

## **The Disconnect between Policy Practices and Women's Lived Experiences: combining work and life in the UK and the Netherlands**

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**Abbreviated title: The Disconnect of Work-Life Policies**

**Word count: 7982, including notes and bibliography, excluding abstract**

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### Abstract

Combining work and family life is central to women's participation in the labour market. Work-life balance has been a key objective of UK and Dutch policy since the 1990s but policies created at the national level do not always connect with the day to day experiences of women juggling caring and domestic responsibilities with paid work. Using qualitative data from a European Social Fund Objective 3 project the paper explores women's lived realities of combining work and family life in the UK in comparison to the Netherlands as a possible 'best practices' model. We argue that women in both countries experience work-life balance as an ongoing process, continually negotiating the boundaries of work and family, and that there needs to be a more sophisticated appreciation of the differing needs of working parents. Whilst policy initiatives can be effective in helping women to reconcile dual roles, many women in both the UK and the Netherlands still resolve these issues at the individual or personal level and feel that policy has not impacted on their lives in any tangible way.

## **The Disconnect between Policy Practices and Women's Lived Experiences: combining work and life in the UK and the Netherlands**

### Introduction

In recent years work-life balance policies have been subject to considerable scrutiny. Given changing demographic conditions in European countries and the push for increased labour market participation, such policies are often seen as a (partial) solution to solving labour market participation problems (Mara Yerkes, 2006). Critical analysis raises questions relating to efficacy, awareness and take-up (Knijn & Smit, 2007; Warren, 2004) – particularly the gendered nature of much employment and social policy (Crompton, 2006; Peper et al., 2005; Mara Yerkes, 2007). While research at the organisational level shows the significant effect employer policies can have on work-life balance (den Dulk, 2001; Peper et al., 2005), and specifically that of women (Wattis et al., 2006; Mara Yerkes et al., 2006), analyses of government policy, with the exception of Scandinavia, are often less optimistic (Carmichael et al., 2008; Hantrais & Ackers, 2005; Leitner & Wroblewski, 2006; MacInnes, 2006).

In this article we do not question the effectiveness of government legislation from a policy analysis perspective. Rather, we question the efficacy of government-led measures from the perspective of women's lived experiences. In doing so, we are contributing to more recent discussions which focus on the usage of work-life policies and individual experiences (see, for example, Bernard & Phillips, 2007; Bø, 2006; Everingham et al., 2007). Using qualitative data, we explore the day to day experiences of women combining work and family life. In doing so, we address two research questions: how far can work-life balance policy in the UK and Netherlands help women

reconcile their dual roles? And is there a connection between policy initiatives and women's lived realities? Our evidence suggests that a significant disconnect is evident between women's own experiences and government policy.

We start by looking at the emergence of 'work-life balance' as a general and policy issue relating to changes in women's employment, which clearly shows a need for policies that adequately address how work and care can be managed effectively given women's entry into Western labour markets. Narrowing our focus to the UK and the Netherlands, the next section not only explores the changes to work-life government policy in these two countries, it shows that the day-to-day reality of these policies is often disconnected with the *aims* of work-life balance policies. Following, evidence of women's lived experiences demonstrates that this disconnect between policy and daily life is dependent upon the negotiation of dual roles, the influence of the workplace, the role of the partner, and the continued presence of emotional and practical consequences. We conclude with a number of recommendations for future policies and research.

## Data and Methodology

The qualitative data reported in this paper is from an ESF funded study on work-life balance policy in the UK and Netherlands, which was conducted primarily in 2005 but also in the spring of 2006.<sup>1</sup> Whilst a significant body of statistical research into work-life balance issues exists (DTI, 2003; EOC, 2004; Eurostat, 2005), there is relatively little qualitative research looking into women's negotiations of work and family life. The evidence discussed in this paper therefore represents an in-depth perspective on women's experiences. Firstly, the paper is based on 67 in-depth interviews with working mothers

in the UK. These were both face to face and telephone interviews lasting between one and three hours. In addition three focus groups with lone parents, public sector workers and private sector workers took place in the UK. The UK sample includes women working in a variety of occupations, in the private, public and voluntary sectors (see Table 1). A majority of the women work full-time, meaning more than 30 hours a week (62 per cent) and the remaining 38 per cent work part-time (30 hours or less). Nineteen of the women interviewed were working in managerial positions. The majority of the women in the UK were married or living with partners, with 25 per cent of the women divorced or separated from partners or identifying themselves as being lone mothers.

