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Rationales of Care in Contemporary Welfare States: The Case of Childcare in the Netherlands

Abstract

The article is concerned with childcare policies in the Netherlands since the 1960s. It seeks to contribute to theories of gender and policy formation in welfare states through its focus on political discourses and ideological assumptions embedded in societal notions of care. In analyzing the Dutch case, I distinguish three rationales, respectively a moral, an interest, and an efficiency rationale, which reflect various basic arguments on gender, care, and welfare. The article argues that the rationale of efficiency has been particularly important for an expansion of childcare provisions since the late 1980s. Although this rationale has provided sound arguments for the expansion of childcare, it has been criticized by some feminists because of the hidden assumptions in it about care. The conclusions about the Dutch case have broader implications. In the context of welfare state reform, hegemonic political discourses on childcare are shifting and may have significant consequences for the relation between gender, care, and the welfare state.

Although the Netherlands has a long-standing reputation of being a generous welfare state with an extensive web of social provi-

sions, the same can hardly be said of its state-subsidized childcare facilities. Until recently the Netherlands was among those countries in Europe with the lowest levels of state-funded childcare facilities (Anttonen and Sipilä 1996). Registered care for children under three years was virtually nonexistent in the early 1980s (Sainsbury 1996).

The lack of facilities for young children must be seen against the backdrop of the development of the Dutch welfare state and the explicit and implicit assumptions about gender relations. Almost all post-Second World War labor and social security legislation and measures were based on a belief in separate gender roles between the (male) breadwinner and the (female) caregiver. Dutch policy makers developed a sophisticated and extensive system of income provisions for the nuclear family with traditional gender relations. For that reason, the Dutch welfare state seems to be at the crossroads of the social democratic welfare regime and the conservative, corporatist regime (Esping-Andersen 1990; Bussemaker and van Kersbergen 1994). From a gender perspective, it belongs to the “strong breadwinner model” (Ostner and Lewis 1995), albeit a particularly generous variant (Bussemaker 1997a). The commonly held belief that the best way to care for and raise children was in a family environment presided over by a mother was the majority view well into the 1970s. Roman Catholics, Protestants, social democrats, and liberals (i.e., the most important political movements in the Netherlands) all agreed that a stable and tranquil family life was the best guarantee for social prosperity.

This consensus on family policies and gender relations existed in an otherwise strongly divided and denominationally segregated society. The denominationally segregated society is known as pillarisation (*verzuiling*). Pillarisation refers to the political system and particularly the notion of consociational democracy as a way to create consensus and stability in a system where no single political party had a numerical advantage over the others. Therefore, different from many other countries, governments are coalition governments from social democrats, Catholics, Calvinists, and liberals.¹ However, pillarisation also refers to an institutionalized system of subcultural organizations of different religious (denominational) and quasi-religious (liberal and socialist) groups, who all had their own organization. But despite differences in political views, they agreed upon separate gender roles and the notion that children should be taken care of by their mothers at home.

These attitudes began to change in the 1970s, first slowly, but finally resulting in important shifts in perceptions of family and gender and consequently in childcare. Whereas in the 1960s public childcare was regarded as something immoral in a well-developed welfare state where mothers were supposed to take care of their children at home, in the 1990s childcare is recognized as an economically productive

instrument of policy making to increase women's labor-market participation and thus make the Dutch economy more competitive. Childcare has been integrated in a successful form of welfare-state restructuring, which has recently gained international attention.

This article is concerned with analysis of political debates on (public) childcare and traces shifts in hegemonic discourses that reflect assumptions about gender differences. Attention to discourse and policy debates can contribute to a better understanding of the Dutch case, which is seen as an exceptional case in gender and welfare state research, with its long-standing combination of extensive social provisions but dearth of childcare facilities (Bussemaker and van Kersbergen 1994; Knijn 1994). Finally, analysis of the discourse on childcare can provide an overview of the implications of recent transformations that have taken place in the Dutch welfare state.

The analysis also seeks to contribute to theories of gender and policy formation in welfare states through its focus on political discourses and ideological assumptions embedded in societal notions of care. I take the position in this study that the programmatic conceptions and idioms used in political debates do not simply precede actual policies, but they determine in part and interact with these policies; they give shape to the way in which social relations (e.g., gender relations) in society are perceived.² The analysis has benefitted from Hobson's and Lindholm's (1997) research on gendered frames of citizenship, discursive resources, and policy formation and from Fraser and Gordon's (1994) analysis of dependency and the reproduction of political hegemony. Fraser and Gordon (1994) trace the genealogy of meanings of the keyword "dependency" in historical and contemporary political discourses in the United States. Previously, Fraser developed the concept of "needs-talk" (through an analysis of American debates on need) as "an idiom in which political conflict is played out through which inequalities are symbolically elaborated and challenged" (1989, 291).

In analyzing the Dutch case, I began with the concept of needs talk but found that when applied to societies other than the United States, it may not capture the complexity of discursive conflict. On one level the Dutch debates on gender, care, and welfare from the 1960s are expressions of needs talk. However, "need" has so many varied meanings that it is difficult to sort out the dimensions of conflict, ranging from the need of poor (lone) parents for daycare during work hours, the need of children "at risk" for educational and moral supervision, the need of children's social and pedagogical development more generally, the need of women for a fairer redistribution of paid and unpaid (care) work, the need of employers to increase productivity, to the need of the government to fight budget deficits through increasing

women's labor-market participation. In short, need is a discursive resource used by a range of social actors for a range of different purposes. To distinguish more precisely between various discourses and their inherent ideological assumptions, I consider how needs talk is embedded in various basic arguments—what I refer to as rationales deployed by various social actors. Using the Dutch debates on childcare, I consider three rationales and call them, respectively, the rationale of morality, interest, and efficiency. First, I consider the moral rationale as it is linked to the debates around whether state-funded childcare facilities can be morally justified—whether they fit with the political hegemonic notion of the “good life” (in the Dutch context this refers to a long-standing notion that care for children should be provided full-time by the mother at home). Within this rationale needs talk refers in particular to poverty and needs of children at risk. Second, I use the term “interest rationale” to reflect the ways in which childcare is represented as benefitting a particular group: children, parents, lone parents, etc. Interests thus can mean children's interest (need) for pedagogical and social development, but it can also refer to the interest or need of caring parents who seek to create time and space for self-development. As we shall see, the rationale of children's interests has a great deal of continuity and was often formulated in opposition to the interests of parents and mothers seeking autonomy and independence. In the discursive terrain around childcare, however, these interests sometimes appear to overlap.

