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Marriage and gender inequality: work–family arrangements of Portuguese and British highly qualified women

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This article examines work–family reconciliation processes in order to understand if, over the course of marital life, women become socially closer or further away from their partner. Drawing on work–life interviews with highly qualified women in Portugal and Britain, we compare these processes in two societies with different historical and social backgrounds. Findings reveal three main configurations of social (in)equality which emerge during married life: growing inequality in favour of the man, in favour of the woman or equality between spouses. With due attention to the importance of national specific factors, we present three main conclusions. First, (in) equality is built up over the course of marital life and female strategies for reconciling family and work are at the core of this process. Second, the national specificities can mould the effects of cross-national gender mechanisms. Third, the intersection between cross-cultural phenomena such as conservative attitudes towards domestic work and national specificities (such as the availability of part-time options) is a rather complex process which needs further research.

Keywords: work–family conflict; gender; class; division of labour; dual-earner couples

Cet article examine les processus de l'articulation entre vie familiale et vie professionnelle afin de comprendre si, au cours de la vie conjugale, les conjoints deviennent socialement plus proches ou plus distants. Utilisant des entretiens approfondis avec des femmes ayant un niveau de qualification élevé, au Portugal et en Grande-Bretagne, l'article compare ces processus dans deux sociétés ayant des contextes historiques et sociaux différents. Les résultats révèlent trois configurations principales de l'(in)égalité sociale émergeant pendant la vie conjugale: l'inégalité croissante qui favorise l'homme; l'inégalité qui favorise la femme; et l'égalité entre conjoints. En ce qui concerne l'importance des facteurs spécifiquement nationaux, l'article présente trois grandes conclusions. Premièrement, l'(in)égalité se construit au cours de la vie conjugale, et les stratégies féminines visant à concilier la vie familiale et la vie professionnelle sont au cœur de ce processus. Deuxièmement, les effets transnationaux des mécanismes de genre sont modelés par les spécificités nationales. Troisièmement, l'intersection entre les spécificités nationales (telles que l'option de travailler à temps partiel) et le phénomène transnational (tel que les attitudes face au travail domestique) est un processus complexe qui doit être étudié plus avant.

Mots-clés: conflit travail-famille; genre; classe; division du travail; couples à double revenu

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Introduction

The fulfilment of women's career aspirations usually implies changes in their relationships with other family members. Although women's solutions for balancing work and family do not mean a disinvestment in family life, their commitment to professional life certainly means rethinking traditional female roles (housewife, mother, spouse) associated with gender inequality. Unlike authors who defend an individualistic, cultural perspective and seek to explain these changes through the rational nature of women's decisions (Becker, 1991) or 'lifestyle preferences' (Hakim, 2002), we claim that women's solutions for balancing work and family life are rarely the result of individual choices. Our point is that their decisions are made on the basis of both constraints and opportunities (Crompton, 2006; Crompton & Lyonette, 2008), and are also due to the fact that motherhood and the woman's relationship with the world of paid employment are social constructions (Pfau-Effinger, 1999). We argue that, in view of these 'constrained' solutions for balancing work and family, the social (in)equality that is built up during a couple's life is symptomatic of the ways in which women articulate these constraints on one hand and gender differences on the other. Based on these assumptions, the question arises as to how national specificities can play a role in creating favourable conditions to equality in couple relationships even if women do have different perceptions towards work, career and family life.

In this article, we focus on the contribution that marriage makes to gender differentiation via the functioning of marital life in two different countries. In order to understand if, over the course of marital life, women become socially closer or further away from their partner, our main goal is to examine work–family reconciliation of those who are highly qualified since they have more educational resources and hence are more able to exercise their work choices. We pinpoint the specific characteristics of these processes in Portugal and Britain, which are considered to be societies with historical and social specificities, both from the point of view of gender and of welfare and the labour market. The contexts in which individuals and families make decisions about work and family are quite distinct in these two countries (Lyonette, Crompton, & Wall, 2007), since they represent different levels of wealth and have experienced contrasting developments in the fields of family and gender policies and of the job market and employment.

In Portugal, work–family policies have been developed in a context where full-time dual-earner couples are the predominant model. During the 1960s Portuguese women were forced to find a job due to male emigration and the colonial war (1961–1974), and since the 1974 Revolution there has been a growing level of full-time work for women. Therefore, the low incidence of part-time work appears to be connected to a context which combines a 'strong work ethic concerning women's employment' (Wall, 2007b, p. 37) and the considerable increase in standard of living which comes with two full-time incomes. Portuguese women continue to work full-time in the most critical phases of the family life cycle, and it is more qualified, married women with school-age children who are least likely to stop working during the different family transitions (Wall & Guerreiro, 2005). The prevalence of full-time employment of mothers with small children has a stronger linkage to a leave policy model based on an *early return to full-time work* and gender equality principles (Wall, 2007b). A short, highly compensated, post-natal leave (120 or 150 days) is complemented by service provision policies and by several gender-neutral entitlements to take time off (Wall & Leitão, 2012).

In Britain, the ‘one and a half earner’ family is the predominant model for the division of paid labour in couples with children. This family model reflects a ‘modified’ version of the male breadwinner pattern. Part-time work is ‘recognizably *the* way of reconciling work and family’ (Lewis, Campbell, & Huerta, 2008, p. 25) and evidence has shown that British women like part-time work and flexibility in their working hours (Scott & Dex, 2009). This is especially important when male partners are working long hours, as they do in the UK (Biggart & O’Brien, 2009). Forty-five per cent of working British women currently work reduced hours, representing one of the highest levels of part-time work for women in Europe and the OECD countries. Because of the limited part-time options available in highly skilled jobs, many women compromise by crowding into lower-level jobs (Grant, Yeandle, & Buckner, 2005), although research has demonstrated that professional and managerial women are more able to exercise their ‘personal “choices”’ with regard to work–family articulation (Crompton & Lyonette, 2008). The high part-time employment of mothers is strongly connected to a *short leave part-time mother policy model* (Wall, 2007b). Statutory maternity leave provides high compensation (90% of previous earnings) for only six weeks followed by an additional lower amount for 33 weeks. The UK has often been described as a market-oriented or liberal welfare regime with a flexible, de-regulated labour market. Publicly funded childcare services are underdeveloped, and the family and the market remain the major social spheres for care.