Research in the Netherlands was carried out to investigate possible best practices in work-life policy. Although the Dutch data stems from a smaller sample, it offers a surprisingly similar comparison to the UK case. 16 in-depth interviews were undertaken with policy-makers, academics and trade unionists and employers. Also, four focus groups were conducted with 14 working mothers, including women employed in both the public and private sectors (see Table 1). The majority of the Dutch sample also worked full-time (64 per cent), with 36 per cent of the sample working 30 hours or less each week. All of the women in the Dutch sample worked full-time prior to having children but most reduced their hours when returning to work after childbirth, therefore the average workweek of the Dutch sample is 28 hours a week. All of the women in the Dutch sample were either married or living with a partner.

The distribution of our sample deviates in some ways from typical female working patterns in both countries, including the amount of full-time workers in both samples. We discuss the prevalence of part-time work in the next section, which helps

place our sample in a broader context of employment patterns typical for both countries. The samples used for this research are not intended to be statistically representative extrapolations from the wider population of either country. Rather, the data presented here provide a much-needed in-depth exploration of women's everyday work-life balance experiences. Finally, we note that, particularly in the UK, many policy changes have taken place following our data collection in 2005 and 2006. Whilst we mention these policy changes in the text, the women interviewed were not affected by the majority of these changes, a point we discuss in relation to our findings below.

### Work-life Balance

The decline of nuclear families, the increase in women's labour market participation and the shift to post-Fordist employment are three developments that have clearly caused a shift in policy discussions towards work-life issues. These developments have led to what some commentators have termed a 'crisis of care' (Fraser, 1994). With the decline of the nuclear family, we can no longer assume that care tasks will be absorbed within the family. Likewise, European welfare states, such as the UK, which are based on a family wage/male breadwinner ideal which no longer exists in post industrial labour markets, are not equipped to respond to caring needs. Moreover, we have witnessed a shift to post-Fordist labour markets, where increased flexibility is demanded and the labour market careers of workers have become increasingly transitional (Schmid, 2006).

These developments have occurred alongside the increase in female labour market participation from the 1970s onwards. As a result of household and demographic

changes, as well as the rise in education levels, more and more women continued to take part in paid employment, but more importantly remained in paid employment, even after marrying or having children. In the UK, as well as in the Netherlands, women's employment has greatly increased during the last decades, but despite this seemingly positive development, the labour market situation for women in both countries leaves much room for improvement.

In the UK, women's labour market participation is 70 per cent compared to men's participation, which is 83 per cent (OECD, 2007), with 73 per cent of mothers with children under 16 in paid work (EOC, 2007). However, 40 per cent of British women work part-time (OECD, 2007), many of whom are working mothers. The status of jobs for women working part-time is more likely to be of a lower level with 25 per cent of part-time women workers in occupations indicating a lower level of educational achievement (Manning & Petrongola, 2005). Walby and Olsen (2002) conclude that many women suffer downward mobility on return to part-time work after having children, including an average drop in earnings of 16 per cent. This situation is exacerbated for lone parents and low-income families who face additional barriers to balancing home and work responsibilities (DTI, 2003).

In the Netherlands, women's labour market participation is currently 69 per cent (OECD, 2007), and 62 per cent of mothers with children 16 or under work, a ten per cent increase since 1995 (Portegijs et al., 2006). But high employment rates among women mask the fact that most of this is part-time work; nearly two thirds (61 per cent) of Dutch women work part-time (OECD, 2007). Half of Dutch mothers with young children work part-time and only six per cent of mothers with young children works full-time. The

remaining group of mothers with young children does not participate in paid work of more than 12 hours a week (Portegijs et al., 2006). Within Europe, the Netherlands has the most far-reaching legislation to allow and regulate part-time work, putting part-time workers on an even par with full-time workers. Yet Dutch women and mothers are more likely to remain in part-time work over the long term (SCP, 2008; M. Yerkes, 2009, forthcoming).

In both countries, part-time work appears as a strategy for managing work-life balance, a development taking place in many European countries (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007). Interestingly, the authors of the fourth European Working Conditions Survey note that in regards to work-life balance, “while part-time work is increasing, the proportion of workers with atypical schedules remains low” (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007: 92). We note, however, that part-time work has declined slightly in the UK in recent years. Moreover, it can be argued that atypical working hours have become the norm. However, part-time workers remain predominantly female in the UK; women’s share in part-time employment has also declined but remains high at 77 per cent (OECD, 2009). And while part-time work is well-protected in some countries, as is the case with the Netherlands, part-time work often disadvantages women in terms of pay, training and career progression (Dekker, 2007).

