

Feminism at the Crossroads of Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism: Restructuring Women's Labor in the Context of Family Leave Reform in Finland

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This article analyzes the convergences of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism in the context of Nordic welfare state reform. Using Finland's ongoing family leave reform as an illustrative example, the article shows that neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism find common ground in welfare state reform where workfare policies are intensified and the dismantling of the public provision is coupled with extended private sphere norms. The article unfolds neoliberal and neoconservative feminisms in the public policy context. It demonstrates that neoliberal and neoconservative feminisms contribute to restructuring women's labor by locating women as subjects critical to capitalist growth, competitive economies, national wealth, and balanced state budgets as providers of productive and reproductive labor. Moreover, they associate women's productive and reproductive labor with freedom and emancipation.

Introduction

In this article, I analyze the convergences of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism and how they contribute to Nordic welfare state reform. I focus on the restructuring of women's productive and reproductive labor. I unfold neoliberal and neoconservative feminisms by analyzing their manifestations in gender equality and family policies. Although I draw from gender equality policy broadly, I use as an illustrative example the ongoing family leave reform and related public discussion in the Nordic welfare state of Finland. Finland's gender equality and family policies are closely tied, and

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its family leave reform opens a window to a timely and politically heated gender equality policy debate.

I have chosen family leave reform as an illustrative example for three reasons. First, the family is central to both neoliberal and neoconservative policies in ongoing welfare state reform. In her analysis of policy reforms in the United States, Melinda Cooper (2017) showed how private family responsibility has become the guiding principle of social policy and has been reinvented as an instrument for distributing wealth and income. In this context, the welfare state has been repurposed as the enforcer of traditional family values. Second, the political family leave debates in Finland revolve around women's labor, making it a good case for unfolding the restructuring of women's productive and reproductive labor. Third, feminism and gender equality policy play an important role in family leave reform, enabling a broader analysis of the convergences of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism. By analyzing family leave reform in Finland, I ask how the convergence of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism and their manifestation in gender equality and family policies contribute to Nordic welfare state reform. More specifically, I ask how the aforementioned convergence contributes to the restructuring of women's productive and reproductive labor.

The complex relations between feminism, neoliberalism, and conservatism have been analyzed extensively by feminist scholars across disciplines. This research has charted the deleterious effects that neoliberal policies have had on women and minorities (e.g., Karamessini and Rubery 2014); the effects of neoliberal governance on gender equality policy (e.g., Hudson, Rönblom, and Teghtsoonian 2020); neoliberal subject formation and its injurious effects on women (e.g., Gill and Scharff 2011), and how feminism itself has changed through its engagement with neoliberalism (e.g., Rottenberg 2018). The research on feminism and conservatism has paid attention to the gendered effects of conservative and far-right populist politics promoting "traditional" gender roles and family values and on the effects of a broader anti-gender movement on women and minorities (e.g., Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

These debates have made important contributions to understanding the dynamics of neoliberalism and conservatism and their convergences from a feminist perspective. However, they have tended to sideline the fundamental reworking of the economy–society relation that is at the core of neoliberalism as a political and philosophical project (see Adkins 2018a). In addition, the role that feminism and gender equality policy play in the reworking of this relation requires more attention. My article contributes to the earlier debates on the convergences of feminism, neoliberalism, and neoconservatism by analyzing how they have contributed to Nordic welfare state reform. Rather than analyzing feminism in all its forms, I focus on its neoliberal and neoconservative dimensions and their manifestations in gender equality and family policies.

As Melinda Cooper (2017, 24) has stated, the history of economic formations (such as the welfare state) cannot be understood apart from the

operations of gender, race, and sexuality without obscuring the politics of wealth and income distribution itself. The ongoing state reform involves opening the working capacities of women who previously came under the paternalistic protection of the welfare state, such as single mothers (Brady 2021) and mothers of young children (Fox Piven 2012; Adkins 2018a, 2018b; McRobbie 2020). This opening concerns creating a class of poor, contingent female workers who constantly churn between working for benefits and working for wages that do not pay enough to live (Adkins 2018b, 152–53). Welfare state reform also involves free-riding women's reproductive labor (such as care and other activities that sustain the workforce and life). Reproductive labor is often performed without pay and is treated as having no monetized value, although it provides a background condition for capitalist accumulation and social life (Fraser 2016; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). Thus, ongoing welfare state reform involves the intensification and exploitation of women's productive and reproductive labor. By analyzing family leave reform, I argue that neoliberalism and neoconservatism, as political rationalities, are crucial for sustaining this intensification and exploitation because they locate women as critical subjects to capitalist growth, as providers of productive labor (as workers) and reproductive labor (as mothers and carers). I also argue that the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism with feminism contributes to this process by associating women's productive and reproductive labor with freedom and emancipation.

In the next section, I present earlier debates on the convergences of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism and introduce my theoretical approach. Following that, I present family leave reform in the context of gender equality and family policies and Finland's broader welfare state reform. I display my findings into two analytical sections. The first analyzes the manifestations of neoliberal feminism, and the second analyzes the manifestations of neoconservative feminism in family leave reform and gender equality policy and how they contribute to restructuring women's labor. In the concluding section, I discuss what my findings could mean for feminism.