I have defined the third rationale as one that encompasses efficiency (as well as utility and productivity). The central concern here is whether day care facilities can be expected to contribute to economic efficiency—for example, whether they yield a return on investments in education made by the government and/or employers and whether they contribute to competitiveness of the economy. This rationale is the most recent one and gained political hegemony in a short time. Needs will refer in the first place to the need of employers or the state to increase productivity but can also refer to families or individuals.

Depending on the rationales chosen, discursive resources for gaining political hegemony vary. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that these rationales can carry apparent contradictory political views. For example, in the Netherlands denominational views on morality have been hegemonic in the moral rationale, though one finds secular variants in the moral rationale, including a feminist view on the ethic of care (Tronto 1993). An interest rationale can be based on a (hegemonic) pedagogical view of children's interest, but it can also be based on a feminist view of women's interests in equal opportunity for paid work and self-development. And an efficiency rationale can be founded on a utilitarian principle of enhancing prosperity, but also

on a feminist argument based on the need to utilize women's cultural capital and to thus allow a contribution to economic productivity.

Just as one rationale can potentially comprise potentially conflicting positions, a specific idea can be argued from differing rationales. For example, feminists in favor of public day care can use rationales based on interest and efficiency. Moreover, changes in discursive resources can open space for a shift in interpretations—for example, from interest of women where women's autonomy is the main rationale, to the interest of employers where efficiency is the dominant rationale. Thus, rationales as I use them should not be considered as coherent, static frameworks but rather as dynamic framing devices that reveal how political discourses and ideological assumptions are shifting across time and space (in this case public childcare in the Netherlands).³

This article first provides a brief overview of various forms of childcare and their development. Subsequently, the focus shifts to the level of political debates and rationales. In conclusion, the various rationales are considered in light of welfare state transitions and retrenchment.

Forms of Childcare and Their Development

In 1960, there were thirty day-care centers for children funded by the Dutch state; a few companies had private-sponsored childcare facilities (van Rijswijk-Clerkx 1981). In 1990, there were 300 registered (partially) state-funded facilities alongside over 300 company-based and private day-care centers (Pelzer and Miedema 1990). A policy program called the Stimulation Measure on Childcare, inaugurated by the government in 1990, has been crucial for a rapid growth of facilities since that time. During a four-year period, government's funding to childcare provisions skyrocketed to nearly NLG 300 million in 1994. This policy led to an increase of 70,000 childcare facilities in a short period of time. If in 1990 only around 2 percent of children under three were placed in state-funded day care, by 1993 this had risen to 8 percent (European Commission Network on Childcare 1996). The percentage of children in the three and older age category in a public childcare center is still lower (6 percent), but is partly compensated by the fact that most children start school early.⁴ Nevertheless, there are still lengthy waiting lists.

The Dutch have had various forms of childcare, all of which developed independently of each other, private initiatives alongside those publicly supported. No concerted or coherent policy existed until recently. The few day-care facilities that existed in the early 1960s were intended for those children who did not receive enough attention at home and for women such as unmarried mothers who were

“forced” to earn their own living. Children were referred to such facilities on social or medical grounds. Many of these provisions were administered along denominational lines. In Dutch these denominational groupings were known as “pillars.” Each pillar, especially the Roman Catholic and Protestant, but also the quasi-religious groupings (socialist and liberal) had its own organization, including schools, media, hospitals, trades unions, and some childcare provisions (see Bussemaker 1997b; see, for childcare in particular, van Rijswijk-Clerkx 1981).

These facilities were funded partly by private (charity) organizations and partly indirectly via the Poor Act which goes back to 1912. When the General Welfare Act [*Algemene Bijstandswet*] was inaugurated in 1965—an act which rounded out the post-war social security system and which is often described as the jewel in the system’s crown—regulation shifted to municipal social services which were responsible for executing the welfare act. However, some local authorities delegated this responsibility to the childcare facilities themselves, which then determined entry requirements and parental contribution. In many cases, they were less strict in their entry criteria than social services departments. The financial relationship between the General Welfare Act and childcare would continue from then on and had consequences for single mothers especially, who represented the largest proportion of recipients of income support through the welfare act (see, for single mothers, Bussemaker et al. 1997).

But it was not only single mothers who, albeit incidentally, made use of state-funded facilities for social or medical reasons. From the 1960s on, a growing number of often highly educated women wanted to continue working and attempted to make use of the limited number of existing facilities (van Rijswijk-Clerkx 1981).⁵ In the 1970s, the lack of facilities led to initiatives by parents. These gradually became more institutionalized, particularly from 1977 with government-funded partial compensation for staff costs.⁶ However, their numbers remained marginal and there was no question whatsoever of coordinated government policy.

Besides childcare funded by government, there were also private or company facilities. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of companies began organizing kindergartens in order to attract female personnel, including van Nelle and Verkade (a coffee and a cookie factory, respectively). Van Nelle offered care facilities as early as 1956 for working mothers with children between four and six years; the Verkade factory set up its day care in 1961. However, these were exceptions in a society where the consensus was that women’s place was in the home caring for children. The preferred strategy was to attract migrant workers to make up the shortfall in labor supply

rather than to stimulate women to take on paid work, as in the Scandinavian, particularly Swedish, cases. Beginning in the mid-1980s new initiatives emerged in the private sector; some companies paid for employees, others set up their own creches. A new organization, the Netherlands Childcare Foundation (Stichting Kinderopvang in Nederland; SKON), which sells childcare facilities to companies on a supply-and-demand basis, was founded for this purpose. Private initiatives to provide childcare, for example, by companies, have been further stimulated since the policy program Stimulation Measure on Childcare was initiated.