Women in both the UK and the Netherlands also continue to take primary responsibility for domestic and caring work - work which continues to lack social and economic value (Crompton, 2006; Fraser, 1994). Policy in both countries continues to frame women as the primary carers (J. Lewis, 2001; Rake, 2001). The Netherlands is characterised by a



combination policy model with a reduced working hours culture, which assumes both partners will take responsibility for work and care. However, the Dutch labour market remains gendered, with a one and a half earner model positioning women as the half earner able to fall back on a male breadwinner if necessary. In contrast, whilst the UK has moved towards a one and half earner model, and working patterns continue to change and evolve, a long hours culture remains in the UK and policy largely continues to assume a residual male breadwinner model (Warren, 2001).

As a response to these changes, governments have worked to increase the availability of work-life policies, to make it easier for individuals to negotiate the boundaries between their work and personal lives. But how are these policies perceived by the people who need them and use them? The discussion below indicates that government policy in the Netherlands and the UK is largely ineffective in addressing the needs of working parents (McKie et al., 2002). Work-life balance policies may help women to manage their dual roles but current policies in the UK and the Netherlands do nothing to encourage men to take up caring.<sup>2</sup> In addition, women's desire to care for their own are not recognised, in what Duncan terms 'the rationality mistake' (Duncan et al., 2003). This refers to the misunderstanding by policy-makers that rather than outsourcing care, individuals often feel they should care and more significantly 'often wish to do so' (Duncan et al., 2003: 310). As the authors point out, this is especially the case in relation to dependent children. According to the authors, in terms of orientations towards work, there is a common policy assumption, backed by this perspective in sociological research (Hakim, 1995, 2000; Kirby, 2003) that people act 'as rational economic man', weighing

up their circumstances in economic terms ‘taking individualistic, cost-benefit type decisions about how to maximise their own personal gain’ (Duncan et al., 2003: 310).

The ineffectiveness of much work-life policy is rooted in the complexity of this policy area. If work-life policies are expanded and extra services are introduced, there is a risk that policy will lose sight of these individual care preferences and women’s desire to take some responsibility for caring themselves. Yet a lack of caring facilities or services can impede women’s labour market participation, making a combination of work and care all the more difficult. This ‘catch-22’ is evident at the organisational level as well. Overly flexible work-life policies at the level of the firm are likely to hamper organisation effectiveness, but a lack of work-life arrangements place often unrealistic demands on parents to organise the day-to-day combination of work and care.<sup>3</sup> As evidence in this article will highlight, policy approaches in both of these countries are surrounded by this ambivalence, which makes it unlikely that they will connect with the reality of individuals’ work-life balance.

In sum, the development of women’s labour market participation in the UK and the Netherlands and the high levels of part-time work suggest an assumption underlying existing policies that women’s part-time income will supplement the male full-time living wage (Smith et al., 1998). Indeed, the fact that women are now economically active but remain primary carers within the domestic sphere questions the proposition that the labour market and the gendered division of labour have been transformed at all. More accurately, perhaps, is the proposition that the male breadwinner model has been slightly modified rather than altered in any significant way (Crompton, 2002). The gendered division of labour persists in positioning women as principal carers, thus women become

available for part-time work – a situation which is something of a ‘vicious circle’, and which is a source of concern for academics writing in this area (O’Reilly & Fagan, 1998).

### Policy Practices and Women’s Lived Realities

Both the UK and the Netherlands have seen an increase in work-life policies in recent years. But these policies often do not connect with women’s realities in balancing work and family life. For the UK, work-life balance and family friendly policies have been central to the Labour government agenda since 1997, with the Government launching a Work Life Balance campaign in 2000. The UK Government has introduced a raft of policies including the Employment Act (2002) the Flexible Working Request, tax credits for working parents, extended schools provision, improved maternity rights and paid paternity leave. Maternity leave in the UK is one of the longest in Europe (with Slovakia and the Czech Republic scoring marginally higher in length of leave) (Plantenga & Remery, 2005). Furthermore, improving childcare provision became a key aspect of UK policy and a main focus of expenditure. Since the research took place, the Work and Families Act (2006) has placed flexible working firmly on the UK policy agenda and has improved maternity and adoption rights and doubled maternity pay in the UK. The Work and Family Act also introduced additional paternity leave and, crucially, extended the flexible working request to carers of adults. The UK has thus moved towards a more supportive rhetoric, with demands for the government to extend flexible working rights to all. However, whilst many family policies were in situ by April 2003, many of the women interviewed felt these policies had had little impact. Moreover, the main legislative changes of the Work and Family Act only affected mothers with babies born

after April 1<sup>st</sup> 2007 thus none of the participants in our research were affected by them. At the time of the research whilst there had been substantial policy changes, ‘family policy ha[d] not become a legitimate and fully institutionalised policy domain’ (Hantrais, 2004: 161). The role of policy was viewed by the women participating in the research as minimal, providing a supportive discourse, but with the onus on individuals to negotiate with employers on a personal level. For example, whilst there is a statutory right to request flexible working for parents, guardians and carers, it is a right to request, rather than an entitlement to work reduced hours, leading commentators to observe that ‘Government is trying to ride two horses: supporting families and minimising regulation’ (Moss, 2001: 11).

