2001, 62 per cent of employees working in companies having more than 20 employees were working on average 35 hours per week. The next part of the law is due in 2002: the 35-hour rule is to apply to small firms too.

practices that they have traditionally objected to. In the banking sector or in the retail sector, for example, they have signed up to an agreement which entails an extension of the opening hours. As a result, more employees than before are working late in the evening, early in the morning or have to work on Saturdays or Sundays. Moreover, the 35 working hours are calculated on an average on a yearly-basis, which means that employees can sometimes work 42 hours a week or more for a few months and much less during other periods of time. Within the same company, a large range of solutions can also be developed. This has contributed to reinforce the general movement towards individualisation and fragmentation of working schedules. As far as management is concerned, for instance, the units of reference are working days, which means that they can get a day off every two weeks for example (or have a longer period of vacation). But, at the same time, they can go on putting in a huge number of working hours each day which does not help to devote more time to family obligations.

*Results of studies carried out among working parents: a wide range of effects*

A survey was conducted at the end of 2000, among 1,618 full-time employees (with or without children) working in large companies having implemented this law for at least one year (Méda, 2001, Estrade, Méda, Orain, 2001, Méda, Orain, 2002). It is important here to keep in mind that some of these companies had implemented this law all the more quickly so they did not have to cope with a lot of difficulties in reorganising their activity and could be provided with large subsidies by the State (under the condition that they had created employment). The following results are quite instructive and show that diversity is the rule:

- It appeared that a majority of these employees had a positive view of this law: being asked about the impact of the reduction in working time on their daily life, at the workplace as well as outside, 59 per cent answered that it had "rather improved their

daily life". On the other hand, 28 per cent declared that "nothing has changed". Among 13 per cent of respondents, it even resulted in a degradation.

- Results varied greatly according to socio-professional status, to gender and to the terms of the agreement that were applied to the company within the scope of the legislation.
- Women, who are supposed to be more eager for fewer working time constraints than their male colleagues, are more often satisfied: 61 per cent compared to 58 per cent in men.
- A large majority (73 per cent) of mothers with young children are satisfied, and confirm that it is easier than before to combine their job with their family obligations.
- Three out of four female managers (with or without children) deem that their daily life (at work and out of work) has been improving. This is the case for only 40% of women with low qualified jobs.
- As far as the reconciliation of family and professional life is concerned, diversity is also the rule: nearly half of the parents with children under 12 years report that they have been spending more time with their children since the reduction in working time (RTT). Around a third of employees declare that combining work and family life is easier than before (32 per cent of men, 38 per cent of women). 57 per cent declare that nothing has changed.
- 40% of employees complain that work has become more intense and that they have to do the same amount of work in a shorter time span than before.
- The enduring asymmetry between the sexes in family involvement has not been affected by the reduction in working time. Women still assume the main burden of household chores and devote more time than before to cleaning, doing some tidying

up, cooking and gardening. Men spend more time doing odd jobs, gardening and some shopping.

*A few results drawn of our research among families with young children*

According to a recent study (Doisneau, 2000) on the effects of RTT on life both at and outside work, work organisation features appear to be the determining factors in how satisfied workers are, more than their own personal circumstances or those of their companies. This is partly borne out by the results of our research<sup>12</sup> conducted among working parents (fathers or mothers) with at least one child aged under six, working in a firm which has adopted the RTT<sup>13</sup>.

When asked “*Do you feel that the law on the 35-hour week has made it easier for you to combine your family life with your working life?*”, almost six out of ten parents working in a firm or establishment which had already adopted the law answered positively. A statistical analysis of the data showed the most discriminant variables in the replies to this question. As Tables 4, 5 and 6 show, conditions of employment, and in particular those relating to patterns of working schedules, are what contributes to influence people’s perception of the impact on their family lives.

- Working atypical hours (early in the morning, late in the evening or at night<sup>14</sup>) regularly or occasionally considerably reduces the probability that workers will judge RTT to have had a positive effect on their family life: among those who work during ‘normal’ hours, 64 per cent

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<sup>12</sup> This research has been funded by CNAF and DARES (Ministry of Solidarity and Social Affairs) and conducted under the scientific supervision of J. Fagnani (MATISSE, University of Paris 1) and M. T. Letablier (Centre d’Etudes de l’Emploi).

<sup>13</sup> The families in our sample are recipients of six different CAFs (Local Family Allowance Fund). In each one, there is a representative sample of families with at least one child aged under six, who are recipients of the local CAF. Among this sample (n=3,216), we were able to focus on parents already working 35 hours on average per week.

<sup>14</sup> *ie.* before 8 AM or after 6 PM.

consider that the RTT has improved their daily life compared to only 50 per cent for the others (Table 4). This actually confirms the major impact which atypical working hours have on ways of managing childcare, which becomes more complicated in view of the opening hours of childcare facilities;

**Table 4: Combining paid work and unpaid work: has the reduction of working time made it easier than before? Breakdown according to the replies (Yes or No) to this question and to working schedules**

	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Have atypical working hours</b>	50%	50%	100%
<b>Don't have atypical working hours</b>	64%	36%	100%
<b>TOTAL (n= 658)</b>	58%	42%	100%

Inférieur à 0.001 (coefficient significatif au seuil de 0,1%)

Source : Enquête sur la conciliation de la vie familiale et de la vie professionnelle, CNAF-CEE (6 CAF), 2000.