The Convergences of Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and Feminism

Feminist scholars have comprehensively analyzed the gendered dimensions and effects of neoliberalism. This research consists, first, of analyses of the gendered effects of various policies that comprise neoliberal policy regimes. These include austerity policies and cuts to public expenditure (Karamessini and Rubery 2014; Kantola and Lombardo 2017), low-wage growth strategies (Walby 2011), and a crisis of care (Fraser 2016; Dowling 2021). These studies have shown that neoliberal policies are injurious to the welfare, well-being, and economic security of women. Second, feminist scholars have analyzed the

effects of state transformation and neoliberal governance on gender equality policy and how it becomes compromised or co-opted in these processes. Claims that are complicit with a market agenda (such as women's employment) are granted primacy, and gender equality is increasingly represented as a contribution to economic growth and competitiveness (Kantola and Squires 2012; Elomäki 2015).

Third, feminist scholars have analyzed neoliberal subject formation and its injurious effects on women as it produces responsabilized, entrepreneurial, and economically calculative subjects. Feminist scholars have mapped the emergence of entrepreneurial and competitive forms of subjectivity for women that includes the prioritization of work and achievement; an investor approach to one's appearance, health, the household, intimate relationships, and mothering; a disavowal of structural inequalities; and a constant striving for perfection (McRobbie 2009; Scharff 2016; Rottenberg 2018; Adkins 2018b). Fourth, feminist scholars have analyzed how feminism itself has changed through its engagement with neoliberalism. These analyses have sparked new concepts such as "neoliberal feminism" and "post-feminism" (McRobbie 2009; Prügl 2015; Rottenberg 2018). They are feminist in the sense that they entail awareness of particular gender inequalities. They are neoliberal in the sense that they disavow social structures that produce this inequality and accept full responsibility for individual success and well-being.

The relationship between feminism and conservatism has drawn less attention, but there is still substantial scholarship about this relation. Much of this work has focused on the increasing popularity of conservative and far-right populist politics promoting traditional gender roles and family values and on the emergence of a broader anti-gender movement (e.g., Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). These analyses have paid attention to the gendered effects of conservative policies, such as the weakening of gender equality policy and the strengthening of conventional gender roles. They have also paid attention to the convergences of neoliberalism and conservatism and pointed out that in various national contexts, the neoliberalization of economic and social policies has involved the strengthening of their conservative aspects, such as familialism or restriction of abortion rights (Lombardo 2017; Elomäki and Kantola 2018).

In these analyses, conservatism has been seen as an anti-feminist force. There are also empirical analyses of conservative forms of feminism (e.g., Scheiber 2018) although they tend to be skeptical about whether these should be labeled "feminisms." Conservative women's increased participation in electoral politics has also gained scholarly attention (e.g., Celis and Childs 2018). These analyses have shown that conservative women or feminists challenge and change public discourse about "women's interests." Their claims and acts tend to stem from personal experiences, especially as mothers and carers, or from alternative feminist accounts of women's position in society. These accounts emphasize women's distinctiveness, complementarity, equal worth,

and partnership with men, often underpinning a preference for policies that support a mother's choice to stay at home over policies that support women's participation in the paid workforce (Childs and Webb 2012; Celis and Childs 2018). Conservative feminism has also been called "choice feminism" as it encourages women's empowerment and agency but dismisses the role of power, institutions, and resources, and the context in which choices are created and must be implemented (Scheiber 2018). In this respect, it resembles neoliberal feminism.

As can be seen, neoliberalism and neoconservatism are distinct political rationalities that are contradictory in many respects, and their convergences with feminism have diverging outcomes. Yet, these rationalities find common ground in contemporary politics, especially in ongoing welfare state reform that takes place in various geographical and political contexts. On the one hand, the neoliberal dismantling of the public provision is coupled with extended private sphere norms, and families (instead of the state) bear primary responsibility for investing in the education, health, and welfare of children (Cooper 2017). On the other hand, individual rights and freedom have become crucial vehicles for expanding neoconservative morality into the public sphere (Brown 2019). Thus, although these rationalities do not share a common logic, they have similar political effects as they both replace welfare state protection with markets and morality.

In analyzing the convergences of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism in the context of Nordic welfare state reform, I pay attention to the restructuring of women's labor. Lisa Adkins (2018b) has noted how neoliberalism involves a very specific transformation of lives: one whose dynamic turns on the logics of inclusion, expansion, and limitlessness, rather than (as is often assumed) exclusion, constraint, or limit. Adkins argues that neoliberalism contains a gender order in which women are not social reproducers but subjects who are critical to capitalist growth via their incorporation in the wage-labor imperative. This transformation of women's lives should be understood as a critical dimension of the market becoming the mode of rationality for state and society (Adkins 2018b). I draw on Adkins' analysis and especially on her notion of the centrality of women's wage labor to neoliberalism and capitalist growth. I also show by employing feminist political economists' analyses (e.g., Bakker 2007; Fraser 2016) that the logics of inclusion and expansion are not limited to wage labor but also comprise women's unpaid labor, especially when state economies and public provision are concerned.

To unfold this dynamic, it is critical to add the dimension of neoconservatism to the analysis. By analyzing family leave reform, I aim to show that welfare state reform cannot be understood solely from the perspective of the extension of the wage-work imperative, although it is an important aspect of it. The family policy discussion also revolves around "family values" that emphasize women's roles as altruistic caregivers, providers of unpaid reproductive labor. A similar logic of expansion and limitlessness concerns both

productive and reproductive labor as they are both critical to capitalist growth and national economies.