Although our comparative analysis of the relation between marriage and gender inequality focuses on factors relating to family dynamics such as marital negotiation and solutions to reconcile work–family demands, these internal variables are by no means unaffected by family policies and the labour market context.

Marriage and (in)equality: theoretical considerations

Sociological research has questioned the widespread belief that choice of spouse is detached from social constraints and has shown that marriage plays a fundamental part in the crystallisation of social cleavages by homogamy. The decisive importance of social proximity when beginning marital life, which has been confirmed by the prevalence of homogamic marriages, is a common feature of all research conducted in societies that have undergone changes in terms of family demographics or socio-professional structures (Birkelund & Heldal, 2003; Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Bozon & Héran, 1987; Girard, 1964/1981; Kalmijn, 1994; Rosa, 2005; Widmer, Kellerhals, & Levy, 2003). However, there are few authors (Delphy & Leonard, 1992; Rosa, 2013; Singly, 1987) who question the fact that the analysis of the role of marriage in social differentiation is invariably limited to the start of marital life, while ignoring the functioning of marital life and family transitions in increasing social distance between partners. We argue that examining social distance in the couple at the beginning of marital life gives too limited a view of the role of marriage in the formation of social differences and especially social inequalities between men and women. Individuals’ positioning in the socio-professional structure, their career aspirations and especially the fulfilment of these aspirations are not impervious to family dynamics and transitions, and in particular to the complexities underlying the articulation of work and family life.

Bearing in mind the way in which gender inequalities permeate the work and family spheres, in spite of changes in attitudes and behaviours, we can posit that the effects of getting married often take the form of different occupational destinations for men and women. We further propose a dynamic approach that regards the social distance between

spouses as a *process* that occurs beyond the formation of the couple and look at the ways in which different factors interact and intervene in this process. Due to this focus on ascertaining the contribution that marriage makes to gender differentiation via the functioning of marital life, social distance between partners will be addressed in a dynamic perspective (Rosa, 2013).

In order to analyse the (in)equality processes which take place in the different transitions of married life, we focus on division of labour. This area is crucial in transformation or reproduction of gender norms. The traditional model of the male breadwinner/female caregiver has declined in most European countries and the number of full- or part-time working women has grown. Although in Portugal, the full-time dual-earner model is predominant, women still have less continuous, more differentiated work pathways than men with various combinations of full-time work, staying at home and sometimes working part-time (Wall & Guerreiro, 2005). In Britain the 'one and a half earner' family is the prevalent model for the division of paid labour in couples with children (Lyonette, 2012), and women are increasingly more likely to work part-time or not at all according to how many children they have (Labour Force Survey, 2013). Nonetheless, in both countries the family division of paid labour is coupled with a traditional pattern concerning domestic labour, with women retaining primary responsibility for childcare and housework. This clearly constrains *all* women, even those in well-paid and highly qualified jobs, in their decisions regarding work and care.

Studies have observed more receptive male attitudes towards housework sharing (Wall, 2007a), suggesting the permeability of cultural models of masculinity to the transformations in gender relations (Lorga, forthcoming). However, in practice, there is little change on the domestic front. The impact of changes in the division of paid work on the division of housework is not linear, as women's independence – due to increasing female employment – and the demands of a full- or part-time job have not resulted in significant changes in the division of housework (Lewis, 2001; Press & Townsley, 1998). Between the notions of division of housework – childcare and domestic work – and the notions of delegation – cleaner, nanny, nursery, outsourcing services, network of family members – it is more often women who have to question their career aspirations and reformulate or adjust their employment plans in accordance with the family logistics. This pattern of the family division of labour reflects the discrepancy between egalitarian attitudes and the asymmetric practices that many studies continue to find (Wall, 2007a). This incongruity also questions the principles of economic (Becker, 1991), rationalistic (Blood & Wolfe, 1960), normative (West & Zimmerman, 1987) or subjectivist theories (Hakim, 2002). In this paper we take a comprehensive approach that focuses on the constraints, negotiations and different interests that intervene in the family division of labour (Crompton, 2006; Moen, 2003).

Our study combines the interactionist perspective and a critical approach of interactional order. Studies on family interaction (Kellerhals, Perrin, Steinauer-Cresson, Vonèche, & Wirth, 1982; Widmer et al., 2003) have clearly shown the complexities between the family division of work arrangements and marital dynamics. In the analysis of female strategies for reconciling family and work, it is essential to look at some aspects of marital dynamics since the different forms of commitment and availability for paid work cannot be dissociated from the logics of interdependence and availability for paid work cannot be dissociated from the logics of interdependence that relativise the independence of the spouses' careers (Nicole-Drancourt, 1989). Marital interdependence goes hand in hand with tensions between the family's collective interests and individual independence, and these tensions are particularly challenging in dual-earner/career

couples. In this article, we focus on negotiation and communication, paying special attention to how normative power operates in order to produce gender inequality (Björnberg, 2004).

On the other hand, the specificity of the interaction order can be understood only by taking into account the partner's positions and dispositions, as well as the situational-interactive dimension (Mouzelis, 1995) of what is at stake at each stage of family life. This critical approach leads to three assumptions. First, roles or social positions are embedded in rules and normative expectations. Second, social skills are acquired in often diverse socialisation processes and cannot be reduced to what is at stake in each interaction context. Finally, the ways in which a partner applies norms in her/his decisions are as complex as they are dependent on more structural constraints or opportunities which can vary throughout social and cultural contexts.

