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Organisation of exchange of good practices on gender equality (VT/200/054)

RESPONSE REPORT: The Netherlands

by Inge Bleijenbergh

Part 1: overview - the Netherlands

1. What are the main national policy provisions on childcare, including how childcare is funded?

In the Netherlands, since 1 January 2007 the Dutch government supports the public provision of childcare support. This means that all parents in employment, studying or in a trajectory preparing for employment can apply for a tax allowance to support (part of) the costs of childcare. This allowance is income dependent and supports childcare facilities of parents own choice, being day-care services, pre-school or after-school services or a recognised host parent (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2008).

The introduction of this legislation marked a shift in the Dutch childcare discourse, that had started with the introduction of the Law on Childcare in 2004 (Wet Kinderopvang). Formerly also childcare support was available, but only for one third of the actual costs. Another third of the costs had to be paid voluntary by the employer and one third by the parents. Since 2007 the employer's contribution is included in the tax allowance and the state is responsible for collecting it. Moreover, since the tax allowance is income dependent, the contribution of parents may be less than one third of the costs.

With the new legislation, the political responsibility for childcare provision moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. In contrast to Slovenia, in the Netherlands two different systems of childcare exist. Child care institutions provide full-time day care for children from the ages of 0 to 4, while pre-school institutions provide part-time day care for children from 2.5 to 4. These institutions used to fall under different legislation and have a different policy logic (Bleijenbergh, Bussemaker and de Bruijn, 2006). Full time day care was supported by the ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and supported gender equality. In contrast, pre-school institutions fell under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and supported the preparation of children for education. In practice, the first institution is mainly used by double earner families, while the second is mainly used by families with a more traditional breadwinner housewife model (Ministerie van Onderwijs,

Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2007). The recent move of responsibility for full-time day care to the Ministry of Education, aims to bring the two systems towards each other and to connect the logics of education and gender equality.

The childcare legislation is already under threat because of its own success. The Balkenende IV government, which is a combination of Christian democrats and Socialists, recently announced plans to decrease the level of childcare allowances. Dutch Left wing parties and Non Governmental Organisations are organizing protest actions against these proposals (Groen Links, 2008).

2. Please describe how these national policy provisions contain objectives and/or targets related to gender equality and the participation of women in the labour market? How have they been implemented in practice?

The public childcare policies are part of the Dutch Equality policies that originate from the 1980s, while the pre-school institutions show traces of the elder, more traditionally oriented Dutch welfare system, where married women stay at home and bring their young children to a preschool institution for some hours a week (Bussemaker, 1998).

After the Second World War the Dutch welfare system was based on the ideal of a (male) breadwinner that earned a wage high enough to support wife and eventual children. From the 1980s, married women entered the labour market, but mainly on a part-time basis. In the beginning of the 1990s, the Dutch government began to stimulate employers childcare provision, but on an individual and voluntary base. Employers which provided their employees with childcare services were given a tax incentive. As a result, the provision of childcare facilities was steady but slowly increasing (Bleijenbergh, Bussemaker & de Bruijn, 2004). At present, the Netherlands has a relatively high labour participation of women. In 2005 66% of the women are in paid employment, but 61% of them were working part-time (Portegijs et al. 2006). As a result, the majority of the women are still economically dependent on their husband. In 2004, only 42% of the women between 15 and 65 was financially independent (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2007). The majority of part-time working women are able to take care of their children or elderly relatives for some days of the week, something which is highly valued in the Netherlands.

Also a relatively big amount of men is working part-time, namely 15% of men in 2005 (Portegijs et al, 2005).

The cultural emphasis on the value of care for relatives is reflected in Dutch equality policies. During the nineties Dutch Equality Policies were directed towards shifting care giving responsibilities from women to men, to give both sexes equal chances on the labour market and in politics (Bleijenbergh, 2004: 65). Under influence of a neo-liberal turn in the beginning of the new millennium and of the Barcelona target figures, at present the emphasis is narrowed. Redivision of care responsibilities between men and women has disappeared from the political agenda, while the goal of increasing the working hours of women dominates right now (Ministerraad 2007).

3. Please briefly describe any specific initiatives that have been introduced to enhance the quality and accessibility of childcare provisions, including the role of staff working in childcare services?