More broadly, I employ Wendy Brown's (2006, 2019) and Melinda Cooper's (2017) theories of the convergences of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. What interests me particularly is how the ongoing welfare state reform, involving the dismantling of the public provision, is routinely coupled with extended private sphere norms and legitimized with a gendered traditional morality. Cooper (2017) has shown how neoconservative movements have, since the 1960s, emerged in the United States in response to similar concerns that mobilized neoliberals, such as the liberation movements that fought for greater wealth and income redistribution and challenged the sexual normativity of the family wage. As a response, neoconservatives and neoliberals have reinvented the family as an instrument of distributing wealth and income (see also Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020). In my analysis of Nordic welfare reform, I shift my focus from the distribution of wealth and income to the gendered distribution of labor, which is also an important element of Nordic gender equality policy.

Case and Context: Family Leave Reform in Finland's Transforming Welfare State

I analyze neoliberal and neoconservative feminisms in Finland by focusing on gender equality and family policies, especially the ongoing family leave reform. Although family policy is a policy sector on its own, it is also an integral part of Finland's gender equality policy. The Nordic gender equality model combines policies to promote high levels of women's participation in political life and paid work (Siim and Borchorst 2002). These policies include work-family balance policies, namely, publicly subsidized or paid parental leave arrangements and publicly subsidized childcare arrangements. Women's work has been integral in the Nordic welfare and gender equality model, and family policies have been characterized as an infrastructure to promote gender equality. They have (at least in principle, if not always in reality) assisted mothers in overcoming care-based barriers to equal participation in working life and assisted fathers in gaining equal participation in family life. This has been often called the "dual-earner, dual-carer" model (Teigen and Skjeie 2017).

Finnish family leave policy is generous by international standards: at the moment (March 2022), it provides approximately thirteen months in total of paid family leave (an income-related parental allowance). Four months are reserved for the mother, nine weeks for the father, and six months can be divided as the parents wish. The parents can also use cash-for-childcare benefits (a low flat-rate homecare allowance) until the youngest child turns three years old. Despite the long-standing commitment to the dual-earner, dual-carer model in gender equality policy, the division of parental leave among mothers

and fathers is far from equal. Although the labor market integration of women in the Nordic countries is high, women still use the vast majority of family leaves: in 2019, women used 89 percent of parental allowance and 93 percent of cash-for-childcare benefits ([Social Insurance Institution of Finland 2019](#)). This has led to a double burden for mothers and contributed to persistent gender equality problems in working life, such as pay gaps, women's lagged careers, and discrimination against young women. Cash-for-childcare benefits are seen as a poverty trap, especially for unemployed or underemployed women with low education, because they can lead to long absences from working life and a low income that persists throughout women's life-course ([Sipilä, Repo, and Rissanen 2010](#); [Kuitto, Salonen, and Helmdag 2019](#)). Family leave is also linked to broader class-based and racialized inequalities. Women with tertiary education, higher income, and secured jobs return to work earlier, and their partners are also more likely to share parental leave with them. Mothers with low education and income and migrant women take the longest family leaves ([Kuitto, Salonen, and Helmdag 2019](#); [Elomäki, Mustosmäki, and Sandberg 2021](#)).

Feminist politicians, femocrats, nongovernmental organizations, and researchers have, throughout the 2000s, campaigned for a thorough family leave reform and presented different models for a more equal family policy. The most popular model among feminist actors has been the "6 + 6 + 6" model, consisting of a six-month quota for each parent and a six-month parental leave that can be divided as the parents wish (e.g., [Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 2010](#)). The models also take into account different types of families, such as single parents, shared custody, and same-sex parents, so that they are allowed the same amount of parental leave as heterosexual nuclear families. The most significant difference to the current system is the relatively long father quota and the extension of income-related parental allowance. The reform has been notoriously difficult, mainly due to strong opposition toward the reform from conservative political parties: the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats, and the populist Finns Party (henceforth called "conservative parties"). The Left Alliance, the Greens, the Social Democratic Party, and the National Coalition Party (henceforth called "liberal parties") have supported the reform, although for different reasons. The National Coalition Party is somewhat of a watershed in this composition, as it is a conservative right-wing party, and regarding family leave reform, the party is torn between its objectives of increasing (women's) employment and reinforcing traditional family values.

The political and public debates regarding family leave reform have remained heated. The liberal parties represent family leave policy as an instrument to promote gender equality (in this case, women's employment and/or a dual-earner, dual-carer model). The left-liberal parties also highlight the redistributive aspects of family leave policy while the right-liberal party represents it as an instrument to promote women's employment. The conservatives

position families as consumer–citizens who should have freedom of choice about their care arrangements (Autto 2016). Thus far, freedom of this sort has resulted in a deeply gendered division of parental leaves. The conservatives seem to have been much more passionate about preventing the reform than the liberals have been about promoting it, and there was no serious attempt to implement the reform until the late 2010s. Feminist actors have lacked political power and legitimacy, and they too have been unable to push the reform forward. The difficulties in the family leave reform also reflect the central role of labor market partners in social and public policy, as the tripartite negotiations have made it difficult to increase the parental leave or father’s quota (Elomäki, Mustosmäki, and Sandberg 2021).