Besides public and private childcare, there were playgroups. These differed from childrens' day-care centres in that their aim was not to encourage women to enter paid work but rather to contribute to a child's social development. Most were open only a few hours a week. Originally, these playgroups were established by private initiatives, among them women's organizations in the 1960s. In the expanding welfare state of that time, they rapidly became part of government policy and were subsequently attributed an important social function in welfare provisions for children.⁷ Until the late 1970s, they would play a major role in pedagogical work. Although they retained popularity, in the 1980s their role was partly taken over by ordinary state-funded childcare facilities (in some cases they cooperate in the provision of part-time childcare). Interestingly, playgroups were excluded from the policy program in 1990, particularly because of limited operating hours.

In the 1980s another form of childcare arose, family day care or, as it is called in the Netherlands, host parenthood. The child is cared for in this case at the home of the care provider, although there is some public quality control. Host parenthood is normally cheaper than public provisions and meets some of the objections against public childcare; host-parenthood comes closer to caring for children in the home, if not the home of the mother.

Before analyzing the rationale underlying the recent policy program of expanding daycare facilities, the stimulation measure, I first turn to the analysis of the arguments in earlier decades.

Immorality, Necessity, and the Interests of Children

In the 1960s, a major political consensus existed on the undesirability of state-funded childcare. The hegemonic discourse reflected the moral rationale that was dominated strongly by negative associations with public childcare. Childcare provisions were not seen as part of new social welfare arrangements, but rather, the absence of such facilities was proof of the achievement of the welfare state. This view

was uncontested by most Dutch political parties in the 1960s. In their view, public childcare might have been necessary in times when a proportion of the population was living in poverty and mothers were forced to leave the home for paid work. But it was regarded as something immoral in a well-developed welfare state as the Netherlands (Bussemaker 1993). Public childcare also had a political moral dimension, as it was linked to totalitarian regimes of oppression and state control. In the 1950s, the decade dominated by the Cold War, only the communist-party-aligned Dutch Women's Movement (Nederlandse Vrouwen Beweging; NVB) advocated childcare. The NVB pointed out the facilities available in Eastern Europe that enabled women to participate in paid labor (and thus to form part of the working class). For many others, childcare facilities in Eastern Europe were reflections of a godless, regulated society.

Fear of state control, particularly of education, has to be understood in terms of the Dutch tradition of pillarization, which provides different subcultural (religious) groups with their own educational institutions. Though they are publicly financed, they are privately governed and thus have a rather high autonomy vis-à-vis the state. Public childcare, all the more because of its potential link to education, was therefore easily viewed as an attack on subcultural organizations and their autonomy. In addition, an exceptionally strong motherhood ideology reinforced the idea that care of children should properly occur in the family—preferably by the mother. If married women with children did work, then they would later apologize, saying: “but my children never suffered” (Moree 1992).

The pervasive view that emerged in the 1960s was that the Dutch welfare state had evolved toward a higher moral ground where poverty no longer existed, where women were no longer forced to work, and where childcare was, therefore, superfluous. In other words, childcare was associated with former, undesirable conditions (poverty), or with contemporary, undesirable political systems (totalitarianism). Positively formulated, it assumed that it is better for both children and women to be at home and dependent on a breadwinner.

The end of the 1960s, however, saw a cautious shift in the discourse on childcare away from an absolutist (religious-dominated) moral rationale. Women in the Labour Party (PvdA) reflected on changes in the mother-child relationship in 1969: “One of the primary changes, we believe, is that we no longer see the separation between mother and child as ‘sinful’. By that we mean the toddler and childcare centres that are growing up in a number of cities and regions of the country” (*Ons Werk* 1969). At the same time, a new discursive framing (Hobson and Lindholm 1997) of interest emerged with regard to the social development of children, particularly for part-time play-

groups. This occurred in a context of ongoing expansion in the welfare state and an increase in government influence on education and social work, among others. Strikingly, anxieties over state control did not surface in the public debate on playgroups. Instead, the discourse on children's interest took in issues of care and social development.⁸ As a consequence, the playgroups became an integral part of social policy. This had a slightly positive effect on acceptance of part-time public childcare provisions. Moreover, it created some room for a still cautious formulation of childcare in terms of socially desirable facilities for children.

In 1969, the responsible secretary of state for Culture, Recreation and Social Work (Cultuur, Recreatie en Maatschappelijk Werk; CRM), would put forward both essential and desirable reasons for childcare:

I am also thinking, for example, of the situation of an only child who needs contact with other children. I am thinking of the situation of the single father or mother and of those cases in which families are hit by illness or invalidity or where the mother is overburdened. Finally, in this respect, I also think of those situations which occur in certain neighbourhoods and in which children living on the umpteenth floor of an inadequately sound insulated building will find it very difficult to express their natural exuberance. (Tweede Kamer, Handelingen II 1968–1969, 2317)

But despite the new discursive terrain that opened up around children's interest, politicians did not see paid work for women—unless strictly necessary—as a valid reason for childcare. In that respect, the moral rationale noted above still persisted. As a result, a strong ideological distinction was made between the interests of children, which became widely respected, and those of women which were only taken into consideration in very special circumstances (medical reasons, for example, and incidentally for lone mothers who went out to work).⁹

Feminist action groups that emerged in the late 1960s as part of the feminist movement began to challenge the hegemonic interpretation of children's interests. A key issue among feminists was the elimination of barriers to women's participation in public life, and the lack of alternatives, other than the full-time care for children by mothers at home, was one of their targets. Moreover, some of them were inspired by Marxist ideas about collectivization and alternative ways of caregiving and education. They extrapolated on the rationale of children's interests and also pointed out women's interest in collective childcare. Man-Woman-Society (Man-Vrouw-Maatschappij; MVM) and Dolle

Mina (literally “crazy Mina”), the two best-known feminist groups, prioritized childcare. In January 1970, Dolle Mina took action by organizing an “open-air creche.” Later that same year, both organizations, along with NVB, carried out local and nationwide creche actions, organizing demonstrations in various cities (with the slogan “we are not kangaroos, we want creches”) and presenting a petition to the government, asking for public childcare (van Rijswijk-Clerkx 1981).

These women’s organizations wanted expansion of childcare to a general basic right. They questioned fundamentally the view of day-care facilities as emergency provisions for “defective” families, its association with morality, and the limitation of the rationale of interest to the interests of children. By formulating interests in such general terms they represented public childcare as a basic citizen’s right for all parents, whether they were in the labor market or not.