Despite the fact that women as primary carers are more likely to use work-life balance policy, the UK data demonstrate women’s lack of awareness of both their entitlement to, and their low level of take up of, both parental leave and the flexible working request. This is supported by Adam (2008) who found that only slightly more than half of all UK employees surveyed were aware of the rights introduced in 2003 to request flexible working.<sup>4</sup> Some women in the UK also said they would be deterred from taking parental leave because it was unpaid. This was a particular issue for lone mothers as the quote below illustrates, and reflects the UK government’s failure to consider the needs and circumstances of single women with children, identified as a common thread running through New Labour family and welfare policy (J. Lewis, 2001; Rake, 2001; Standing, 2001).

That’s fine if you can afford it, if you’ve got a husband or a partner on a good wage [...] but for someone who needed the money there’s no chance you could do it. (Supermarket worker, UK)

Some policies, in particular tax credits, were viewed as positive incentives for women, especially those on low incomes, to remain in employment after childbirth.

If it wasn't for the fact that the child tax credit and working tax credit were paid to me, I certainly couldn't work, I would be stuck on income support. (Civil Servant, UK)

Our findings suggest, however, that UK policy has not yet adequately addressed women's needs and preferences, particularly in the areas of childcare and leave arrangements.

We had nursery vouchers. They made a big thing about free nursery places for 4 year olds, but you try and find them and they are not there. Or if you go to a state nursery, they are only there half 9 till half 11. Who can work that? (IT technician, UK)

I think if you were routinely seen as putting in requests for unpaid leave to cope with children you'd be seen as not being able to cope correctly with putting in place like arrangements to care for your children. (Senior Legal Partner, UK)

In sum, most of the UK women did not feel national policy had any tangible effect.

I suppose I don't feel it having an impact around me. So I suppose I can't say that at a policy level they are trying to do enough, I think in practice I don't notice any big changes as a working parent. (Social Worker, UK)

Policy was seen to lack any real power; women felt it was up to them to resolve work-life issues at the level of the individual. These findings are confirmed by other research, which illustrates that although most employers provide supportive discourses and policies on work-life balance, this does not translate into reality of working practices (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007). As Leitner and Wroblowski have argued, the consistency of work-

life policies is particularly salient, and helps explain the success of work-life policies in Scandinavian countries, for example (2006). In the UK, legislation tends to merely formalise existing informal arrangements within workplaces in regards to flexible working (Fagan, 2003).

In the Netherlands, policies for achieving a better work-life balance have also grown substantially during the last decade. The most well-known Dutch legislation in this area concerns working hours legislation and the Working Hours Adjustment Act (*Wet Aanpassing Arbeidsduur; WAA*). Passed in 2000, the WAA provides employees the right to increase or decrease individual working hours after one year of employment with the same employer, and the request is reversible. In this manner, the Dutch WAA legislation goes beyond the UK policy of a right to request. However, stronger legislation may not necessarily lead to greater take-up; take-up of the right to request in the UK has been higher than in Germany, for example, where flexible working hours legislation goes beyond a right to request (J. Lewis & Campbell, 2007). In the Netherlands, it could be argued that the WAA merely formalized the right to adjust individual working hours; prior to its passage in 2000, nearly two-thirds of employees were able to adjust their working hours within the boundaries of collective labour agreements. Prior to the introduction of working hours legislation, part-time workers were guaranteed pro rata rights and benefits with the adjustment of the Equal Treatment Act in 1996 (Mara Yerkes, 2006).

The Dutch Work and Care Act (*Wet Arbeid en Zorg*), passed in 2001, intended to alleviate work-life balance problems. It included the right to minimal paid paternal leave (two days), unpaid parental leave, paid adoption leave, partially paid short-term care

leave and two days paid urgent leave. This legislation was modified in 2005 to provide individuals with a right to six weeks, unpaid, long-term care leave. More recently, Dutch policy-makers implemented legislation to create an individual savings scheme - the Life Course savings scheme. By participating in this arrangement, individuals save money to finance leave at a later date. Participation is voluntary, as is employer approval, unless individuals have requested to take up a form of statutory leave (parental and long-term care leave). Use of the savings scheme is low; only six per cent of employees made use of the scheme in its introductory year (CBS, 2007). Alongside this individual financing of leave, childcare reforms have also been at the forefront of Dutch policies in recent years. A push to marketize childcare took place in 2005, when a new childcare law came into effect. Eligible parents receive a government subsidy for childcare costs, and since 2007, employers are legally obligated to contribute to employee childcare costs.

