

RECONCILING WORK AND FAMILY LIFE: WORKPLACES, OCCUPATION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF WORK-LIFE CONFLICT

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Introduction

Concerns about the appropriate balance between work and family life have intensified as growth in female labour market participation has been accompanied by falling fertility and the prospect of an ageing population. The importance of this area for policy has led to a growing body of research, to which ESRI researchers have recently contributed.¹ One of the papers specifically explores the various types of flexible working mechanisms and the relationship with work-life conflict, using data from the 2003 *Changing Workplaces Survey*,¹ a nationally representative survey of employees in Ireland, which provides a unique and comprehensive picture of contemporary Irish workplaces. The other papers focus on Ireland's situation in an international comparative context, drawing on the 2004 *European Social Survey*,

What is Work-life Conflict?

The concept of work-life conflict addresses the tensions and trade-offs that may be associated with combining paid work with other interests, primarily 'family'. A central element of the concept is the idea that meeting demands in one domain makes it difficult to meet obligations in the other domain. There are two dimensions to work-life conflict: work-to-family/life conflict and family-to-work conflict. The studies focus on the former, and the items used to measure work-life conflict are:

- Worrying about work problems when not working;
- Feeling too tired after work to enjoy the things you would like to do at home;

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Work-Life Conflict in Ireland

- Finding that the job prevents you from giving the time you want to your partner or family;
- Finding that partner/family gets fed up with the pressure of your job.

As McGinnity and Calvert (2009) point out, Ireland, along with the UK, is often classified as a 'liberal' welfare regime, with relatively little market interference, low taxes and low state support for caring. In these countries, childcare costs are an issue and there are relatively low rates of take-up of parental leave compared to the majority of other EU countries, in part because it is unpaid in Ireland. State support for 'family-friendly' policies and the extent to which such policies are guaranteed by legislation, or up to the individual employer to implement, have implications for how workers combine work and family life.

When the level of statutory provision of family-friendly policies is low, the flexibility provided by employers becomes particularly critical. Russell *et al.* (2009) specifically explore the relationship between the availability of flexible working arrangements in Irish workplaces and work-life conflict. They take as their starting point the hypothesis that flexible working arrangements allow employees to better manage work demands and reduce time-based conflict. However, they note the alternative circumstances whereby flexible working, namely working from home, could potentially increase work-life conflict owing to the greater intrusion of work into family life. The survey measures the availability of different types of flexible working arrangements in Irish workplaces, as well as respondent take up. Their analysis suggests that part-time working is available in 53 per cent of respondents' workplaces and 20 per cent of employees report actual take up. Flexible working hours is another common working arrangement, available to 43 per cent of employees and used by 23 per cent. Around 30 per cent of employees report that job-sharing is available; however, only 6 per cent report actual take up. Working from home is the least commonly available of the flexible working arrangements (14 per cent) and is used by 8 per cent. Flexible working arrangements are highly gendered: while women are more likely to be involved in part-time working (and thus reduced earnings), men are more likely to report working from home.

In terms of work-life conflict, they find that nearly a third of employees regularly come home from work exhausted, with 18 per cent reporting being too tired to enjoy things outside work. Between 10 per cent and 15 per cent of employees regularly report that their job takes up family time and that their partner or family gets fed up with their job. Their main findings include:

FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

- Part-time work is associated with a significant reduction in work-life conflict.
- Flexitime is also associated with lower work-life conflict, but this relationship is less significant.

- Those involved in home working experienced significantly higher levels of work-life conflict, compared to workers who share the same occupational and organisational characteristics but who do not work at home (this is partly because working from home is associated with longer working hours).
- The number of flexible arrangements implemented in the workplace is found to significantly reduce work-life conflict for men, but has no effect for women.

INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

- Female employees experience higher levels of work-life conflict than male employees, when occupational and organisational characteristics are controlled for.
- Those with children under 5 years experience the highest levels of work-life conflict.
- Higher levels of work-life conflict were observed for both mothers and fathers of young children.
- Those who were married or cohabiting reported higher levels of work-life conflict than single people.

In conclusion, the authors argue that flexible working arrangements should not be considered as a ‘package’ but distinctions between the different types of arrangements should be drawn. Home working in particular seems to exacerbate tensions between work and family life rather than resolving them. Furthermore, their results suggest that an organisational commitment to family-friendly working arrangements may be beneficial to all employees, not just those who take up these options, since they tend to reflect an organisational culture that acknowledges that employees have commitments outside of the workplace.