Apart from an incidental increase in lunch-break facilities at some primary schools, these feminist claims for childcare as a basic entitlement did not have much effect. And although on paper feminist groups such as MVM and Dolle Mina advocated expansion of subsidized childcare, they increasingly took fewer and fewer initiatives to achieve them. Their attention moved to other issues (abortion, for example). Further, issues concerning the care for children in general and public day care in particular began to challenge feminist positions, and discursive conflict emerged. Some feminists simply didn’t want to think that the movement should become absorbed in children and care because they thought women had done this long enough. Others questioned the role of the state in the provision of day care. Moreover, even feminists in favor of public day care came to realize that the demand for childcare as a right and the expansion of provisions was light years away. Appeals for childcare based on women’s interest for autonomy evoked such an such strong resistance that many feminists put the issue aside.¹⁰ There was no discursive space to question the political hegemonic discourse on children’s interest, which was by then the only acceptable rationale for public day care.

Consequently, although publicly funded facilities began to gain more recognition within the political sphere in the early 1970s, feminist arguments based on the entitlement of women to public childcare disappeared, and the only rationale in the public debate was one based on the social and pedagogical development of children. This point of view is reflected in a study on the desirability of childcare commissioned by government and carried out by the Working Group on Policy Analysis for Child Centres in 1974. The working group concluded that the interests of children should be central to childcare and did not see as desirable “greater numbers of women going out to work than

is currently the case, even if good and financially accessible . . . day-care centres are available” (CRM 1974, 6).

The working group did see the interests of the child as reason to expand the emerging toddler care centers, but argued strongly against full-time public care. The report reflected the general societal view at that time: part-time childcare can be useful from the point of view of children’s development, but should not be advocated to enhance women’s autonomy or economic independence.

In conclusion, the moral rationale that dominated since the 1960s, an ideology of motherhood and care shared by opinion leaders, began to lose its absolute hegemony in the early 1970s, when a rationale of interests began to gain ground. But in the early 1970s, there was only room for the formulation of children’s interests. As soon as women began making claims for childcare for women’s emancipation and autonomy, the moral rationale moved back in, blaming mothers for being egocentric and socially irresponsible. A democratic, developed welfare state, in which care for small children was provided by the mother and took place in the home, was still seen by many as the highest level of moral development; the detachment of mother and child was seen as sinful.

Women’s Interests and Childcare as a Controversial Issue

The moral rationale was kept alive during the 1970s. The notion that childcare in a developed welfare state is a vice was still put forward in 1978 by the prominent social-democratic economist and Nobel prize-winner Jan Tinbergen. He saw state-funded childcare as an indicator of social and cultural crisis: “A place of custody for children is necessary in a society where poverty obliges both parents to work; not in a prosperous society; there must be adequate realization that nothing is more fascinating than the raising of an infant or toddler” (Tinbergen 1978, 65). The welfare state, in Tinbergen’s view, had made child day-care centers superfluous. This attitude expresses the fear of the elevation of childcare from something born from necessity to a virtue. Such a view represents a familiar moral rationale in which the emphasis lies on the higher moral ground which the welfare state has reached because it has liberated society from grave poverty.

But by the end of the 1970s, the moral rationale, although still to be found, had lost much of its political hegemony. In the meantime, a rationale gained ground in which the interest of children’s social development was expressed. Moreover, in the late 1970s, the parents’ (and mothers’) interest in childcare, which disappeared after the short-lived feminist actions from 1970, was again raised, although very cautiously. That occurred in a context in which some parents had

established their own kindergartens to make up the shortfall in state-funded facilities. By now, conflicting interpretations of interests had become the subject of debate in the formal political arena of the parliament. But the interpretation of interests gave rise to heated differences of opinion. This is apparent, for example, in 1977 when the Dutch parliament (known as the Second Chamber) debated a seemingly straightforward point on income tax deductions for childcare for single parents. Tax deductions are a popular policy instrument with regard to care issues, and the proposal itself was not special. What makes it interesting are the implicit assumptions that structured the proposal and that were debated in parliament. The government's proposal would make costs of home family care deductible for single parent families, irrespective of the parents' participation in the labor market. But it would not deduct the costs for state-funded childcare for the same group. As an alternative, members of parliament argued for tax deductions for family care at home and public childcare. But at the same time, they wanted to restrict the deduction to lone parents working outside the home. The two conflicting positions in the debate (from the government and the opposition in parliament) reflect a range of contested positions: between care for children in the private and the public sphere, between single-parent and two-parent families, between rights and needs, between deserving and undeserving clients, and between male and female roles and tasks. Two hypothetical cases structured the debate; the first, introduced by the Dutch minister of finance, was the case of a single father who has family help, does not work outside the home, but derives his income from a pension. The secretary of state wanted to provide a deduction as compensation for the loss of care tasks that would have been performed by the man's wife. The second case, presented by members of parliament, was an equally hypothetical case of a divorced woman with children. Shouldn't this woman be equally or even more eligible for family care if she worked outside the home? The minister thought not, arguing that in that case one "would weigh whether and to which extent a person as single parent is able to care for a family. I find the idea quite gruesome . . . to introduce a distinction on this point. . . . The example of the man is much more striking than that of the woman; this proposal is also intended to facilitate the man's position (Tweede Kamer, Handelingen II 1977–1978, 74). Of course, the secretary of state was passing a judgment on the capacity of parents to care for their children, making a distinction between men and women that assumed that women were the main caretakers in families and that would remain unchanged.¹¹

Not only does this example show the implicit assumptions in various rationales, it also reflects a more contested discursive terrain, as

expressed by the oppositional view of members of parliament. In the final bill, parents with costs for childcare outside the home were eligible for the tax deduction (regardless of whether they work outside the home).