Dutch working mothers in our sample are generally well-informed of the myriad of these leave policies, changes to childcare subsidies and their right to adjust working hours.

I did use it [short-term leave]. Of course, for me it's a bit more up close and personal, I have all these arrangements, I promote them myself and tell employees, you know, you can take leave or short-term care leave. I have done it twice myself, short-term care leave, once when he had an ear infection in the middle of the night and the next day I just took a day of care leave. No problem. (Bank Manager, NL)

Yet while most of the women in our sample were aware of paid leave arrangements, they often chose to use fully paid vacation days rather than request paid leave to meet their short-term care needs. These findings are consistent with a study by the Netherlands

Institute for Social Research. The authors find that the most exigent need among individuals is for paid, long-term care leave rather than short-term leave (Luijn & Keuzenkamp, 2004). While Dutch leave policy has improved during the past decade, paid parental leave is often not available and remunerated long-term care leave is only available through the individual Life Course savings scheme, which lacks the flexibility to meet the changing needs of working parents.

Most of the women in the Dutch sample applied a strategy of reduced working hours to meet their work and family life needs. The Dutch data demonstrate that only a third of the women continued to work full-time following childbirth and the take-up of leave arrangements depends greatly on whether or not remunerated leave is available.

I read in our CLA [collective labour agreement] that there would be a leave arrangement, parental leave, well, I'm going to take that. Turns out it's unpaid, I think that's unacceptable. The [company] made a choice to reserve a budget for older employees and not for younger parents. (Teacher, NL)

Dutch mothers' consistent take-up of their right to adjust working hours can be problematic. Not only does an adjustment of working hours often equate to part-time work, thereby leading to long-term disadvantages associated with this working form (Mara Yerkes, 2006), part-time work is often not as flexible as one might think. As one expert explains,

In a situation where an individual decides to work fewer hours because they want to combine caring for their children with a paid job, it will do nothing to help the situation if their employer says they can have Mondays off even though they need Tuesdays off because the crèche is closed. This is an area of the law that remains vague. (Expert interview, NL)



In sum, the availability of work-life policies has increased in both the UK and the Netherlands. Policies in both countries are aimed at increasing leave arrangements, improving childcare and creating flexible working possibilities. Levels of satisfaction with work-life balance and working hours are fairly high and comparable in the UK and Netherlands (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007), however this varies by sector and social class, with those women in managerial positions working longer hours and more likely to report their jobs interfering with their family lives (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006). Awareness of policies is high in the Netherlands, although the use of leave policies differs across education levels (SCP, 2006). In the UK, awareness of policies is more problematic (Adam, 2008). Yet in both countries many women explained that they do not make use of the policies available because, in particular, leave is unpaid and childcare is expensive and difficult to arrange—in other words, many existing policies do not meet their needs. Improved leave arrangements and childcare, more tailored to the changing needs and preferences of working parents could go a long way in addressing these problems. We discuss these policy recommendations further in the concluding section.

Alongside changes necessary at the national level, some evidence suggests that employer-level policy may also be effective. A qualitative study by Larsen (2004) on the work and care strategies of European families shows that the availability of flexible working hours with an employer makes it easier to share caring responsibilities. Nevertheless, women's work-life balance is not only affected by the availability of employer-level arrangements, but also by the organisational culture and whether a culture supportive of taking up work-life policies is present (Bond, 2004). British research shows

that workplace cultures where few employees work flexibly foster the belief amongst career conscious women [and men] that flexible working, in particular reducing hours and taking a pay cut, is seen as a lack of seriousness and commitment to their career (O'Brien & Shemilt, 2003; Warin et al., 1999).