In this article, we postulate that the solutions women find in order to articulate work and family roles are a crucial gateway for the analysis of gender (in)equality within the couple. In order to capture the nature of these solutions we have formulated the concept of strategies for reconciling family and work. The female strategies for reconciling family and work can be briefly defined as the result of woman's attitudes towards the division of labour and partner's career. Nonetheless, we shall clarify two major theoretical assumptions underlying this concept.

First, strategies for reconciling family and work reflect the solutions that women find for balancing work and family life and are therefore the result of the choices that they make on the basis of their normative orientations (Lyonette, 2012) with regard to their stake in a career, availability for motherhood and the family, and eventual priority given to their partner's career. In spite of the change in women's identity – which for a long time was defined solely by their position in the family – they are still the centre of the family economy and have to develop solutions for articulating work and family life. However, if we presume that family members may have contradictory individual plans, one of the perhaps most marked aspects of the divergence of interests in a working couple lies in the fact that, for the woman, a career may be an aspiration to fulfil herself in another way (Commaile, 1993). This translates into personal construction of a relationship with family and work which the 'doing gender' theory finds it difficult to explain (Deutsch, 2007).

Second, strategies for reconciling family and work are not the same as logical or rational projections, which would be reflected in a set of individual choices made alone and therefore not related to identity legacies or the contexts of marital and social interaction. In fact, women's strategies are based on commitments and compromises, norms and values that make us reject the idea of a choice unconnected to social and cultural constraints.¹ Choices actually are conditioned by axiological beliefs that take the form of values and cognitive beliefs that manifest themselves in representations of social reality. Women's strategies are therefore far from being the result of conjugal negotiation purely based on the individuals' different resources, as Blood and Wolfe (1960) claimed, since they involve rationalities which cannot be explained by resources alone. If women do not merely use their skills in accordance with an economic principle of maximising the family collective (Becker, 1991), we should not assume that they act in accordance with a subjective notion of individual maximisation, as espoused by theories that underestimate the impacts of social and normative contexts (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Burgess & Locke, 1945/1963; Hakim, 2002) – but rather in negotiation with others in the context of a relatively flexible moral framework (Björnberg & Kollind, 2005; Crompton, 2006). The

concept of strategies for reconciling family and work is therefore far from any theory that separates subjectivity from the objective conditions imposed on their constitution.

Data and methods

From an analysis of Portuguese and British women's work–life biographies a diversity of experiences regarding the articulation of employment demands and family obligations emerged. By analysing how work–family articulation is experienced, we could use the work–life biographies to identify the processes underlying the (in)equality produced over marital life, and to examine the interference of national specificities in these processes.

Our analytical strategy was conceived in two stages. In a first stage, a typological approach was used in order: to identify the different configurations of inequality between spouses emerging from the interviews; and to identify the different female solutions for reconciling work and family needs. The construction of the different types of marital pathways was based on a descriptive analysis of both partners' work pathways over the marital lifecourse. The different female solutions for reconciling family and work found are, instead, a result of the conceptualisation exercise upon the women's decisions made in crucial moments of their work–life pathways. From the observation of attitudes towards division of labour and male career emerged the strategies for reconciling family and work.

In a second stage, and in order to support the core arguments in this paper, biographical matching pairs have been presented and examined. This further in-depth analysis of gender (in)equality within the couple enabled us to identify the processes underlying the solutions for reconciling work and family. This methodological procedure enabled us to grasp how the specific national context influences the processes of gender (in)equality within the couple. The biographical matching was the comparative strategy used. Six Portuguese and British work–life biographies were selected. The main factors used in matching cases were the following: age; attitude towards division of labour; and attitude towards partner's career.

We focus on a qualitative analysis of 57 in-depth interviews, which enabled us to reconstitute the universes of meaning that family and work have for highly qualified women. Our aim was to encourage a number of women to talk about their *choices* with regard to their family life, job and career aspirations and particularly about the way they meet the demands to balance work and family. We examine these issues drawing on a comparative analysis of 27 interviews in Portugal and 30 interviews in Britain. The work–life interviews came from two projects – carried out in Portugal and Britain – covering broadly similar topics: work and career; work and family life; division of domestic labour; conjugal negotiation.²

Explicit criteria were used in selecting the two corpuses. The criteria of respondents' *schooling* (degree) and *occupation* (qualified) were governed by our goal of picking socio-professional situations more favourable to career progression (Lorga, 1999) and therefore particularly demanding for work–family balance. The criteria of *marital profile* (in a conjugal relationship) and *parental profile* (with school-age children) had to do with our purpose of observing commitments between marital dynamics and the demands of motherhood and the parent–children relationship. The *age criterion* (30–54) was selected to ensure the inclusion of women at a particularly demanding stage of the family life cycle.

All women have a degree and fall into the category of Professionals and Managers. The largest age group is 40–49 and almost all were married (either in a civil or religious marriage). Most respondents have two children, although a little over one-fifth of the Portuguese respondents had only one child, in comparison with one-third of the British respondents.

Results

Our qualitative data reflect the considerable differences between women's working status in the two countries. Among all the interviewees, only one Portuguese woman works long part-time hours. Ten British interviewees worked part-time or long part-time hours, and one interrupted her work path due to work–life conflict. Despite these differences between the countries, the analysis confirms the cross-cultural nature of gender mechanisms. On the one hand, very few interviewees totally share the domestic work. On the other, social distance that emerges between partners over the course of marital life often favours the man. In fact, the hypergamic marital pathway was the most observed among all the interviewees: we found 16 Portuguese and 15 British women with this pathway. The second marital pathway observed – homogamy – is characterised by social proximity between spouses. Seven Portuguese and nine British women have this pathway. The third marital pathway observed – hypogamic – is characterised by emerging social distance in favour of the woman. Four Portuguese and six British women have this pathway.