In spring 2016, the discussion about family leave reform suddenly flared up when nonfeminist economic actors (labor market partners and right-wing political parties) presented family leave reform as a means of increasing employment. In contrast to the earlier efforts by the feminist and gender equality actors, the economic actors’ initiatives evoked immediate and extensive public discussion about the urgent need for family leave reform. The nonfeminist economic actors presented their models for family leave reform, addressing the duration of earnings-related parental leave, the division of parental leave between parents, the amount and duration of cash-for-childcare benefits, different types of families, and the flexibility of the family leave system (Elomäki et al. 2019). Although the models vary, the undisguised objective to increase employment is central to all of them. The reform in some models was even represented in more concrete terms as a means to reach the prevailing government’s employment target of 72 percent (Elomäki et al. 2019). This repoliticization of family leave reform in public discussion led to a reform initiative by the former right-conservative government (2015–2019), although it failed due to the ideological differences between governing parties and the economic constraints that the governing parties set for the reform (Elomäki, Mustosmäki, and Sandberg 2021). The current left–green government has finally reached a consensus about the reform, and the renewed family leave model will come into effect in August 2022. The reform is a compromise between the governing parties: it extends the father quota and the overall duration of earnings-related parental allowance but keeps cash-for-childcare benefits untouched.

The repoliticization of family leave and the reform itself should be understood in the wider context of welfare state reform in Finland and especially the intensification of workfare policies since the early 1990s (Kantola and Kananen 2013; Ylöstalo and Adkins 2021). Workfare is a set of coordinated state policies, initiatives, and schemes, which requires the unemployed to participate in work and work-related activities to receive benefit payments (Peck 2001; Wacquant 2010; Cooper 2012). Workfare reforms were imported into the Nordic countries from the United States as part of a new understanding of managing the labor supply, one that focuses on “activating” people’s

entrepreneurial capacities to work rather than the redistribution of resources. Within the shift from welfare to workfare, the state provides strong incentives to work (via, for instance, compulsion and sanctions) to ensure that as many people as possible are included in the labor supply. Since the 2010s, activation policies have intensified in Finland (Ylöstalo and Adkins 2021) and across Europe, North America, and Australasia (Adkins 2018b). Critically, populations that previously came under the paternalistic protection of the welfare state have also been targeted. These populations include, among others, single parents and mothers of young children (Fox Piven 2012; Cooper 2017; Adkins 2018a; 2018b; Brady 2021). In what follows, I analyze how the convergence of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism contributes to this restructuring of women's labor.

I draw from central policy documents that outline Finland's gender equality and family leave policies and the current family leave reform (e.g., government programs, government action plans for gender equality, political parties' family policy programs in the 2000s). I also draw from public discussion about the reform in media, social media, and central policy actors' blogs and other public statements in 2016–2021, when the discussions about family leave reform turned toward women's employment. Rather than a systematic analysis of family leave reform, I use it as an illustrative example of the convergences of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism in Nordic welfare state reform and the restructuring of women's labor involved. My focus is on the social and cultural context of the public and political discussion around the reform, not on the content of the reform. To this end, I employ a textual and discursive approach (e.g., Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). I understand feminisms and policies as a complex combination of meaning and practice, founded by and reproduced through gendered ideas about the world (Griffin 2015). Rather than an attempt to map the policy-making processes and political debates around the reform empirically, my analysis is theoretically focused. It aims to complement the theoretical debates on the convergences of feminism, neoliberalism, and neoconservatism by analyzing how they have contributed to welfare reform and, in particular, to restructuring women's productive and reproductive labor. I focus on the neoliberal and neoconservative feminist aspects of family leave reform. The reform, along with gender equality and family policies, is more complex and contains diverging feminist and nonfeminist voices. I start by analyzing convergences of neoliberalism and feminism, then continue by analyzing neoconservatism and its convergences with neoliberalism and feminism.

Neoliberal Feminism and the Working Mother

In this section, I analyze the convergences of neoliberalism and feminism in Finland's family leave reform by focusing on how the reform restructures

women's labor. As already mentioned, in Finland's gender equality policy, family policy is strongly aligned with women's employment, gender equality in the labor market, and work–life balance. This is visible in all government action plans for gender equality in the 2000s. These action plans state that “work–life balance has to be developed in order to raise the employment rate” (MSAH 2005, 7). Women's employment is also represented as a key element in sustaining the welfare state:

Gender equality is part of the Nordic welfare model. The model is based on a high employment rate, competitive economy, equal services and care. . . . The precondition for high employment is that the family leave system and daycare are functional. (MSAH 2012, 7)

As I will show, this instrumentalization of gender equality and family policies to the government's competitiveness-driven agenda (see [Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2021](#)), especially to rising employment, ties feminist and neoliberal agendas together.

Happy Work–Life Balance

Far from being unique to Nordic gender equality policy, such dynamics of subjecting gender equality policy and other aspects of life to national competitiveness and capital accumulation characterizes gender–economy relations under capitalism. The current financialized form of capitalism has relocated manufacturing to low-wage regions, recruited women into the paid workforce, promoted state disinvestment from social welfare, and externalized care work onto families and communities while simultaneously diminishing their capacity to perform it ([Fraser 2016](#); [Fraser and Jaeggi 2018](#)). This has resulted in rising inequality and a dualized organization of social reproduction: commodified for those who can pay for it, privatized for those who cannot. Such configuration has been termed as the ideal of the two-earner family ([Fraser 2016](#)), which is also embedded in Nordic gender equality and family leave policies in the form of a dual-earner, dual-carer model. The Nordic model is also based on distributing care between parents rather than solely on externalizing it. This is also visible in political parties' family policy programs in which the family leave system is tied to equal distribution of care and gender equality in the labor market. [The National Coalition Party's \(2018\)](#) family policy program states:

The central aim of family leave reform is to enable more equal and flexible distribution of parental leave between parents. This is essential for gender equality to come true in working life. The current unequal distribution of family leave has a negative effect on women's careers and wage development.