### Lived Experiences

In this section, we provide an in-depth look at women's lived experiences, which reveal markedly similar experiences amongst Dutch and UK women. One of the most important findings is that women from both countries overwhelmingly expressed that they experience work-life balance as a process, not a static one-time moment. And within this process, there is a constant battle between balance and conflict due to women's dual roles as carers and employees. As one UK interviewee explains,

We do always feel we are sort of juggling the next six months, you know sort of constantly changing the arrangements just to sort of cope...But there are times when it just falls apart. (Business Analyst, UK)

Effective work-life balance policy needs to recognise how carers' circumstances change across time, an issue not addressed in UK and Dutch policies. As one Dutch woman explains,

I've made all kinds of career moves in my 'previous life' and now I'm making some as well...that chasing that I did is gone now that I have kids, it's going well, but it's hard going through certain phases (Teacher, NL)

In this manner, our results are in line with the critique given by McKie et al. (2002), who argue that UK policy frames work-life balance issues too narrowly. Policy does not address that women's circumstances can change in both the short and long term; women negotiate and renegotiate boundaries between work and care as children get older and support networks and employment change.

Whilst, as stated earlier, most women in our study resolved work-life balance issues on a personal level, employer flexibility, was however, effective in facilitating this for many women (see Wattis et al., 2006). Yet while we find that employer flexibility helped some women achieve a better work-life balance, workplace cultures often conflated the difficulties of managing dual roles. More importantly, informal workplace cultures can hinder access to policy (Bond, 2004).

In the UK, the long hours culture is especially problematic. For some women the extensive flexibility available in their workplace was offset by heavy workloads and employer and client-led flexibility, which led to long working hours. Thus, for some women, flexibility became a way of managing a long hours culture, rather than facilitating work-life balance as the quote below illustrates:

On average I work 45-50 hours [a week]. Sometimes more depending on a deadline and usually over the whole month you try to pan it out so you don't do more than 50 hours in a week [but] I work from home, I've got meetings scheduled, but if I couldn't make the meetings I can dial in on teleconference. I plan my own week. (IT/Business Outsourcing Consultant, UK)

Conversely, the Netherlands is characterised by a reduced hours culture. Within this reduced hours culture, the workplace is often still structured around full-time

employees, a situation that causes stress and problems for women in balancing their work and family lives. As one Dutch woman explains, the Dutch reduced hours culture can clash with workplace cultures of presenteeism in the Netherlands, which affects the way employers and colleagues view the contributions of women working reduced hours:

It's all about the culture that you're in and the 'presenteeism' culture [actual physical presence of employees at work] . . . and that's true, of course. In 32 hours you do just as much as you do in 36 hours. People who work from home do much more than people who work at the office. (Project Manager, NL)

Another interviewee felt that the presenteeism culture led to unfair treatment of women working reduced hours:

We're in an office with about 25 people and there are quite a few women who work part-time and one of the bosses never has a problem with that but the other. . . . If something isn't going right, 'Something's missing, I need a file that can't be found', then it's always the part-timers. . . . It's so hypocritical to always blame the part-timers when it could just as easily have been a full-timer who had a day off. (Notary Worker, NL)

Within the employment sphere, the influence of workplace and employer flexibility is clearly visible. However, it is often taken as given that women will integrate care with work (McKie et al., 2002) and that their work is more open to disruption than men's. Consequently, men have a more straightforward relationship with paid work than women:

Mostly, I think I sometimes feel a bit resentful that he has the flexibility to stay late when he needs to and I don't, you know I think of days where it gets to five to three and I think I wish I could just finish this report or get this piece of work done and I can't so I occasionally might take things home or you know, more likely I'll take it home and then

not get round to doing it and bring it back again the next morning so I feel slightly resentful. (Social Worker, UK)

Work-life balance is more straightforward for women who have access to flexible care such as good informal support from relatives, most frequently grandparents, and those who can afford private wraparound care such as *au pairs* and nannies. However, this is dependent on financial circumstances and arbitrary availability and, therefore, should not be treated as a general solution. Where women lack such support, partners and working hours become central to work-life balance. For instance, equal division of childcare between partners and good informal support may alleviate negative workplace pressures with some women working full-time achieving a better balance than women employing the ‘part-time strategy’. If support is absent, coping with care and work can be problematic, even if employers are flexible and accommodating. For example, women whose partners were more actively involved were much more positive about their work-life balance.

There is no way I could’ve done it without [husband]. Because he, I mean I take [daughter] even now to the childminders in the morning and [husband] picks her up in the evening. So if I need to stay later I can and that works really well. It means we have breakfast together in the morning... And then in the evenings she comes home and [husband] and her have dinner together and I come in and she’s going to bed so we spend some time together and I see a bit of her in the morning. So it’s not perfect but it works for us. (Credit Policy Manager, UK)

But for some women, the role of the partner created conflict rather than positively influencing their work-life balance.