Finally, results reveal four different female strategies for reconciling family and work (Table 1). The family-oriented strategy was found between those women who give priority to partner's career and whose attitude towards the division of labour is governed by norms. Among all the interviewees, we found nine Portuguese and six British women with this strategy. The maximalist strategy was found among those women who give precedence to partner's career yet making compromises alone in order to maximise their stakes in career and family life. We found six Portuguese and nine British women with this strategy. The conflict management strategy was found among those who do not concede precedence to partner's career, having already a propensity to negotiate the division of labour in order to reach a work–family conflict resolution. We found eight Portuguese and eight British women with this strategy. The mutual balancing strategy was found among those who do not give precedence to their partners' career and actually seek to share all the domestic work. We found four Portuguese and seven British women with this strategy.

Table 1. Four female strategies for reconciling family and work.

Strategy for reconciling family and work	Family-oriented	Maximalist	Conflict management	Mutual balancing
Attitude towards division of labour	Governed by gender norms	One-sided compromise	Propensity to negotiate	Negotiation
Attitude towards partner's career	Male career takes precedence	Male career takes precedence	Neither career takes precedence	Neither career takes precedence

If we take into account all the interviews, the fact that there are more British than Portuguese women, or vice versa, with a specific strategy does not obviously allow us to provide a comprehensive overview of women's strategies for reconciling family and work. This actually is not the aim of a qualitative study. As we will observe in the next sections, the biographical matching enables us to disclose that different female strategies are a by-product of how partners negotiate under different structural constraints, including the cultural-national ones.

As the matching procedure was developed after the fieldwork was completed, not all cases could be compared with suitable equivalents. We finally achieved 18 matches (Table 2). Data presented in Table 1 suggest female strategies for reconciling family and work are a crucial indicator of equality in the couples. In all matched pairs, the career precedence between partners, as much as female attitude towards the division of labour, has effects over the course of marital life. Whenever the women concede precedence to their partners' career (MCTP), there is an increasing status occupational distance that favours the man. On the other hand, we didn't find such a marital pathway when neither career takes priority (NCTP). Among all the matches, only three Portuguese and four British interviewees have a stronger career progress than their partners. Lastly, data confirm that the division of domestic work is an area where gender equality is always at stake. If only three Portuguese and three British women equally shared the responsibility for childcare and housework with their partners, we observe that domestic work is rarely shared whenever male career takes precedence.

In the next sections we turn to the processes behind the female strategies, with particular attention to the negotiation between partners and how norms and structural constraints can make the difference in work–family reconciliation. We have selected three matched pairs for the following reasons:

- (1) The three biographical matches illustrate three different strategies for reconciling family and work. Our empirical analysis intends to disclose the processes behind the female strategizing;
- (2) All the matched pairs illustrate the areas of negotiation that are decisive for women to reach a work–family balance;
- (3) All the matched pairs illustrate national specificities and play a role in work–family reconciliation.

When family comes first

The work–life biographies of Amália (P12) and Rachel (M14) illustrate processes of construction of inequality when family life demands have an impact on the female career. Both women are 48 and hold a degree in Medicine. Both had roughly similar occupational positions to their partners when they started living together. And both adapted their career plans to family demands. The two cases highlight the cross-cultural nature of gender mechanisms, but they also suggest differences between gender regimes. Both interviewees prioritise the family and are ready to relinquish their work plans for family obligations call. However, in order to continue working full-time the Portuguese interviewee chose a family-friendly job and delegated to family members or housekeepers much of the domestic work. In contrast, the British interviewee rarely delegated the domestic work while she worked full-time, and then decided to stop working and take on all the childcare and housework herself after a difficult work–family conflict experience.

Table 2. Cross-national comparisons.

Portugal	England	Career precedence between partners	Female attitude towards division of labour ^a	Current domestic responsibility	Marital pathway	Female strategy for reconciling family and work
P12: aged 48; FT doctor in practice; partner long FT surgeon; child 12	M14: aged 48; FT medical consultant (currently n/ working); partner FT barrister; children 10, 7	MCTP	GGN	Self; self	Hypergamic	Family-oriented
P17: aged 41; FT PA senior technician; partner long FT lawyer; children 11, 4	A7: aged 46; PT finance manager; partner FT self-employed businessman; children 17, 15, 10	MCTP	GGN	Self; self	Hypergamic	
P26: aged 34; long PT project manager; partner FT business director; children 7, 5	A8: aged 36; PT accountant; partner FT manager; children 10, 7, 6	MCTP	GGN	Self; self	Hypergamic	
P25: aged 43; FT doctor in practice; partner long FT management consultant; children 15, 13	F4: aged 42; long PT internal audit manager; partner FT marketing manager; children 11, 8	NCTP	GGN	Self; self	Hypergamic; homogamic	
P2: aged 39; FT HR departmental head; partner long FT finance CEO; children 8, 7, 5	A18: aged 36; long PT accounting director; partner FT management consultant; children 4, <1	MCTP	OSC	Self; self	Hypergamic	Maximalist
P9: aged 42; FT university lecturer; partner long FT building company CEO; children 13, 10	M9: aged 40; FT consultant gynaecologist; partner FT consultant cardiologist; children 4, 1	MCTP	OSC	Self; partly shared	Hypergamic	

Table 2 (Continued)