In the two-earner family ideal, emancipation joins with marketization to undermine social protection. Its dominant imaginary is the liberal–individualist and gender egalitarian woman, sometimes termed as “neoliberal feminist” (Rottenberg 2018). Although neoliberal feminism is often traced to popular feminism and cultural products instead of state reform, these analyses also shed light on the convergences of neoliberalism and gender equality and family policy. Both neoliberal feminism and gender equality and family policy encompass an idea about work–family balance. Catherine Rottenberg (2018) argued that in the popular feminist sphere, the idea of work–family balance has been incorporated into the social imagination as a cultural good that helps to engender a new model of emancipated motherhood: a professional woman who balances a successful career with satisfying family life. This happy work–family balance is currently being represented as a survivor technique for women in working life and a progressive feminist ideal. The key to being a feminist mother is the ability to bridge private and public spheres simultaneously without disavowing either one. Thus, the dilemma for a new feminist mother no longer seems to be entering the public sphere, but rather the possibility of finding happiness through a balancing act, which becomes the sign of women’s progress (Rottenberg 2018, 38).

Although Finland’s gender equality policy does not employ the market-oriented language of Anglo-American popular feminism, the idea of finding well-being and social equality through a balancing act between work and family (albeit with the help from politically aware partners who will carry their share of childcare and domestic work) is also an important aspect of Nordic gender equality and family policies. In the Nordic context, this balancing act is done for the sake of the family, gender equality, and national competitiveness. Or, as stated in the Akava—Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland blog about the current family leave reform:

Work–family balance must in the society and working life in the 2020s be possible. . . . Flexibility, gender equality, and positive attitude towards families can have a positive effect on the birth rate, which is important for the future of the welfare society, employment, and economy. (Murto 2021)

In this context, the sudden interest in family leave reform of economic actors and their framing of it as an employment measure should not be seen as a change of course but as part of a long continuum of the intersection of gender equality and women’s work. It also follows the same path as Finland’s family policy discourse, which, in the 2010s, has downplayed ideas emphasizing redistribution, social equality, and family well-being and replaced them with economic rationality favoring mothers’ labor market participation and fiscal austerity (Nygård, Nyby, and Kuisma 2019). Rather than sidelining gender equality, the economic actors represented family leave reform as a means to

promote gender equality, emphasizing that a working mother signals gender equality. The Confederation of Finnish Industries blog claimed that their model was “the most gender-equal” of all proposed models. It continued: “To us, the most important objective has been to increase the employment rate and this cannot be done without significant improvement in women’s position in the labor market” (Oksala 2017; see also Elomäki et al. 2019). In the nonfeminist economic actors’ visions, gender equality in working life was reduced to women’s employment rate, and structural inequalities in working life were pushed back. Thus, the gender equality policy was tied to those supply-side labor market strategies that characterize workfare policies.

Mothers as Targets of Workfare

The shift in gender equality discourse toward women’s employment as a source of emancipation and national competitiveness have in feminist research often been analyzed as neoliberalization of gender equality policy (Kantola and Squires 2012; Elomäki 2015; Prügl 2015). Notwithstanding the significance of these analyses, I suggest that these shifts are also important to understand in the context of a wider welfare state reform and particularly the intensification of workfare and labor market activation schemes. Rather than understanding this shift as a “general” neoliberalization or economization of gender equality or family policies, I suggest that what is critical about this reform is that while its rhetoric addresses aspirational women, it targets neither them nor women in general. Instead, it targets a particular group of women: mothers of young children. Women’s employment rate is already relatively high in Finland. In 2019, women’s employment rate was 71.8 percent while men’s was 73.3 percent, but long parental leaves and their unequal gendered division have a descending effect on young mothers’ employment. Women’s and men’s employment rates vary the most in the age group of twenty-five to thirty-four years. In this age group, women’s employment rate in 2019 was 73.5 percent, and men’s was 82.5 percent (Statistics Finland 2019). As already pointed out, long parental leaves do not fall equally to all women. Well-educated women, who have interesting jobs to which they can return and partners who share parental leave with them, take much shorter parental leaves than women (often migrant women) with low education and no job to which they can return. These out-of-work women are also the very same populations who are defined as problems in the classificatory schemes of workfare regimes, along with the long-term unemployed and the over-fifties (Cooper 2012; Fox Piven 2012; Adkins 2018b).

Workfare policies cast unemployed populations in particular terms. Rather than being seen as in need of state protection, the unemployed became responsible for providing for their own needs. Lisa Adkins (2018a, 2018b) argued that women (particularly poor unemployed and underemployed women with dependent children) do not simply suffer injurious effects of workfare

but are, in fact, targets of workfare (see also [Cooper 2012](#), [Fox Piven 2012](#); [Brady 2021](#)). Activation regimes serve as an institutional pillar of the regulation of labor and labor markets in finance-led post-Fordism. They expand the capacities of whole populations to work. In so doing, they provide the cheap, flexible, and compliant labor on which the post-Fordist labor market depends ([Adkins 2018b](#)). Workfare policies are thus a device for securing the conditions for capitalist accumulation, and this has involved a particular emphasis on the activation of laboring capacities of these target populations, including women with small children.