WORK-LIFE CONFLICT IN A COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

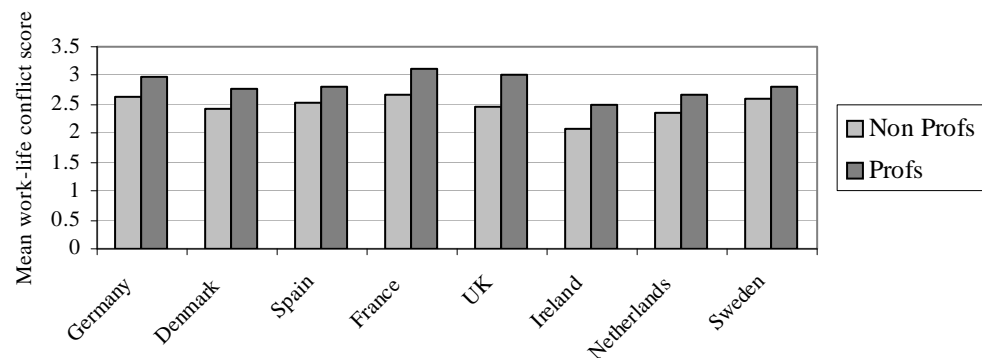
There are substantial differences between countries in ‘family-friendly’ policies such as the availability of parental leave, the right to flexible working arrangements, and the costs and coverage of childcare provision. How do these affect the nature and extent of work-life conflict across countries? Gallie and Russell’s (2009) study of seven European countries finds that in general work conditions play a larger role than family characteristics in determining the extent of work-life conflict. This suggests that a policy emphasis on improving working conditions is likely to have a major effect in reducing work to family conflict. They find that work pressure has the most negative impact on balancing work and family demands, arguing that it seems likely that the marked rise in levels of work pressure in European countries since the early 1990s has contributed substantially to greater strain in managing work-family life.

The authors note the paradoxical result that, for women, ‘raw’ levels of work-life conflict are particularly high in countries where supports for the reconciliation of work and family life are more developed, for example Denmark and Sweden. These high levels of work-life conflict, they argue, are partly associated with longer hours of work and it is suggested that the relatively long hours of work and high job pressure cancel out any impact of greater support for caring. In contrast, in the UK and The Netherlands, family pressures were partly absorbed by the fact that a high proportion of women worked part time.

Of particular interest to McGinnity and Calvert (2009) is the relationship between work-life conflict and social inequality in Western Europe. In their study of eight EU Member States including Ireland, they draw on the debates concerning time-use, which suggest that there is an inverse relationship between a lack of time and income poverty. Is being too busy the positive and privileged position of high status professionals? They ask whether this is also true of work-life conflict, and explore how countries differ in this regard.

As Figure 1 illustrates, they find that work-life conflict is higher among professionals than non-professionals in all the countries under study.

Figure 1: Country Variation in Work Life Conflict by Social Class



Source: 2004 European Social Survey.

Their results suggest that the differences in work-life conflict between professionals and non-professionals is particularly marked in the UK, Ireland and France, though overall they argue that the pattern is remarkably consistent, given the policy and labour market variation in these countries. They find that part of this difference is explained by the fact that professionals work longer hours and experience more work pressure than other social classes, though the effect remains even after accounting for these factors. In addition, they find that professional women in Ireland and particularly in Britain, countries with low state support for caring, show high work-life conflict compared to other working women in these countries.

The authors argue that, from a policy perspective, it is important not to dismiss concerns about work-life conflict as a ‘yuppie condition’: modern

welfare states and labour markets require an increasing proportion of citizens in paid work, and thus female labour market participation in particular must be facilitated. European economies/welfare states cannot afford to lose highly-skilled female labour; the problem of work-life balance and how it is achieved among professionals is therefore particularly important.

Conclusion

These papers represent a contribution to the growing research on work-life conflict, which has received significant policy attention at both national and EU level. In the last twelve months, the economic landscape has changed dramatically and the Celtic Tiger period of nearly full employment and economic growth has been replaced by concerns about unemployment and reducing government spending. What the current economic climate heralds for the issue of work-life conflict is uncertain and is likely to be strongly affected by (1) whether unemployment is concentrated within households, and (2) the effects of redundancies on the remaining workers, in terms of their job stress and work loads in the context of reduced staffing. The opportunity to explore these issues in more depth is provided by the next *Changing Workplaces Survey*, currently in the field at the moment, as well the next *European Social Survey*, which is planned for 2010.

[†]H. RUSSELL, P. J. O'CONNELL and F. MCGINNITY, 2009. "The Impact of Flexible Working Arrangements on Work-life Conflict and Work Pressure in Ireland". *Gender, Work and Organization*. Volume 16, Number 1.

F. MCGINNITY and E. CALVERT, 2009. "Work-Life Conflict and Social Inequality in Western Europe. Comparing Work-Life Conflict in Europe: Evidence from the European Social Survey". [*Social Indicators Research*](#). Volume 93, Number 3.

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