Portugal	England	Career precedence between partners	Female attitude towards division of labour ^a	Current domestic responsibility	Marital pathway	Female strategy for reconciling family and work
P13: aged 36; FT university lecturer; partner long FT self-employed businessman; children 8, 6, 1	M10: aged 40; FT consultant gynaecologist; partner FT HR manager; children 11, 7, 5	MCTP	OSC	Partly shared; self	Hypergamic	
P10: aged 34; FT researcher; partner FT technical sales consultant; children 9, 6, 5	F12: aged 35; long PT senior HR generalist; partner long FT business director; children 3, 1	MCTP	OSC	Partly shared; self	Hypergamic	
P27: aged 32; FT university lecturer; partner FT PA services director; children 8, 2	F18: aged 33; PT relationship manager; partner FT funds manager; child 1	MCTP	PN	Partly shared	Hypergamic	Conflict management
P4: aged 49; FT secondary school teacher; partner FT civil servant; children 11, 8	A14: aged 47; PT finance director; partner FT self-employed businessman; adopted child 3	NCTP	PN	Partly shared	Hypogamic	
P3: aged 40; FT academic researcher; partner FT lawyer; children 14, 11, 7	A4: aged 41; FT audit partner; partner FT managing partner; children 10, 8, 6	NCTP	PN	Shared; self	Hypogamic	
P8: aged 50; FT academic researcher; partner FT academic researcher; child 16	A1: aged 44; long PT tax investigations director; partner FT consultant civil engineer; child 11	NCTP	PN	Partly shared	Homogamic	
P20: aged 45; FT university lecturer; partner FT bank manager; children 19, 11	A3: aged 40; long PT senior business manager; partner FT programme director in banking; child 3, pregnant.	NCTP	PN	Partly shared; self	Homogamic	

Table 2 (Continued)

Portugal	England	Career precedence between partners	Female attitude towards division of labour ^a	Current domestic responsibility	Marital pathway	Female strategy for reconciling family and work
P16: aged 42; FT commercial director; partner FT bank manager; child 16	F23: aged 38; FT project leader; partner intermittent self-employed designer; child 2	NCTP	PN	Partly shared	Homogamic; hypogamic	
P14: aged 42; FT secondary school teacher; partner FT accountant; children 16, 8	M8: aged 42, FT consultant obstetrician; partner FT consultant anaesthetist; child 1	NCTP	N	Partly shared	Homogamic	Mutual balancing
P5: aged 46; FT PR manager; partner FT editor in chief; child 9	F9: aged 48; FT financial reporting analyst; partner FT risk manager; children 10, 8	NCTP	N	Shared	Homogamic	
P22: aged 40; FT lawyer; partner FT academic researcher; children 6, 9	A12: aged 38; FT associate director; partner FT academic researcher; children 3, 2	NCTP	N	Shared	Homogamic	
P6: aged 43; FT university lecturer; partner FT physical education teacher; children 14, 12	A10: aged 39; FT finance director; partner FT accountant; child 5	NCTP	N	Partner; shared	Hypogamic	

^aGGN, governed by gender norms; OSC, one-sided compromise; PN, propensity to negotiate; N, negotiation.

Choosing a family-friendly job

Amália is married with three children. Her entire career was planned according to family needs. Since she and António started living together, they made an agreement regarding the division of labour: she would follow a family-friendly workpath, whereas he would pursue a much higher demanding career. Amália has been working as an immunohaemotherapist in a public lab. She works 40 hours a week. António followed a career in the private sector as a surgeon, a more time consuming job: he works 'at least' 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. With a fixed and well-structured work schedule, Amália's job allows her to be more available for the family.

If I had to choose between work and family, I mean if in any way the family prevented me from working, I would stop working right away. (...) When you ask other people and they tell you the two things are both important, or that work comes first, I find that really confusing! For me family is undoubtedly more important! (...) I chose this hospital-based speciality precisely for that reason, so that I could provide more support to my family. So I only ever worked as a hospital doctor. And in the afternoon, I had the afternoons more or less free, apart from when I was on emergency duty, to be with them. We made this option from the beginning. So, it had to be him to pursue a highly time consuming career in the private sector.

The agreement concerning the division of labour within the couple results from different processes combining power and gender norms. Amália alone takes on the role of reconciling work and family life. If she does not experience any family-work conflict, this is because she not only chose a family-friendly job, but she also delegates childcare and the domestic tasks extensively to her mother-in-law and two housekeepers. Amália could always count on the strong childcare support from her mother-in-law, who usually stays with the children while she is working.

My life was made incredibly easy. After my first son was born, my mother-in-law made herself available to take care of him. She was someone who was at home, she had a maid, and had the baby every day. We would go to the university ... the baby would stay there, and in the evening we would go and have supper, stay and play with him until he fell asleep, then we'd come home, and during the week he'd sleep over there. We did this every day, and at weekends, on Friday night, we'd bring him home to spend the weekend with us. This for the whole time we were at university.

Amália's attitude towards the division of labour is governed by rules and normative expectations that embedded a woman's role within the family. She acts according to normative power, since she rules herself according to norms that she thinks she must follow. Amália never 'blamed [António] for not having time for the family', even in the beginning when she had to do all the housework because they could not purchase domestic services. Normative power also underlies António's aloofness, to whom Amália can hardly speak. His attitude results from his perception that any family issue is an overburden.

He always agrees with everything. He says 'I've already got masses of problems, don't overload me!'. There are things that I plan and do, and if I have a problem I try to solve it without overburdening him. [...] I always try to resolve matters, and I only ask him if there's some doubt or if he has something to say about the choice in any particular case, otherwise I'm the one who decides, and not ... With our children, the house, trips, I'm the one who decides and acts. For example, a while back, ever since we've had a bit more money to spare,

we used to go travelling. I'm the one who deals with everything with the girl, at the travel agency ... I'm the one who decides, I'm the one who chooses.

This conjugal dynamic, barely communicative and firmly embedded in gender norms, is interpreted by the interviewee as a result of different personality attributes: 'I am much more docile and submissive, and he is much more aggressive and authoritarian'.

Interrupting the career path

Rachel is married with two children. Rachel's experience of a high level of work-family conflict led her to interrupt her career. She has now been out of work for two and a half years. For 12 years, she was a full-time medical consultant 'very actively involved in management/clinical governance issues' in different hospitals.

It was constantly a source of stress, trying to not let down your own kids and family and not let down somebody else's in the hospital and I think the stress did build up and I think that I misjudged, possibly how much stress I was feeling.

