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Work–life Balance. The Agency and Capabilities Gap

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This book is the outcome of a five-year project of the European Network of Excellence RECWOWE with the contributions of twenty authors. It applies Sen's Capabilities Approach (CA) to Work–Life Balance (WLB) in a selection of European countries and Japan in a context of emerging concern about WLB, state investment in childcare, and increased female employment, combined with no dramatic change in men's involvement in care tasks.

As presented in the introductory chapter, according to the CA perspective, the issue is what makes people able to achieve WLB, in the sense of a valued achievement. Care and WLB are seen as ends “not means to increase labor force or other instrumental goals, such as increasing fertility” (p.7). WLB is the result of an effective choice modulated by potential freedom to make choices (real opportunities). The authors develop, therefore, an agency-centered framework (summarized in Figure 1.1 p.14) figuring the possibilities to convert resources through individual factors (situated agency influenced by gender, class, skills, and family support); institutional factors, i.e., welfare regime (rights, care services,...), but also at the firm level (organizational culture); and societal factors, i.e., norms, especially gender norms in terms of care and employment (collective capabilities). Individual, institutional, and societal factors are considered as conversion factors, i.e., factors that convert resources in agency freedom for WLB. Central are the notions of choice and agency inequalities related to the level of expectation bound to the perception of alternatives as well as senses of entitlement; the authors refer to these as the cognitive dimensions.

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The book is structured in two parts. Part one considers how norms, especially gender norms, and work organization modulate the impact of policies. In the first chapter, policies, gender norms, and attitudes are compared across eleven EU countries and Japan through the analysis of a series of large-scale surveys, such as the European Values Survey. Policies on parental leave, part-time work, and childcare provision have progressed, and WLB has become a leading norm. The working time capabilities measured by the gap between the actual working hours and what people would choose (capability hours) reflect unequal agency in WLB. Extreme cases are those people who can not even imagine reducing their working hours, which is for example the case in a context of job insecurity. This is well expressed in the subsequent chapter showing through a qualitative survey that there is a much higher sense of entitlement in Sweden than in Hungary, two countries where double earning is widespread, but with quite different economic contexts and degrees of implementations of the policies and gender norms. The same survey has been implemented in Japan, a country characterized by a low awareness of rights and strong gender norms. Policies and the work culture make it especially difficult for men to exercise their rights. Policy changes are mainly aimed at supporting women, both at work and at home, with economic and 'natalist' objectives, rather than WLB and gender equality. The last chapter of this first part is a comparison of Germany and Spain. Regression analyses on an indicator of interference between professional activity and home performed on the European Social Survey 2004 show that, in both countries, when controlling for age, education, and characteristics of job, the presence of children has no effect either for women or for men. These results are commented in light of the broader context of low employment rate of mothers, expressing a normative gendered context that makes it difficult to conciliate motherhood and career.

The second part (Chapter 6–9) is focused on the role of the work organizational cultures for implementing WLB national policies both directly through the companies' policies and practice regarding parental leaves, childcare, and work hours' flexibility; and indirectly through their effect on the employees' ability to exercise their rights. In chapter 6, cluster and regression analyses on the Establishment Survey on Working Time and WLB 2004–05 identify among the 21 EU countries those with higher/lower Capabilities and the factors associated. The same data are used in Chapter 7 to analyze the meanings of part-time jobs in terms of WLB through an index of reversibility built on questions addressed to human resource managers; results show that globally reversibility is low. Chapters 8 and 9 are based on qualitative surveys on managers' attitudes and employees' sense of entitlement, in different types of companies: chapter 8 in banking sector in the UK, Netherlands, and Slovenia and chapter 9 in three types of companies (private retail, public health, and multinational IT) in Slovenia.

Results show the high degree of variability within countries and the gender dimensions both in terms of the role of the proportion of women in the company and of gender norms. Globally, WLB is higher in public and large companies and in the sector of services. The impact of corporate culture is analyzed by distinguishing three types of manager attitudes: discourses focused on disruptive effects of WLB policies appear to be associated with lower agency, while agency is enhanced by

moral discourses about the ethics of promoting WLB and by discourses putting emphasis of employees' human capital.

As underlined in the concluding chapter, the added value of the Capabilities framework lies in the multilevel approach of WLB, in a gender perspective, and a “fine-grained contextualization” (p. 272) at the intra-country and firm levels, as well as the recourse to qualitative surveys to catch agency. In short, this book is a compelling application of the CA that focuses on what is probably the most difficult aspect of its operationalization, i.e., the choice–agency dimension. It does it by recalling that choice is anchored into the array of opportunities and that agency is embedded into context. The strength of the book is, therefore, the focus on the role of intra-country variability, especially that of the corporate cultures as a collective conversion factor that is mediating the conditions of the global context and, moreover, its interpretation by the persons. This “emic” dimension is introduced through the original notion of the person's “sense of entitlement to make claims for WLB.”

In turn, regrettably there are also some weaknesses in the Capabilities design and implementation. There is no distinction between endowments and conversion factors. One wonders then what kinds of resources (individual or collective) are converted and modulate the capabilities. Although a cross-sectional dimension, gender issues are not clearly discussed in Capability terms. The notion of agency lacks a strong definition and appears to vary somewhat from chapter to chapter. So does the notion of Capabilities, which slips from Sen's definition—freedom to achieve—to capacity, agency. Lastly, the book highlights the pertinence of a multi-layers approach, but it lacks a systematic analysis of the interaction between corporate cultures and national settings. In particular, for the sake of clarity, it would have been useful to elaborate a typology of countries' WLB policies and work culture based on the characteristics considered in the book.