That was one of the reasons why we split up. The responsibility was with me whether I liked it or not. (Events Organiser, UK)

The stresses and conflicts of working and childcare are more extreme if women are divorced or separated from partners. For instance, whereas two parents can divide pick-ups and drop offs and take advantage of flexible working, lone parents have to work within standard hours more rigidly in order to be compatible with nursery or school hours. However, UK findings show that if women had access to good informal support, they could cope more effectively than some partnered women. Support from former partners varied, but many women talked about a lack of practical and financial support. Most women felt that childcare was primarily their responsibility and that they could not rely on former partners for any tangible help. When partners were separated, gendered care responsibilities appeared to be reinforced more acutely:

I think this is the problem. You shouldn't just be dividing costs, you should be dividing responsibility. There are five working days in a week. [Mother] is responsible for five of those. And he is not responsible for any of those. I have that problem when my mum is sick. I phone him up and say, 'Can you take a day off?' 'No'. 'All right then.' I have to then, it always comes down to you, the mother. (Marketing Assistant, UK)

Another important finding in our study is that the continued negotiation between work and personal life has both emotional and practical consequences for working mothers. Feelings of guilt towards both spheres — employment and the family — were often evident. As one woman explains, for her the most important thing is: *because I*

*have done the right thing by my children (Manager, NL).* But having the idea that one is ‘doing the right thing’ does not remove feelings of guilt.

I like my work but I always have the feeling that if I’m here then I want to be at home.

And if I’m at home I should be at work. (Teacher, NL)

Attempts to reconcile these emotions with individual reality reflect the process of work-life balance for most women.

I will go through periods where I beat myself up big time where I think I’m the most horrendous parent and get really down. Generally though, I have a balance but I can lose the plot at home every now and then. . . (Outreach Worker, UK)

The difficulty of some women’s emotional reconciliation reflects the fact that policies bestow little attention to the diversity of women’s needs and preferences as carers. Although women are expected to care, they are also expected to work (McKie et al., 2002) with New Labour policy discourses in the UK and current government discourses in the Netherlands emphasising the value of paid work. Subsequently, the needs of women who want to care for their children rather than take part in paid employment become less salient as a policy issue (Duncan et al., 2003):

I enjoy the job I am doing in the sense you’ve got to be doing something you like to do.

Because I would much rather be at home looking after my little girl than sending her off for someone else to look after. And I think there is a lot of guilt around it as well – you do feel guilty going to work. I leave late in the morning, my partner takes my daughter to my sister-in-law’s, and some mornings she has little tears in her eyes as I’m waving her off and I think ‘Oh God, I have to go to work and leave you’. And I know she’s alright when she gets there, but it’s just that you do feel guilty. Have I had

a child to give her away to somebody else and get them to look after them? (Project Co-ordinator, UK )

The process of work-life balance is an ongoing, complex juggling act, one which leaves many women feeling stressed and guilty, as employees, wives and mothers. While work-life policy availability may have increased in an attempt to help women and men balance paid work and personal lives, underlying assumptions of the division of care, informal workplace cultures and a lack of recognition of the changing dynamic nature of work-life balance means policies are often disconnected with the everyday lives of working mothers.

## Conclusions

Policy initiatives addressing work-life balance can be effective in helping women to progress in the workplace. However, policies created at the national level do not always connect with the day to day experiences of women combining work and family life. Despite an expansion of work-life policies in both countries, our data demonstrate that many women in both the UK and the Netherlands still resolve these issues at the individual/personal level and feel that policy has not impacted on their lives in any tangible way. The everyday experiences of women in these countries brings to the forefront the dilemma of work-life policies: a lack of policies often means problems of combining work and care, but an abundance of work-life policies can hinder individual opportunities to care, thereby disregarding individual caring preferences. However, the ambivalent approach of some policies for combining work and care, such as providing unpaid leave, has proven just as problematic, as this policy approach does not meet the



needs of individual parents. Childcare policy, while improved in both countries, is viewed as inadequate by the respondents—both in terms of availability and cost. Current policy is largely driven by the business agenda or the desire for increased labour market participation. In contrast, the data presented here highlight the need for a wider cultural and socio-economic shift in policy, practice and attitudes to work–life balance and women’s progression.