Whereas Rachel has modified her career ambitions, her partner's career did not suffer any impact of family demands. Robert is a self-employed barrister and he is away a week at a time: 'every week, he comes home for weekends (...) and he does work at weekends sometimes'. He only had the possibility to travel on a regular basis for work reasons after her decision.

My husband didn't really influence me one way or another about when I gave up work. (...) At the time that I stopped work he started working with a new chambers whose work was basically based a lot in the Midlands and would involve him being away a lot of the week. So in fact, it's been useful in the sense that while I've been at home, while he's had to be away more, I have actually been at home providing, well from a practical point of view, no worries over childcare but also continuity for the children who have also changed schools in that time.

A set of elements can be discerned behind Rachel's decision. Rachel takes the challenge of work-family balance as a personal duty while believing that she can maintain a high level of commitment in both domains. However, she increasingly experienced work-family articulation as a conflict and enormous difficulties with childcare were the final breaking point for her.

I had horrendous problems with childcare, yes, I mean I think that's why, when I came to resigning and leaving, there were issues that were work related but also there were issues about childcare and schools that I felt that I had not really got on top of, and so that's why it seemed to me that I needed to take time out and address the home things.

Rachel takes on the role of articulation but she does not delegate the domestic work. She has only 'occasional' help from her parents, and she never seeks to negotiate with Robert, who is often away working long hours. Even if she has stopped working because she could not cope any longer, she also believes 'a child will suffer to a certain extent if their mother goes out to work full-time'. Her time off has enabled her to be totally involved in family life. And she acknowledges the importance of being a very present mother.

My time off has been extremely fulfilling because I've managed to get really involved with their education, settle them in to new environments, understand, you know, how the whole thing works, be around to organise social, you know, things for each of them, play dates and so on and that's worked very well, yes, extremely well, and both of them are much more settled. But childcare has been a *real* problem.

Rachel's decisions are clearly governed by normative expectations underlying her high commitment as a mother. On the other hand, she does not jeopardise Robert's lack of involvement in family life. She acknowledges that there is a communication deficit within the couple because of Robert's attitude – 'my husband isn't a great talker' – but she also accepts his passivity, even towards her decision to interrupt the work path. Robert never conceived that, in doing so, she actually sacrificed her autonomy and fulfilment for the well-being of the family. Normative power thus operates to ensure that Rachel does not seek to negotiate the work–family arrangements with her husband whose career always took precedence.

I think his career has always been more important. Although when we met, he then, he was a solicitor and he then transferred to being a barrister and during that time, I supported him. The sort of thing I'm thinking about is, even when we had more equivalent positions and took part more equally in terms of looking after the children, if there was a problem, it was always a question of me having to sort it out, not him. (...) He would always leave it to me. He would never say, I can't go to court. (...) It was always for me to sort out if the nanny was ill or couldn't turn up or whatever, so I don't think that they're [both careers] equivalent, no, and of course they're less equivalent now that I don't work.

The resulting division of labour has become more uneven than ever. Over the course of marital life, this dual-career couple has become a male breadwinner one: 'my main responsibility, as I see it now, is my children'. Childcare and domestic work are 'ninety-nine percent' Rachel's responsibility. Nonetheless, she thinks that 'circumstances and individual abilities should be more important than a preconceived idea about whether a man or a woman should be the primary earner'. She blames herself for thinking she could be 'superwoman' until she resigned.

I probably could have handled things as far as my children is concerned and the childcare and sleeplessness and so on. Yes, I could handle that better, but I saw that as my problem.

Even so, she now finds herself in a trap. Without working she does not feel justified to purchase the services that would release her from the domestic workload. This loss of autonomy feeling goes along with her inability to find any connection between both partners' decisions concerning work and family life.

I would love a cleaner in some ways but on the other hand, you know, with both kids at school, I feel that my way of contributing to the house is along, you know, these sort of lines and I'm not as fussy as I used to be. (...) I think I would need to make arrangements that didn't depend on him, for me to go back to work, if it's to be successful. If he chose to take part in it, that's great, but I don't think I would depend on it. I think it would be foolish for me to depend on him in that respect, because I don't see how he can.

Different work arrangements in order to balance

The work–life biographies of Vanda (P2) and Victoria (A18) illustrate processes of construction of inequality within the couple even when the woman has a more self-oriented attitude towards the division of labour. Albeit in both cases the women’s interests are beyond family needs, there is a growing social distance between partners over marital life because female choices and decisions are still rather embedded in gender norms. The low propensity of both Vanda and Victoria to negotiate the division of labour with their partners, and the fact that they give precedence to the male’s career show that gender mechanisms effectively operate on their strategies for reconciling family and work. Vanda is 39 and holds a degree in Law. Victoria is 36 and holds a degree in Accountancy. Victoria and her partner have similar occupational positions. Vanda’s partner has a much higher status occupational position than her.

This biographical comparison highlights the cross-cultural nature of gender mechanisms, but it also suggests the interference of national specificities. The solutions both interviewees found show that these two countries offer different contexts within which women make decisions about their employment and family life. In Portugal, full-time work and long hours are the norm for both men and women, and the dual-earner full-time model is highly valued. The Portuguese interviewee strongly delegates in order to ensure her career progression in a full-time work regime. In Britain, a large proportion of women work part-time and part-time jobs are much more available. The British work–life biography suggests that this availability of part-time work contributes to undermine a more liberal attitude to the need for equal sharing in the home and making equal stakes in a career. The British interviewee decides to work part-time because she believes that children would suffer if both parents work full-time.

Delegation as the major solution

Vanda is married with three children. Vanda finds the solution for achieving a work–family balance by delegating the domestic work in her mother, a cleaner and a baby-sitter. The high income of Vanda’s husband enables them to extensively purchase domestic services. This division of domestic work is not characterised by negotiation, but it is not entirely normative because Vanda can to a certain degree avoid the fact that the family needs affect her career. There was always a status occupational distance between Vanda and her husband. Victor had already a managerial position when they met. He was working in an international financial consulting company of which he became a CEO. Vanda started her work path as a legal consultant in a Public Institution at which she became a Departmental Head.