The shift in public debates about family leave reform as a means of increasing women's employment must thus be understood in the context of intensification of workfare policies where women with small children, who were previously protected from work and working in the Nordic welfare states, have been exposed to the imperative of waged work. This was also evident in the former Finnish government's (2015–2019) attempt to reform family leave, as one of the government's main objectives was to increase young women's employment and labor supply via the reform ([Elomäki, Mustosmäki, and Sandberg 2021](#)).

Although low-educated unemployed or underemployed women are the targets of these policies, family leave reform in Finland is framed in the public discussions as one that also targets, sometimes exclusively, middle-class women with high education. Cuts to public daycare and social benefits have been legitimized with the pejorative term “latte mothers”, which refers to mothers who waste taxpayer money by enjoying maternity leave (i.e., meeting other mothers and their children at cafés; hence, the reference to café latte) and not wanting to return to work (e.g., [Moilanen 2015](#)). This imagery of free-riding but evidently middle-class women is untruthful, as the women who have well-paid jobs to return to tend to do so relatively quickly. In effect, those who are actually targeted by cuts to parental leave and/or public daycare are not latte mothers, who do not really exist. Instead, they are disadvantaged mothers, who are largely missing in the economic actors' family leave reform agenda ([Elomäki, Mustosmäki, and Sandberg 2021](#)). At the heart of the reform, then, is a moral political economy of gender, which is built by co-opting a feminist ethos that emphasizes the emancipating and dignifying role of work and employment for women. Participation at work signals respectability for especially disadvantaged women, who are otherwise cast as burdens on the state ([McRobbie 2020](#)). The dynamics and control of such politics are less about what women ought not to do and more about what they can do. Via these dynamics, gender equality policies contribute to restructuring women's productive labor by locating women's work as critical to competitive economies, national wealth, and their own emancipation. At the same time, the gendered and racialized structures of working life that offer mainly low-paid, part-time, and fixed-term jobs to some women are sidelined.

Neoconservative Feminism and the Altruistic Mother

In this section, I analyze neoconservatism in Finland's family leave reform and its convergences with neoliberalism and feminism. Family leave reform and public discussion around it also involve ideas that seemingly oppose the emphasis on women's employment or other economized justifications and instead highlight the well-being of children, parents, and families. Family leave is already relatively long in Finland, and in the ongoing reform, the earnings-related parental allowance period is extended to about fourteen months (MSAH 2021). Finland's gender equality policies also include policies aimed at reducing structural and intersectional inequalities (such as women's poverty) via redistribution, rather than emancipating women via employment (e.g., MSAH 2010). Work–family balance is an important aspect of gender equality and family policies, but they also acknowledge the current gendered division of parental leave. Thus, they intend at the same time to challenge this division, to ensure women's economic security regardless of their life choices (which are often directed by structural inequalities), and to enable different choices. The Government Action Plan for Gender Equality (MSAH 2005, 17) sets as one of its objectives to “develop cash-for-childcare benefits so that they can provide working parents . . . a real alternative [to paid work].” This suggests that the relationship between gender equality policy and women's work is not limited to intensifying women's productive labor but is multifaceted. To explore this further, I next turn to neoconservatist tendencies in family leave reform and public discussion around it, focusing on restructuring women's reproductive labor. I show that neoliberalism and neoconservatism are not alternative ideologies, but complement each other. Feminism and gender equality policy play an important role in this fusion.

Economized Familialism

Before turning to the convergences of neoconservatism and feminism, I show that neoliberal and neoconservatist family policy discourses share common ground. In the family leave debates, both left-liberal and conservative parties use “familialist” language that emphasizes the importance of the family as a social unit, which should not be seen as a device to increase employment. The Finns Party stated in its family policy program (Finns Party 2017) that “Our starting point is that the family is the most important unit in the world” (p. 3) and “Family policy cannot be—and does not have to be—employment policy, but first and foremost enable solutions that support the child and the family” (p. 5). Although the conservative parties' family policy models differ from the left-liberal parties in many respects, the rhetoric of both places family above the economy. When the current left–green government presented its family leave reform, its stated objective was not to increase employment but the well-being of children and families, as well as gender and social equality. The reform was estimated to increase the costs of family leave by €80 million:

“The reform will increase public costs, but they are an investment in the family,” said Aino-Kaisa Pekonen (Left Alliance), Minister of Social Affairs and Health (Sutinen 2021). She also called it a “reform of love” that improves family bonds: “The equal division of family leave and equal division of care obligations have a positive effect on the relationship between the parents,” said Pekonen (Nurmi 2021).

Familialist discourse has an economized undertone. By framing its family leave reform as an investment, the current government returned to the social investment perspective that has (along with the redistributive perspective) been dominant in Finland’s family policy but which has, since the 2008 financial crisis, given way to a neoliberal austerity perspective (Nygård, Nyby, and Kuisma 2019). The social investment perspective became dominant in Finland after it was reinvented in the 1990s by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Union as part of their vision of a “new welfare state” and a solution to sluggish growth (Jenson 2010). Within the social investment perspective, social and family policies are seen as investments in social inclusion and future economic growth. Policies that facilitate parental employment and gender equality have been prioritized, and children have been seen as a target group of policies that invest in their human capital formation (Nygård, Nyby, and Kautto 2017; Van Gerven and Nygård 2017). Within the social investment perspective, the welfare state is seen as enabling or activating a state that seeks to include families in the market rather than protect them from it.