In some respects 1977 was a high point in gender-equality discourse and policy, and childcare issues were part of these debates, although the relation between childcare and women's autonomy, particularly in relation to labor-market participation, was still very much disputed (Bussemaker 1991). In the mid-1970s a new discourse on formal gender-equality policies emerged, pursued by a left-wing coalition government from 1975. In 1977 the first white paper on women's equality policies, *Emancipatie, proces van verandering en groei* (Emancipation, Process of Change and Growth) was published. Childcare was addressed in this paper, but cautiously. It was noted that childcare can contribute to parents participating in diverse activities in social life, but its authors had a specific idea in mind about the diversity of activities. They were thinking about part-time voluntary work in addition to homework, rather than about professional full-time jobs. Women's labor-market participation was not even mentioned. According to the government, the policy was aimed primarily at providing parents with supplementary support in raising and guiding the development of their children. The government concluded that day-care centers mainly meet an essential interest of single-parent families. People who are not dependent on full-day care were said to prefer playschools; these would give parents (in reality primarily mothers) the opportunity to pursue voluntary and educational activities (*Emancipatie, proces van verandering en groei* 1977).

However, soon after the inauguration of a new Christian-democrat/liberal cabinet in 1977 (see, for coalition cabinets, note 2), there was an opening for the autonomy argument in childcare debates. For the first time, paid work or education was viewed as a valid option for all parents, not just lone parents. Left-wing parties and some liberal politicians placed increasingly more emphasis on women's interests as a part of the childcare debate. Various politicians remarked that equality policies had no chance of success without accessible and affordable childcare. They considered childcare as a vehicle for women's autonomy and independence and recognized the necessity for women to break away from the household to gain personal development. As I have discussed earlier, these arguments initially had been put forward by some feminist groups, although not very forcefully. Moreover, feminists were still divided about the issue of public childcare. Some radical feminists wanted to divorce feminism from children's issues. There were also a number of feminist groups that wanted a more fundamental division of labor between men and women; they

were afraid that public childcare provisions would leave the role of fathers and the organization of the labor market untouched (cf. Sevenhuijsen and de Vries 1980). In addition, some left-wing feminists (pacifist green feminists) doubted whether labor-market participation should be the central means to independence for feminists—they were more in favor of a basic income. Consequently, public childcare did not have their specific attention, but was regarded as only one part of a larger strategy to collectivize care and labor.

The strong and outspoken advocates for public childcare were women from the social-democratic and communist party, also supported by women's groups in the trade unions and some women of liberal parties. They argued that childcare was essential to achieve a fairer redistribution of labor both within and outside the home. They saw its potential for increasing women's participation in the labor market and thereby their autonomy. Their view slowly became more influential, partly as an effect of growing attention to equal treatment of men and women in the labor market and social security arrangements (a consequence of EU directives) and partly as an effect of emerging discussions about welfare-state restructuring. Finally, in 1982 there was a discursive opening for claims that public childcare was a means for developing women's independence through their labor-force participation. Two women parliamentarians used this moment of political opportunity and asked government to produce a statutory and financial regulation for as many different kinds of childcare as possible. In addition, they maintained that public childcare should be expanded. In fact, they argued, together with various chamber members, for childcare as a universal basic provision (Tweede Kamer, Handelingen 1981–1982, 17100, XV, no. 41).

This surge of feminist claims-making around childcare was short-lived, however. After the government fell and new elections were called a couple of months later, the notion of childcare as a basic entitlement went into political netherworld. The new government (liberals and Christian-democrats) set up an Interdepartmental Working Group on Childcare in 1983 whose purpose was to generate proposals that would lead to childcare regulation. But the newly appointed minister, Christian-democrat Brinkman, made explicit his view that childcare and equality policies had low priority in the new government. In effect, he swept the idea of childcare as a basic provision from the table, arguing that this would make childcare a right and elevate it to the level of education or health care (Bussemaker 1993). Underlying this policy ranking was his belief that public childcare provisions would threaten care in the family. What he sought was a redefinition of needs and interests in childcare, which once again highlighted children's interests in social development and de-

flected away debate on childcare as facilitating women's autonomy and independence.

The opening up of discursive space in the public and political debate on childcare that emerged in the 1970s was short lived. There are several reasons for this closure: one obvious reason was the shift toward more conservative government. Other explanations for the failure of feminists to keep up the momentum are twofold: the women's movement was not strong enough and they had not built a viable, recognized constituency in the political arena. Perhaps even more important was the lack of consensus within the women's movement itself—whether or not public childcare should be viewed as a common interest of women.

Restructuring the Welfare State and the Rise of the Rationale of Economic Efficiency

As in many other countries, the Dutch welfare state came under attack in the 1980s for its inefficiency and lack of incentives to increase productivity. A new rationale emerged that linked childcare to economic productivity.¹² In this context, it is useful to look at the arguments employed by critics of the welfare state.

Roughly speaking, there have been two kinds of criticism in the Netherlands. The first is neo-conservative criticism, which focuses on perverse effects the welfare state has engendered such as the “immoral ethos” (Adriaansens and Zijderveld 1981). This critique comes primarily from Christian-democratic ranks. They have advocated an alternative to public provisioning that takes the form of a moral call for a caring society and restoration of citizens' responsibility. The other criticism leveled at the welfare state is the neo-liberal or social-liberal variety, primarily heard from politicians of the right-wing liberal party, but it also comes from some social democrats.¹³ The main thrust of this challenge is toward a more efficient welfare distribution, particularly through an increase in labor-market participation.

In the Christian-democratic ideology, there is a strong emphasis on the perverse effects of the welfare state. According to this view the state has taken over some important responsibilities that traditionally belonged to structures such as the church, local communities, and particularly the family. But instead of supporting the traditional function of these structures, welfare state facilities contributed to a further deterioration of these structures. Consequently, the demand for welfare provisions increases, and the situation gets worse rather than better (Hirschman 1991). In the Christian-democratic ideology, the immoral ethos is the expression of the perverse effects of the welfare state: the welfare state has broken down traditional structures and

has increased selfishness, rather than solidarity and community. In this framework, state-funded childcare embodies both the evils of government interference and control in private life, as well as the indifference and selfishness of individual citizens who allow their own interests to prevail over those of their children. The reinstatement of personal responsibility and of traditional values and social ties, they believe, are the best remedies for bloated welfare state spending. Here we find traces of the original Roman Catholic principle of subsidiarity, that comes down to a reserved policy on care measures: responsibilities should be decentralized to the lower level communities in society, among them the family and voluntary initiatives.¹⁴