Vanda has a big stake in both family life and in career. She grew up in a family context where women have a dominant role: ‘my grandmother was the matriarch’. She was also strongly encouraged by her mother to have a successful career and a wealthy life. Vanda’s mother also helps her reconcile family and work: whenever Vanda needs a ‘good night’s sleep’, she takes care of the children.

I owe to my mother the kind of person that I am today. My career is very important for her ... My mother often expressed her desire that I will have a successful job and an education that could assure a wealthy life.

Her career goal has always been to move up the ladder. Although she had recently been downgraded as a result of disagreements with her hierarchical superior, she did not stop planning on other strategies – such as a postgraduate degree – in order to move upwards.

Managerial positions are the most appealing jobs to me. Purely technical positions don't attract me. I want to combine the technical aspects of the Law with those of Management. I'm a very pro-active and creative person, and that kind of job is the most convenient to me.

Vanda is very keen regarding her career progression, but she feels that she cannot 'compete' with her husband, since she takes all the responsibility for work–family balance. In contrast with Victor, she would not be able to cope with the time pressures of a highly demanding position in a private company: 'I feel that I cannot venture further at this moment and start working ten hours a day for a private company!' Victor is absent 12 hours a day, 5 days a week.

Normative power operates in different ways within the couple. First, Victor's very high income is perceived as a compensation for his lack of involvement in domestic work and for all the communication difficulties. He is characterised as someone not open to talking – signalling a 'lack of emotional maturity' – and Vanda uses the fact that his wage is five times her wage as a valid argument for avoiding communication and negotiation. She overtly recognises that it is 'comfortable' to have enough money to purchase domestic services and thus to pursue a managerial career at her own pace.

Thank goodness he is successful and makes a lot of money [laughter], because I can comfortably progress in my career!

Second, this gender normative division of labour is perceived uncritically as a 'natural thing'. Vanda chooses to delegate the domestic work instead of negotiating it. She feels it as the right option in order to progress in her career at her own pace. She does not confront him with his absence and his greater involvement in a job whose income enables her to extensively delegate. In other words, the male resources are used to compensate an uneven division of labour. Finally, even if she tries to maximise her stakes in both domains always bearing in mind the idea of compromise – not working very long hours; not letting domestic work interfere with her career goals – she complains about the feeling of losing her 'personal space' and of being reduced to the role of mother without never linking this sense of identity loss to Victor's lack of involvement in childcare.

Working part-time for the sake of the children

Victoria is married with two children. From several years now, she decided to work part-time. Her decision was supported by her husband, as both believe that the children would suffer if both parents work full-time. She was the one who reduced her working hours, but she found a working schedule that compromises her stakes in both domains, i.e., that enables her to be more present at home and to continue progressing in her career. Both partners have managerial positions in their jobs. Victoria has been working as Director for a firm of Chartered Accountants, where she started her work life. Charles is a management consultant. In the past he ran a business 'for a while', but he had recently gone back to work also for a firm of Accountants, where he works as a Director.

After their children were born, Victoria decided to work part-time. She took the decision with Charles's support for the sake of the children. She always assumed that she would have a 'reasonably successful career', but she put the partnership career goal aside when she reduced her working hours.

I don't think, and he agrees, we don't think that our children would benefit if both of us were working full-time, full tilt, for promotion because they would just suffer, you know, with our time and, or even our attention. (...) Partner level, and also to some extent at Director level, you become a sales person, so you need to bring in more work, so as a consequence of that you need to do a lot of lunching and wining and dining and there's a lot of responsibility that goes with it ... There are lots of extra things that you have to do that won't necessarily fit into a working day. And I don't want to compromise my family life for that, not even for additional financial benefits.

Nevertheless, Victoria came to find a compromise between her stakes in both domains: after working three days a week for a while, she started working seven hours a day, four days a week in order to progress in her career: 'I could do it in three days – I did it for three days for a year – but I'd just have fewer projects ...'. She expressed fears of ending up in an administrative role like many of her female colleagues, instead of being in a position which gives her more chances to move upwards.

You see it and you hear about that, very often where women go back to work assuming that they'll be able to continue as they had before but end up, particularly in the kind of environment that I work into, either doing a full-time job and part-time hours, or being sidelined into an unchangeable administrative role. And you can see how both of those are easy options in a way rather than fighting the system. And I don't really want to do either of those.

As Charles is away far more often than Victoria, she has the major responsibility for the childcare and housework. Charles always worked long hours. He currently works a minimum of 50 hours a week: 'leaving the house at seven in the morning and usually he's back by about eight-ish in the evening'. Normative power ensured that Victoria has never sought to negotiate childcare and housework with her husband: 'that's just evolved over the years'. However, her choices concerning work and family life were made under certain conditions. Domestic work is scarcely delegated, as they only pay three hours a week for a cleaner and they do not have help from family members. Even working on a part-time regime with a flexible work schedule, Victoria feels the pressures of the articulation between family obligations and work demands.

I'm much more relaxed now, sort of on maternity leave, but when I'm working I have six things on my mind, at any one time, even when I'm at home with the children, so I'm thinking about that piece of work that needs to be finished, I'm thinking about the client that I need to phone, when I'm going to manage that and am I going to get that phone call from this client and what's he expecting for tomorrow and what are we going to have for dinner, and then my son will ask me a question and I'd feel guilty that I'm not focussing on him.

Normative power also ensures that Victoria has never questioned the fact that she was the one who reduced her working hours. She states that 'he loves his job' and, unlike her, he is pretty sure about his career ambition to become a partner. But his determination in pursuing his career goals goes along with the expectation that it would be Victoria's role to compromise in order to reconcile family and work. She is strong in her conviction that it is

only because they have children that his career takes precedence. The fact that her conviction matches his expectation reveals how gender norms are in connection with power in family life.