- One of our hypotheses was the following: as far as the impact of the 35 hour law on the reconciliation of unpaid work and paid work is concerned, there is a split between those employees who had already been benefiting, before the implementation of the law, from “family-friendly” policies at the workplace and those who are working in less or not family-friendly environments where, for instance, working schedules don't fit well childcare arrangements. This hypothesis was partly validated by the results of our research. Working parents were asked to assess the measures implemented in their company in favour of

employees having family responsibilities and to give a mark to their employer. The question was as follows: “*In your opinion, does your employer or your immediate superior or do those running your company take account of the fact that you have one or more dependent children very well or not at all?*”. The scores were from 1, not at all, to 5, very well (see Table 5). It is illustrating that among those employees who rank the employer at the top (4 and 5), 76 per cent deem that the RTT has made it easier to combine their job and their family life; this is the case of only 43 per cent of those who rank their employer at the bottom. Not surprisingly, those who were already “privileged” as far as policies at the workplace are concerned are much more likely to be satisfied than the others.

**Table 5: Has the Reduction of Working Time Made It Easier Than Before? Breakdown according to the replies (Yes or No) to this question and to the Mark Given to the Employer**

	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1 and 2. Not at all and Slightly</b>	43%	57%	100%
<b>3. Moderately</b>	57%	43%	100%
<b>4 and 5. Quite a Bit and Extremely</b>	76%	24%	100%
<b>TOTAL (n= 658)</b>	58%	42%	100%

Inférieur à 0.001 (coefficient significatif au seuil de 0,1%)

Source : Enquête sur la conciliation de la vie familiale et de la vie professionnelle, CNAF-CBE (6 CAF), 2000.

- As Table 6 illustrates, parents appear to have benefited much more from the reduction in working time when their working schedules have been negotiated with their employer or



chosen by themselves. On the contrary, when the organisation of working time has been imposed on them, only half of them say that it is easier than before to balance their job and their family life (compared to respectively 66 per cent and 63 per cent). These parents often work in companies where flexibility, associated with largely unpredictable (or given at short notice), atypical and variable working hours, has been imposed to enhance organisational effectiveness. Therefore for them, the RTT has not offset the drawbacks entailed by the change in working schedules and sometimes, it has even aggravated their childcare organisation.

**Table 6: Has The Reduction of Working Time Made It Easier Than Before ?  
Breakdown according to the replies (Yes or No) to this question and to the question  
“Have Your Working Hours Been Imposed, Chosen By You Or Negotiated?”**

	<i>IMPOSED</i>	<b>CHOSEN BY YOU</b>	<b>NEGOTIATED</b>	<b>OTHER</b>
YES	50.6	62.5	66.2	67.5
NO	49.4	37.5	33.8	32.5
<i>100,0</i>	100.0 <i>49.6</i>	100.0 <i>11.7</i>	100.0 <i>32.8</i>	100.0 <i>5.8</i>

Inférieur à 0.005 (coefficient significatif au seuil de 0,5%)

Source : Enquête sur la conciliation de la vie familiale et de la vie professionnelle, CNAF-CEE (6 CAF), 2000.

On the other hand, it is illustrative that occupational status, level of education, economic sector – public or private –, or level of earnings do not differentiate the answers.

The results of our research corroborate those of a study on part-timers (Bué, 2002) which provides evidence that reducing the working time is not *per se* a means to better balancing of a job and family life. When working hours are imposed and don't fit the organisation of family life, women with children have to cope with more difficulties than mothers working on a full-time basis but benefiting from "normal" working hours or from working schedules which have been negotiated with their employer.

**Conclusion:**

Over the last two decades, France has been providing extensive support for maternal employment. One of the outcomes of this policy is that amongst the member states of the European Union, France is one of the countries with the highest mothers' labour force participation rate (OECD, 2001). At the same time, it now has the highest fertility level within the European Union, alongside Ireland: coinciding with economic growth and a decline in unemployment figures, the total fertility rate (TFR) in France increased from 1.65 in 1994 to 1.90 in 2001. This is partly attributable to the fact that French family policy has incorporated the model of the 'working mother' and that women don't feel obliged to choose between childraising and holding down a job or even pursuing a career. Moreover, as far as childcare norms are concerned, as a result of an interactive process, the attitudes of most French women are in tune with the premises of family policy (Fagnani, 2001).

This illustrates that family policies are partly the result of (and mirror) a cultural and ideological context, which plays an important part in creating a more or less favourable, and more or less guilt-inducing 'environment' for mothers who want (or need) to be economically active.

However, reconciliation policies for working parents are still torn between the political will to promote gender equality and the social need to fight unemployment, between the principles of

solidarity and universalism (Lanquetin, Laufer, Letablier, 2000). Significant shifts have occurred since the beginning of the nineties in the area of maternal employment support, but family policy is still fluctuating between different – and sometimes antagonistic – objectives, which is detrimental to its efficiency and social legitimacy. In particular, it has not contributed to reducing social inequalities within the female population.

Concomitantly, gender discrimination in the labour market is still significant: wage differentials, for example, between men and women have been decreasing since the end of the sixties but are still marked (Meurs, Ponthieux, 2000). This is partly linked to the enduring asymmetry between the sexes in family involvement: women still assume the main burden of household tasks (Algava, 2002), and family-friendly arrangements (parental leave, for instance) tend to be used to a disproportionate extent by women which, in turn, leads to discrimination against them. In actuality, putting the equality principle into practice at work and in the family sphere is still problematic.

Nevertheless, as far as room for manoeuvre in balancing care work and paid work is concerned, it can be argued that, in a comparative perspective, mothers living in France fare much better than most of their European counterparts; a situation that contrasts with the very low proportion of women holding political office<sup>15</sup>. However, this illustrates that a high level of mothers' labour force participation does not always go hand in hand with the exercise of full citizenship.

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<sup>15</sup> However, there have been recent moves to achieve, via the legislature, equal access to political office for men and women ('Parity law').

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