In the Christian-democratic ideology, the rationale of morality was making a comeback in the 1980s. This happened, for example, in 1986 when Hedy d'Ancona, a prominent social democrat and one of the founders of the Man-Woman-Society back in the 1960s, advocated state-funded childcare as a basic provision (d'Ancona 1986). In reaction, the chairman of the Christian-democratic party in parliament, De Vries, referring back to the association of public childcare with totalitarianism, accused her of proposing "state control in raising up children"; he coupled moralism to anti-state socialism. One could also see the Christian-democratic minister with primary responsibility for childcare, Brinkman, expressing a moral rationale. He maintained that in a country where the labor-market participation of both women in general and married women in particular was around 40 percent in the mid-1980s (OECD 1992; Hooghiemstra and Niphuis-Nell 1993), and of that percentage about half were in (short) part-time jobs less than 20 hours a week (OECD 1991), and almost no one took their children to a day-care center five days a week (European Commission Childcare Network 1990), he concluded the Netherlands was in the throes of a kind of "American situation":

Is it not absurd that in many families the norm is for children to come home when it suits them. The notion of 'the icebox is open, switch the TV on, mom and dad will get home sometime' is hardly family life?! . . . Very many families no longer exist as such because both man and woman have to work or want to work and that value is considered of more worth than raising a child. . . . And then, of course, you could set up day-care centres and after-school facilities, but then you're leaving your children to fend for themselves. (quoted in Bussemaker 1993, 204)

The care of children in state-funded facilities is seen as an expression of selfishness and self-interest. Clearly, government subsidized childcare is rejected; only host-parenthood is considered an option within the "new morality" of the Christian democrats.

The neo-liberal criticism of the welfare state concentrates on prohibitive costs and the harmful effects of welfare provisions on dependent individuals; according to this view these provisions produce another perverse effect: they encourage a culture of dependency instead of independency. The remedy is a return to individual responsibility and less regulation, allowing the play of the market to regulate economic and social life. In addition, citizens should be encouraged to bear responsibility for their own lives. There is no place in this framework for expansion of state-funded childcare; instead childcare is seen as a private responsibility. A more moderate version of neo-liberalism, however, which we may call social liberalism (a term that better expresses the influence of neo-liberal ideas within traditionally strong European welfare state such as the Dutch; cf. Mahon 1997) does accept a rationale for the expansion of childcare facilities, although the preferred course is the combination of market and government services. According to this rationale, the state has a responsibility to increase citizens' independence, particularly economic independence, by contributing to the conditions for independence, including childcare.

The social-liberal position gained in popularity in the second part of the 1980s. Within this view, childcare is presented as a means to decrease state dependency (particularly of lone mothers) and expensive welfare provisions (particularly for breadwinners) and to increase the benefits of women's labor-market participation to the state (because of taxes and contributions they will pay). Consequently, childcare is assumed to contribute to economic productivity and competitiveness and is coupled to the efficiency rationale. This rationale provides sound arguments for the expansion of childcare: these facilities can contribute to the stimulation of (still very low) labor-market participation of women and thus reduce the costs of the welfare state, while at the same time countering the waste of female talent and state investment in women (e.g., education) because the expectation is that women will remain in the workforce after having children.

The rationale of efficiency has the potential to create a bridge between social-liberal and feminists actors, particularly those women's groups in political parties and trade unions. Both argue that women's labor-market participation needs to increase and that this requires childcare provisions. By the late 1980s, liberals, social democrats, and influential advisory bodies such as the Social Economic Council and the Scientific Council for Government Policy (*Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*; WRR) all emphasized the significance of childcare for the labor market; at issue here were no longer families or the state, but rather employees, companies, and government.¹⁵

The social-liberal argument had become so hegemonic at the end of the 1980s that now even the Christian democrats could concur with expansion of childcare as an instrument of labor market policy. The argument that women's labor-market participation should be stimulated to ensure funding of the welfare state and the assumption that childcare can play a significant role therein was hardly debatable by the end of the 1980s. Formerly expressed moral and social objections are now few and far between.

The definitive turnabout came in 1990 when the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) produced its report, *Een werkend perspectief* (A Working Perspective). The WRR report and the responses to it from political parties can be considered a definitive recognition of childcare as precondition for women's labor-market participation (WRR 1990). Thereby, the interest of women in public childcare has become a respected interest, but not so much because of women's autonomy per se, but much more because of the potential contribution of women's labor-market participation to the public treasury and the fight against high social security and welfare expenditures.

It was the new coalition cabinet made up of Christian democrats and social democrats, inaugurated in 1989, which developed the policy program to increase childcare, the stimulation measure, in 1990, using the WRR report as its legitimation.¹⁶ This measure is a landmark in Dutch childcare policies; the cautious policy on childcare makes way for a stimulatory policy. Only the small right-wing Christian parties continue to oppose childcare. Other parties sparred briefly on the best form of funding; should it be in cash or in kind? Again, the recommendations of the WRR were followed which meant an in-kind solution of investing in mainly state-funded facilities.¹⁷ The cabinet reserved NLG 300 million for investment in childcare over the ensuing four years (the period would later be extended until 1997).¹⁸ The responsible minister is the feminist and social democrat Hedy d'Ancona. However, the stimulatory policy does not encompass a universal basic provision, as d'Ancona had proposed in 1986, but a combination of allocation based on social grounds, on waiting lists for people living in local catchment areas, and a fixed number of places reserved for company care. The idea is that the government (through national incentives, supplemented with local funding), parents, and companies will each contribute to childcare. Parental contributions are calculated according to income; special deductions are created for companies. In addition, the regular day-care centers should reserve a certain percentage of their places for companies which buy them. The goals appear only partly successful; sometimes there is limited interest from

companies while parents face long waiting lists—as a result places remain unused even though there is great demand. Nevertheless, in comparison with earlier times, childcare facilities have grown rapidly.