The accessibility of childcare provision has improved considerably since the Dutch government introduced a tax scheme that supports the costs of childcare on the basis of the household income. Since employers pay a fixed amount of the costs to the state, the provision of childcare support is no longer dependent on individual arrangements between parents and employers or parents and the municipal. Especially the coverage of childcare costs of lower income is improved, but also huge investments have been made to support middle and higher income groups. To make this concrete, under the new scheme the lowest income groups may only need to pay 4% of the actual costs. On average parents only have to pay 20% of the actual costs (Groen Links, 2008). The maximum price of childcare is 6.10 euro per hour. As a result, in 2008 24 % of children in the age group of 0-4 years make use of public childcare facilities, against 8% in 1995. Moreover, 8% of the children between 6 -12 make use of after school services. (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2008).

4. What are the main gaps and challenges at the national level in promoting good quality childcare?

The main gap is to keep the childcare affordable, now the quest for childcare is growing so quickly. Under the government of Balkenende IV, the budget for

childcare rose from 680 million euros in 2005 to 1580 million euros in 2007 and the government had not foreseen such a big increase in demand (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2008). The government of Balkenende IV has been announcing a budget cutback to childcare to keep the government finances balanced. Concrete plans will be announced in September 2008.

The second challenge is to keep the quality of the childcare services intact, since the growth of the sector has been so quick. Childcare centres run out of staff, room and organisational capacity to meet the growing demand of parents, especially regarding preschool and after school care. Providers that want to set up new services, need to involve many different parties in their initiative, namely schools, municipals, parents, welfare institutions and personnel. Childcare staff needs a secondary school certificate, but because of the high demand qualified personnel is difficult to find.

Section II: Transferability of good practice

5. Please briefly describe specific good practices in your country in the provision of publicly funded childcare (these should be initiatives that have been demonstrated to be of a good quality to promote gender equality).

A good practice is the fact that the Dutch government has been able to involve a fixed employers contribution in the national tax schedule of childcare. Since all employers are obliged to transfer a certain percentage of their profit margin to the national budget, they cannot claim to be on a competitive disadvantage towards each other. In fact this new schedule supports childcare provision for groups that traditionally had a less strong bargaining position towards employers, like low skilled and temporary workers. Moreover, also self-employed people now have a better entrance to this provision.

6. How are these good practices transferable to other countries?

The practice of involving employers in the national childcare pay scheme appeared in the context of the Dutch corporatist system where employers are partners in the

social policy making structure, together with trade unions and the government. Actually such a model has also come to dominate the context of European social policy making in the field of work life policies (Bleijenbergh, 2004). For more than a decade, Dutch employers have stated to be willing to make voluntary agreements on childcare support with trade unions, but after they hadn't been able to meet a certain level of support via collective agreement, the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs obliged them to a collective tax charge. It is difficult to foresee how easily such a system can be transferred to other countries. It may depend on the strength of trade unions in comparison to employers and to the interdependence between the government structure and these social partners.

7. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the Slovenian childcare system, as it contributes to gender equality? What elements of this experience do you think could be transferred to your own country?

One strength of the Slovenia system is that it provides an uniform childcare system. This integrates the goals of gender equality and pre-school education of children, which relieves the pressure of women to stay at home. It would be good to transfer this uniformity to the Netherlands, to integrate the educational and equality goals of the two different systems that are only growing together very slowly.

Another strong point of the Slovenian childcare system is the length and extensiveness of paid parental leave, also for men. Actually the Dutch government is planning to extend the Dutch parental leave (which can be taken up by both fathers and mothers and is not transferable to the other partner) from 13 till 26 weeks. When both parents of a child take up parental leave, they can take care of the child in its first life year before bringing it to childcare facilities. The Dutch system has a wage saving system for the leave to be paid.

A weakness of the Slovenian system is that local municipalities decide on the level of contribution towards parents. According to the Slovenian report, this results in legal inequality between parents living in different communities. Probably the Slovenian system could improve by introducing a national system of childcare support that equalizes the support for all parents.

8. What do you consider to be the main pre-conditions for good quality childcare, in particular so that it contributes to gender equality?

The education level of the staff is important for the quality. The Netherlands has a tradition of a strong motherhood ideology and the idea that children are taken care of at home the best (Bussemaker, 1998, Knijn, 1998). Traditionally even a high level of highly educated women remained at home after childbirth to take care of their children. To alter this cultural tradition, it should be evident that childcare offers added pedagogical value to the upbringing of children rather than a facility for 'keeping the children entertained'. Staff with a higher educational level is better suited to make this educational contribution. Raising the educational level from middle to higher education, would bring childcare staff on the same level as Dutch primary school teachers.

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