The logic of family policy as an investment is also central in conservative parties’ family policy programs, although their focus is on the birth rate, which is seen to secure the nation’s future wealth via the reproduction of the workforce. One of the objectives of the Christian Democrats’ family policy program is to encourage families to have more children. The program states that “Investing in the wellbeing of families is a vital part of far-sighted politics for the future. Investment in families with children provide wealth and savings in the long run” (Christian Democrats 2018, 3). The Finns Party states in its family policy program that “The most severe problems of the Finnish system are connected to the fact that the proportion of working and tax-paying citizens decreases . . . in an alarming way. . . . Without the increase in the number of cake-makers, we do not have enough cake to be shared” (Finns Party 2017, 10). Although the family policies of left-liberal and conservative parties differ, they both conceive the family as an investment in the future economic wellbeing of the nation.

These examples show that moral traditionalism is an important element of neoliberalism. As Brown (2019) and Cooper (2017) have demonstrated, despite their differences on many other issues, neoliberals and neoconservatives agree that family bonds need to be encouraged. For neoconservatives, the issue is mainly moral. For neoliberals, the issue is mainly economic: family values are crucial in a society in which families (instead of the state) bear primary

responsibility for investing in the education, health, and welfare of children. Within the welfare state restructuring, the family has increasingly become an important bearer of social obligations due to cuts to social security and public services, and women have had to fill the gaps through unpaid labor at home.

This increase in women's care activities has, in some feminist analyses, been seen as "turning back time," that is, as a return to the arrangements of labor and life associated with Fordism, in which women were primarily carers, wives, and mothers (see [Adkins 2018b](#)). Lisa [Adkins \(2018b\)](#) has argued that what is at stake is not a return to the past but a transformation of lives specific to the current era characterized by post-Fordism, neoliberalism, and financialized capitalism. In the previous section, I emphasized how this transformation is characterized by the extension of the demand to work to populations previously protected from work. However, women's role as carers is not replaced with paid labor. Rather, this transformation "places the ideals of intensive mothering, domesticity, entrepreneurialism and an investor spirit towards work and working on the same continuous plane" ([Adkins 2016](#), 3) in which women's productive and reproductive labor are seen as vital to national wealth, competitive economies, and balanced state budgets. This is how neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism are brought together.

Social Reproduction as Work

Feminism and gender equality policies contribute to the process of intensifying women's labor. While neoliberal feminism intensifies women's productive labor, neoconservatist feminism focuses on reproductive labor. In Finnish family policy debates, the conservative Centre Party especially legitimizes their family policy with gender equality. A recent example is Annika Saarikko's (the leader of the Centre Party) speech at the opening of the party's communal election campaign in February 2021. The Centre Party has particularly opposed efforts to shorten family leave via cuts to cash-for-childcare benefits. In her speech, Saarikko inverted the public discussion around mothers' (un)employment by claiming that mothers already work hard:

The speeches that Finnish women ought to work more, they make me angry. When a parent stays at home for a short while when the child is young, it does not restrain employment. In light of statistics, the Finnish woman already does an awful lot of work during her life-course. I tell you, Finnish, hard-working woman: you do, you are enough, you are good. You build this country, you love your neighbor. You work, you take care of the children, you take care of the grandchildren, your parents, your parents-in-law. You have hobbies, you do voluntary work and community labor, and when the spring comes you plant flowers to the graves of those who have passed away. You and your kind are heroes of this country. (in [Kuukkanen 2021](#))

Saarikko's speech, with its poetic praise of traditional gender roles, was described in the media as "letting the cat among the pigeons" (Kuukkanen 2021), as it provoked immediate and heated public discussion about gender equality. While some conservatives thanked Saarikko for her speech, the discussion was mainly critical and she was accused of bringing "a wind from the past" and of sustaining stuffy gender roles (Kuukkanen 2021). In other words, Saarikko's speech was interpreted as "turning back time."

By claiming that women's unpaid labor is work that should be recognized and valued, Saarikko employed a feminist strategy of making social reproduction visible and revaluing it (e.g., Folbre 2001; Federici 2012) although in a neoconservative form that disavows structural inequalities. Feminists have responded to the characterization of women as nonproductive citizens by insisting on the status of domestic and/or unpaid reproductive work as real work, a comparably worthy form of socially necessary and dignified labor. Kathi Weeks (2011) has noted that by adopting this strategy, feminists cast work as the primary means by which women are integrated into social life. Working is supposed to transform subjects into independent individuals of the liberal imaginary, and for that reason, it is treated as an individual moral practice and collective ethical obligation.

In line with reinforcing the work ethic, neoconservative feminism also conforms to welfare state restructuring in which gaps in social security are filled with women's unpaid labor. Neoconservative feminism treats women's unpaid labor as a free gift that is inexhaustible, possessing no (monetized) value that can be appropriated without any concern for replenishment (cf. Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 72). Neoconservative feminism does not aim to change the structural inequalities embedded in this sexual politics but thanks women for their compliance. The sidelining of structural inequalities unites neoliberal and neoconservative feminisms.