The political hegemony of social liberalism became clear in 1994 when a new government of social-democrats and liberals came into power: this was the first government since World War I in which denominational (religious) parties were not represented. They certainly support women's labor-market participation (their central political slogan is "jobs, jobs and jobs") and are aware of problems in the combination of (unpaid) care work and paid care. At the same time, however, the current government strongly focuses on shared responsibilities. Childcare is, according to the government, a shared responsibility of parents, employers, employees, municipalities, and the state. A main part of the organization of childcare provisions has been delegated to employers and employees, who have to negotiate childcare in their collective labor agreements. The results vary: in some branches of industry childcare provisions are well organized, in others there are only a few provisions or they are only available for female workers. The government has particularly stimulated an increase in childcare provisions within companies. Now half of all provisions for childcare are linked to companies. Moreover, new incentives were made for employers in 1996: they get a tax deduction of 20 percent for the costs they incur for childcare for their employees. This incentive is part of the governmental attempt to stimulate companies even further to set up their own childcare policy through an idea borrowed from the U.K. and known as Opportunity 2000. Though some expansion in childcare may occur given the steady increases in women's labor force participation, the ball has been put more and more in the court of employers.

State responsibility has also decreased as an effect of decentralization to municipalities. Since 1996 a main part of the responsibility for funding has shifted from national to local government.¹⁹ Municipalities now have a budget which is no longer ear-marked exclusively for childcare. As a result, childcare must compete with other interests and provisions, such as a new soccer pitch or language courses for migrants.

New problems also arise. The recent investments in childcare provisions focus particularly on very small children. Provisions for children of compulsory school age (schooldays end early in the Netherlands) are still ill-developed and show up as a new problem. Moreover, the current policy facilitates the labor-market participation of middle-class women much more than women with poorly paying jobs; the latter usually work in branches of industries where childcare provis-

ions are not very well organized, and they are more dependent on state-subsidized childcare provisions.

Dutch childcare policies are at a crossroads: there is still a choice to be made between expansion of more public childcare (according to the view that childcare is a basic provision and a right, similar to education) or a further privatization and decentralization of childcare. This choice will probably be made in the short term when recent childcare policies will be evaluated. The long-term prospects for expansions in publicly supported childcare facilities are not too good. Rather than a fairer redivision of labor both within and outside the home (the feminist position), the rationale of economic efficiency has had the greatest influence on the policy to expand childcare facilities. Arguments of efficiency, combatting wasted human (i.e., female) capital, and enhancement of productivity appear to have been highly persuasive for building broad-based support for investment in childcare. In fact, they are part of a larger and rapid restructuring of the Dutch welfare state, which has taken place recently, and which has been known as the Dutch “poldermodel.”²⁰ At the same time, diverse notions on accessibility (cf. the idea of a basic provision) have disappeared into the background.

The moral rationale, after making a short comeback in the 1980s, by now certainly no longer holds currency. The rationale of children’s social development continues to play a role. It is often heard in discussions of childcare as a means of early discovery of problems in children’s social development and is directed toward children of single mothers or migrants, but it no longer plays a dominant role in public discourse. What appears as pervasive in the public discourse on childcare are the idioms of efficiency, productivity, and financial viability.

Conclusion

The attitude that childcare was both undesirable and generally unnecessary in a well-developed welfare state like the Netherlands, prevalent in the 1960s, had been transformed by the 1990s. The notion that public day care is immoral, apart from a small group of children at risk and from mothers in need, is now replaced by a notion of day care as an instrument of socioeconomic political policy and a means to combat the waste of women’s human capital and investments in education. The dominant rationale for childcare expansion in the 1990s, the rationale of efficiency, is not an isolated one, but it is part of a broader discourse to legitimate welfare state reform. The very debate about welfare state provisions, whether or not they relate

directly to gender relations, is carried on with economic idioms as the main discursive resources.

Concomitant with the development of arguments concerning childcare is a shift in attitudes to women. Those who in the past perceived women's desire for childcare outside the home as a dangerous expression of self-interest now view it as a valid economic choice. The relationship between social spheres has also changed: childcare has moved from being a private responsibility to a more public economic issue.

Childcare has been expanded, but on balance should this be viewed as a positive step for women's emancipation? The answer depends on the point of view one takes. The answer is "yes" if one focuses on the availability of childcare for women's labor-market participation: in spite of the long waiting lists, women's labor-market participation and thus their economic independence has increased. The answer is "no" if one focuses on the social value of care, for the emphasis has come to rest almost exclusively on the rationale of efficiency in which the value of childcare provisions is primarily instrumental: can they facilitate and increase women's labor-market participation, not do they improve the quality of life or the conditions of work outside and inside the home.

Interestingly, although the public support for childcare has increased, some feminists still question childcare policy, while even feminists once positive to childcare now have doubts, particularly because of the hidden assumptions in the rationale of efficiency. One of the assumptions is that care and labor are a zero-sum relation; the less women are compelled to care for their children at home, the more female labor market supply will increase. Yet apart from the fact that this relation has been questioned in empirical studies (Maassen van den Brink 1994), it also raises more disturbing questions. For example, the rationale of economic efficiency does not allow space to discuss moral and ethical dimensions of care (Sevenhuijsen 1993), since such dimensions cannot be expressed in terms of economic assets and profits. It is also hard to discuss reasons for childcare provisions other than labor-market participation (e.g., for self-development, education, leisure activities or participation of women in public life). In addition, the interests of the elderly and other dependents on care labor, which until recently was usually performed by women, have disappeared into the background of the debate (see Knijn and Kremer 1997). As women have less time to do this caring work, a main point of discussion should be who shall care for them. Finally, the role of fathers is not really taken up as a point of discussion. Since the rationale of efficiency relates childcare provisions to *women's* labor-market participation, fathers seems to play no role (as some firms only pay for

childcare provisions for their female employees, not for their male employees). All together, issues of care cannot simply be put into the cost-effectiveness box.

The Dutch case also illustrates that a positive relation between women's autonomy and public childcare should not be taken as self-evident. How the policy emerges, what discursive resources are available, who are the political actors developing the rationale and implementing policy are key variables in analyzing the potential outcomes. One can turn to the Scandinavian, particularly the Swedish, development of childcare policy to illustrate this point. Swedish childcare policies and its relation to the female labor supply have often been mentioned as a positive example, and this is even sometimes used as a legitimation for recent Dutch politics. But in Sweden femocrats and women's groups in political parties were key actors in shaping childcare policy (Hobson and Takahashi 1997; Mahon 1997). The point to be made here is that childcare policy is not an export commodity that can be transplanted into a different social and political context. Moreover, it cannot be transported over time either; the argument that childcare provisions are in the interest of women to increase their labor-market participation had a very different meaning in the 1970s (when such a policy was implemented in Sweden), than in the 1990s in a more social-liberal framework, as is the case in the Netherlands.