Our data indicate women’s choices in regard to balancing work and family life are shaped by a number of factors, including their negotiation of dual roles, the role of the partner, the role of the workplace, and the interplay between everyday reality and individual emotions. The choices individuals make in balancing work and family life are not a simple reflection of a straightforward preference towards work or care. The data from both countries reveal a dynamic process of work-life balance, with women’s needs and preferences changing across time. The dynamic nature of combining work and care is clearly a problem for policy, which, in many cases, is not formulated to contend with these ever-changing needs and preferences. Policy at the level of the firm could be helpful in this regard. Organisations can address the individual needs of their employees and create an environment conducive to the take-up of work-life arrangements. However, without a supportive workplace environment, employer-led flexibility also has its limitations. As we saw with the UK data, use of workplace flexibility often meant accepting heavy workloads and working longer hours. The UK long hours culture and intensification of the pace of work is a source of dissatisfaction with work-life balance, leaving women in ‘time poor’ households (C. Lewis, 2000; Taylor, 2001). In contrast, in

the Netherlands, the overabundant reduced hours culture led to perceptions of unfair treatment of women in the workplace.

Policy in both the UK and the Netherlands endorses formal equality rather than a substantive reformulation of gender regimes. It operates within a male model of work that serves to reinforce gender roles where women are framed as principal caregivers who must juggle work and family as best they can and fails to ‘challenge structural inequalities’ (Guerrina, 2002: 63) remaining inextricably linked to caring and the ‘mommy track’, thereby leaving women at a disadvantage. In the UK, New Labour discourses relate participating in paid work to being a ‘good citizen’. In addition, the legacy and influence of the ideology of the male breadwinner model is still prevalent, which frames men and women in particular roles, with care roles primarily associated with women. In the Netherlands, our ‘best practices’ case, caring preferences and childcare policy still leave caring roles as predominantly women’s responsibilities.

Without recognition of the interconnected relationship between work and family, the need to fully accommodate working parents and a reformulation of gender roles, reconciling work and family remains problematic in both practical and emotional terms. Work-life policy needs to be attuned to these complexities. First of all, governments can ensure that parents are entitled to sufficient paid leave opportunities and that good quality childcare is available. Studies have shown that 20-30 weeks of paid leave is optimal for women, allowing them time to care without experiencing significantly negative labour market consequences in the long term (Koopmans, 2007; Ruhm, 1998). Moreover, a fully paid individual right to parental leave can act as an incentive for men to take on some caring duties. UK research demonstrates that men are less likely than women to accept

arrangements to facilitate work-life balance if it involves a loss of income and fathers with young children in the UK are more likely to work long hours than men of an equivalent age without children (O'Brien & Shemilt, 2003). Providing affordable, good quality wraparound childcare, on the other hand, can make it easier for men and women to organise work and care when mothers return to the labour market following childbirth. Crompton and Lyonette (2006) argue that work-life stress is lowest in countries where there are policies to support dual-earner families and work-life balance; these include flexible work opportunities and good childcare provision, but also policies which encourage men to assume a larger share of care and domestic work. Some UK researchers also question if there is a contradiction in policy between incentives to increase women's participation in the labour market (especially in relation to single parents) and the policy objective to improve work-life balance (Jamieson & Morton, 2005).

Governments can also work more closely with employers on the issue of work-life balance. It is essential that policy meet the needs of parents but governments must contend with the needs of businesses as well. Collaboration between government and employers can help create more tailored solutions for businesses and employees. Governments can also create incentives for employers to make workplaces more conducive to combining paid work and family life and can provide incentives that encourage the adoption of gender-neutral arrangements within firms. Employers too need to consider effective ways of communicating information on entitlements to employees.

There is a need for 'joined up' policy across the life course, particularly in terms of parental and care leave policies, but also in terms of fiscal support and the regulation

of working hours. There is a need to develop policies which do not penalise employees struggling to reconcile the demands of work, the economy and personal life. Moreover, reconciling paid work and family life 'means more than the increasing opportunities at work agenda; it should imply a redistribution of work and status between women and men, that is changing the gender contract' (Duncan, 2002: 307).

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<sup>1</sup> European Social Fund Objective 3 funded project 'Combining Work and Family Life: removing the barriers to women's progression', based at Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

<sup>2</sup> A small number of countries, including Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland have created so-called 'daddy quotas' to encourage fathers to take an active role in caring for children (Ellingsaeter, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

<sup>4</sup> This awareness varied according to workplace sector, trade unionisation and age of children.



Table 1: Data on the UK and Dutch samples

	<b>UK Sample</b>	<b>Dutch Sample</b>
<i>N</i>	75	14
<i>Age Range</i>	27-50 years old	30-52 years old
<i>Average Age</i>	38.3	37.9
<i>Sector</i>	Private: 38 Public: 28 Voluntary: 10	Private: 8 Public: 6 Voluntary: none
<i>Average number of children</i>	1.9	2
<i>Range of working hours</i>	14-50 hours/week	24-40 hours/week
<i>Average working hours</i>	30.4 hours/week	28.4 hours/week