The Emancipated Mother

The sexual politics embedded in neoconservative feminism is legitimized with a neoliberal valorization of women's free choice: freedom to choose their own path and their own feminism. Saarikko replied to the aforementioned criticism with an opinion column in a newspaper. She began by stating: "The editorial of *Helsingin Sanomat* [newspaper] defined my party's image of women as conservative. That does not hold true." Saarikko continued that her purpose was only to give public credit to women for their paid and unpaid labor. Her party's family policy aims at promoting gender equality and raising the birth rate on the basis of family everyday life, not working life. She wrote:

To me, gender equality means that a woman can carry out life choices that suit her best. Gender equality is not reality until we as women stop dictating the form of good life to one another. (Saarikko 2021)

Conservative pro-family feminism is predicated on a retreat from the critique of sexual difference and male dominance in the public sphere in favor of an under-theorized revaluing of the home, mothering, and the domestic environment (McRobbie 2009). What makes this “feminist” is that it involves a woman’s free choice. In Finland, the conservative parties legitimize the current family leave policy with free choice: at the moment, mothers can go to work and fathers can stay at home with the child, but they choose not to (Autto 2016). The conservatives promote a vision of emancipated womanhood and choices as individual decisions divorced from their wider structural gender inequalities that prevent, facilitate, or encourage women (and men) to make, or from making, decisions. Freedom of choice becomes a crucial vehicle for expanding conservative morality into the public sphere (Brown 2019). In this context, women are being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are offered, not as substitutes for feminism but as an integral part of it.

Neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism are brought together by pinpointing family as the “altruistically driven locus for providing members of society with social security and protection” (McRobbie 2020, 80; see also Cooper 2017). Neither neoliberal nor neoconservative feminism questions the gendered altruistic logic of financialized capitalism. As Angela McRobbie (2020) has noted, the portrayal of housework and childcare as drudgery has become utterly unspeakable in contemporary public feminist discourses. She continues:

It would be interesting to speculate as to why there is at present, despite various other feminist actions, no organization or campaign that addresses the oppressive, repetitive, exhausting nature of daily housework and childcare and the extent to which women are still disproportionately responsible for these daily responsibilities. (McRobbie 2020, 26)

Neoconservative feminism elevates domestic skills and the bringing up of children as a worthwhile, enjoyable, and important social responsibility. It endorses the intensification of mothering as a mode of investment in children’s human capital, which can make up for the loss of status of the stay-at-home mother who directs her professional skills to secure the future middle-class status of her children (McRobbie 2020). As McRobbie writes, [the neoconservative feminist] is “the female head of household who can ‘do it all’ even if she cannot quite ‘have it all’” (McRobbie 2020, 32). Neoconservative feminism and its manifestation in gender equality and family policy contribute to restructuring women’s reproductive labor by locating it as critical to the nation’s human capital, the mother’s dignity, and her children’s well-being. At the same time, the gendered hierarchies of the society and economy, in which reproductive labor is invisible, underpaid, and undervalued (Bakker 2007), are sidelined.

Conclusions

I have analyzed the convergences of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism in the context of Nordic welfare state reform, which involves restructuring women's labor. I have shown that neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism find common ground in state reform in which workfare policies are intensified, and the dismantling of the public provision is coupled with extended private sphere norms. In so doing, women's productive and reproductive labor is intensified and exploited in the public and private spheres. I have shown how neoliberal and neoconservative feminisms contribute to this process by associating both forms of labor with freedom and emancipation. Furthermore, earlier accounts of neoliberalism and capitalism have established that their ability to absorb critical voices has made them extremely durable as socioeconomic formations (Mirowski 2013; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005/2018). The complex entanglements of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and feminism in Nordic welfare state reform should be understood in this wider context, where neoliberal capitalism has secured its continuity by swallowing its critics. In doing so, neoliberal capitalism has been reborn as "progressive" neoliberalism celebrating feminism and emancipation while dismantling social protections (Fraser 2016). It has also been reborn as new social conservatism that secures family ties as a replacement for welfare (Cooper 2017). The welfare changes embedded in these formations are intimately connected with women's productive and reproductive labor.

I have shown that the ongoing welfare state reform is tied to feminism and gender equality and family policies. By placing women's productive and reproductive labor at the heart of their project, gender equality and family policies have also, albeit unwittingly, contributed to the exploitation of women's labor. This begs the questions: what and where is anti-work or post-work feminist politics? Kathi Weeks has provided some answers in her book *The Problem with Work* (2011). In its final section, she explores the political project of "life against work," where "life" is constructed as a possible counterpoint to work. Instead of providing final answers, Weeks opens a critical task for feminism: to build something new (Weeks 2011, 233). Apart from neoliberal and neoconservative feminisms, an important task for all contemporary feminisms in relation to work is to build a feminist project aimed at emancipating women from work, not via work.

In this spirit, it is important to recall that feminism is a multifaceted social movement that contains various voices and forms of resistance. This concerns also gender equality and family policies. Although they involve neoliberal and neoconservative feminist aspects, they also contain redistributive elements. Moreover, in Finland, many grassroots feminist movements have abandoned the "state feminist" approach and instead adopted new forms and targets of critique and action (Elomäki et al. 2020; Mkwesha and Huber 2021). These feminisms can also challenge neoliberalism and neoconservatism as they do

not necessarily aim to mitigate their injurious effects on women and minorities but instead imagine entirely different politics, economies, and constellations of the good life.

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