The conclusions about the Dutch case have broader policy implications. Particularly in the context of welfare state reform, as is the case in many countries nowadays, the discursive terrain around childcare is highly contested and reveals shifting political hegemonic discourses and new ideological assumptions, which may have significant consequences for the relation between gender, care and the welfare state.

NOTES

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1. Between 1918 and 1994, denominational parties have always been in power (with either social democrats or liberals). It is only in 1994 that the first coalition government of social democrats and liberals was formed.

2. This is the point that Hobson and Lindholm (1997) make in their analysis of discursive resources and policy formation.

3. My source material consisted primarily of parliamentary reports from the period since 1960 until recently. In addition, influential publications by politicians in the media (magazines, newspapers, books) are included in the

analysis as well as party political publications insofar as childcare is the main theme.

4. Compulsory education begins officially at five years old, but almost all parents take advantage of the early start option which allows children to begin in their fourth year. If we count these children, then there is state-funded care for 56 percent of children aged between three and five (European Commission Network on Childcare 1996), although part-time. In contrast to public childcare, these facilities are undisputed and are not part of the contested ideological debates. I therefore exclude them from my analysis.

5. Around that time, the labor market participation of Dutch women was extremely low, particularly among married women. For example, in 1960 26 percent of women and 7 percent of married women between the ages of 16 and 65 were in the labor force. In 1970 this was, respectively, 31 and 17 percent (OECD 1992; Hooghiemstra and Niphuis-Nell 1993). It is only since the 1980s that the labor-market participation of Dutch women has been growing more rapidly. In the 1990s the official participation rate of women is similar to that in the U.K. and Germany, although many more Dutch women work part-time.

6. This relates to the so-called state contribution regulation which came into force in 1977. This regulation was also intended to terminate the "abuse" of the welfare act from which day-care facilities had been partially funded. Due to a shortage of alternative facilities, parents in the medium to high income groups also made use of day-care funded by welfare. At the same time, the regulation signified a cautious recognition of the care arrangements that had emerged.

7. The Working Community Childcare Centers in the Netherlands (Werk-gemeenschap Kindercentra Nederland; WKN) emerged as early as 1970 after a merger between two other organizations, the Central Association for Day-care Centers and the Playgroup Committee. In contrast to political developments, both forms of childcare moved closer together under WKN auspices. In practice, however, the WKN focused strongly on the rights of children, especially from strategic considerations. As a result, it contributed (unintentionally) to the formulation of a (mock) contrast between needs and interests of children and of mothers.

8. The differences in the way childcare and education are treated is even more striking in view of the early (compulsory) school age (see above).

9. In the early 1970s lone mothers were still a rather marginal phenomenon. Most of them (almost 50 percent) were widows, while 30 percent were divorced (Bussemaker et al. 1997b). Only a few lone mothers were in the labor force.

10. Only the NVB continued to push for provisions geared to mothers working outside the home (van Rijswijk-Clerkx 1981).

11. It would appear more likely that single mothers would need child care rather than family care, especially if they are attempting to earn their own living. There is also a further ideological assumption in the reasoning of the secretary of state; through his example of a single father, the implication is of a man whose wife has died; when single mothers are mentioned, it is

quickly assumed that they are divorcées. Divorcées' concerns are apparently less deserving than spouses whose partner died.

12. Such a perspective had only been formulated very incidentally by some economists in the early 1970s; however, at that time they did not gain much attention (Bussemaker 1993).

13. The more neo-liberal influence, as it has been formulated in the Dutch context, needs to be distinguished from a laissez-faire liberalism that focuses exclusively on the market. In the Dutch context, "social liberalism" is more accurate. In fact, social liberalism is the label some more right wing social democrats as well as some right-wing liberals use to express their views. For a similar distinction, see Mahon (1997).

14. The central idea of subsidiarity is that the state should not interfere with problems which could be better solved by other, lower-level, communities, because of their place in the organic social order. Only when lower-level organs, such as the family or private (religious) initiative, fail in taking their responsibilities, does the state come in. Subsidiarity, however, also assumes that the state has a responsibility to facilitate the ability of the lower-level organs to perform their duties. As a consequence, the state is assumed to guarantee that families can manage their responsibilities by helping them where necessary, for example, to provide the conditions for care within the family (see Bussemaker 1997b).

15. Whereas in their political rhetoric, liberal Christian-democrat government pointed to "placing responsibility with citizens rather than with publicly subsidized institutions," actual practice already had shifted increasingly to market forces. In a short time, numerous private initiatives emerged which sold childcare places to parents at "market prices." They filled the gap left by government.

16. Earlier, in 1989, a long-expected government position paper on childcare appeared which spoke of a "rigorous additional impulse because of labor-market considerations" (*Regeringsstandpunt Kinderopvang* 1989, 5).

17. The government did deviate from the WRR proposal to generate a "stimulatory fund" in which all government and third-party contributions, including those of employers and employees, would be brought together. Such an approach should have fit very well in the Dutch corporatist structure.

18. This figure consisted partly (NLG 130 million) of funds that had become available due to changes in the tax system.

19. Some parts of policy had already been decentralized before. For example, in 1987 the protection of quality of childcare facilities and some of the allocation of childcare facilities were already decentralized as part of the Act of Welfare Work.

20. The "poldermodel" has recently been used in international political circles to express the Dutch way of welfare reform (also called "the Dutch miracle"). From being known as one of the most expensive welfare states with a high level of inactivity (and therefore welfare dependency) in the 1980s, the Dutch welfare state by now is known for its strong economic growth, low unemployment without an tremendous increase of inequality (as in the U.K. and the United States). The increase of labor-market participa-

tion is largely an effect of the increase of women's labor-market participation—with childcare policies as a means to achieve a higher female labor-market participation. However, as I have argued elsewhere, the “Dutch miracle” is more successful in adapting its economy to international standards, rather than creating a social infrastructure that is in tune with contemporary patterns of work and care (Bussemaker 1997d; see, for a comparative international perspective, Bussemaker 1997c). The dominant rationale for expansion of childcare provisions is a good illustration of the imbalance between economic and social features in the Dutch “poldermodel.”

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