[Both careers] have always been equally important; however, practically speaking, it's his career that is and will take precedence, I think. (...) It's because of the children, just the children ...

Seeking for joint involvement

The cases of Ana (P6) and Emily (A10) illustrate processes of the construction of equality within the couple when work–family articulation is negotiated between partners. Ana is 43 and holds a Ph.D. degree in History. Emily is 39 and holds a degree in Accountancy. Emily and her partner have similar occupational positions, whereas Ana has a higher status occupational position than her husband. Emily and her partner have an active attitude towards the division of labour, which relates one's own interests to those of the other. Both partners made career compromises in order to reach a work–family balance. The case of Ana and Alfredo reveals an even more active male involvement in domestic life. Ana has a higher status occupational position and a higher income than her partner. The key point in the mutual kind of attitude towards division of labour within these biographical pairs is that the female career aspirations prevail as well as family needs and her partner's interests. Both interviewees reap the rewards of the negotiation, progressing more in their careers than their partners.

A subverted division of labour

Ana is married with two children. Ana relies on a highly and active involvement of her husband in childcare and housework. The couple always managed the work–family challenges on a collaborative basis. The relationship between Ana and her partner is also highly based on negotiation. Given that Ana has a more demanding position than Alfredo and their resources do not allow them to purchase any domestic services, they made an agreement: Alfredo would take the main responsibility for childcare and housework. Ana is a university lecturer and Alfredo is a physical education teacher. Alfredo grew up in a lower middle-class family, while Ana came from a highly qualified background. She has always known that she would have an academic career like her father. Alfredo 'wished to study Law', but he could not afford the studies. Ana had her first child before concluding her doctorate. Back then, she had to articulate the writing of her thesis, her courses and family life. But this work overload was mitigated by Alfredo's strong involvement, since he does not have the pressures of such a demanding career.

Ana always wanted to be a mother, but she always found that childcare regrettably overwhelmed her. She admits she never felt the 'vocation' to take care of babies. She prefer doing domestic tasks such as cooking, rather than child caring. Ana and Alfredo are 'undoing' gender (Deutsch, 2007), since he has taken greater responsibility for childcare and at home more than Ana. She states that the close father–children relationship results from the fact that Alfredo is 'a very affectionate person'.

My son was the first baby I've held in my arms. I never liked babies very much. I love to cook.... So, maybe pots and pans are more important to me than babies! (...) Alfredo has a better work schedule, and he ends up spending more time with the children. Each time they

need something they call the dad rather than calling me. I'm a more pragmatic person; I don't bother because it's not worthwhile, but he always checks up if their shoelaces are nice or if their hair is neatly combed ...

Ana recovered very slowly from the childbirth, so Alfredo was mainly responsible for the childcare since the beginning – 'it was Alfredo who taught me to change the diaper'. They never had any help from the family, because Ana's mother does not feel at ease with childcare, and Alfredo's parents do not live nearby. On the other hand, they always shared the housework. Alfredo even did all the domestic work each time Ana travelled abroad while she was doing her thesis: 'The first time I had to travel my younger son was 2–3 years old, and it was very hard for Alfredo!' Ana feels very grateful for having such an 'amazing' partner for life.

He perfectly understand, he always did! And he finds it is encouraging that I need to do thesis and studying in order to progress in my career. He always help me a lot ... Alfredo has been my emotional support! He is an exceptional human being! (...) He helped me a lot in taking care of my grandmother; she suffered from Alzheimer ... The most difficult moments of our life only brought us together.

When both compromise

Emily is married with one child. Emily and her husband already had successful careers when their son was born, and they made an agreement: they both would partly compromise their career plans in order to assure a work–life balance. Both partners are accountants with managerial positions. Emily is a director in corporate financial, and Andrew works in the strategy department of a private company.

Emily got promoted to Director at the age of 31. At that time she was the 'only female director in P's corporate finance team'. The importance of having a career was inculcated from an early age: 'I always think I've got a career'. Her career aspirations are actually linked to a social mobility strategy that she inherited from her parents, who came from a 'very poor background'.

They'd always been you've got to get yourself a professional qualification, just be respectable ... if they were going to pay for us to go to university then it had to be something that they thought was financially worthwhile. (...) I didn't know any accountants but it was always talked about as kind of a good job, a respectable job.

When her son was born Emily was 34 and she and her husband made an agreement which considered both partners' wishes, attempting to find a solution that involved both of their career aspirations. This process of negotiation involves a mutual active attitude and relates Emily's own interests to those of Andrew: 'I think in a way you've just got to go along and both make compromises as you go too, because it can't be completely one-sided, can it?' After their agreement, each one made compromises. Andrew stopped doing 'the international strategy', which involved a lot of travelling abroad, whereas Emily postponed her goal of being a partner. She even recognises that Andrew made more compromises concerning his career progression.

I definitely have no aspirations to be the next Chief Executive of D which is kind of the highest level, but the kind of second level up, third level up would be fine. (...) People generally would get promoted [partner] between 35 and 45 ... I would like to become a

partner but I'm just not sure how realistic that is in terms of balancing it with other things. (...) I think out of the two of us, he's the one whose made a sacrifice in terms of, well he's very definitely made a sacrifice and he's turned down a promotion a couple of times ... He's been there for about ten years and there have been a couple of things where he has been offered a promotion which has either involved a lot of overseas travel or quite long hours and we just know that we couldn't do it.

Emily and Andrew's relationship is based on a negotiation and open communication logic which applies both in childcare and housework. All the domestic work is shared, even if she is the only one having a flexible work schedule.

I might be able to work at home three days because I've got a report I need to do and then I might not be able to work at home for three weeks because you've just clients, you've got meetings or whatever.

They both work full-time and they could not do it without some delegation. They contracted a nanny since they do not have any informal support. This decision was symptomatic of Emily's attitude towards the division of labour: 'I always assume that I'm paid to have some childcare and to be in a position where I can come to work'. The couple spends about £3000 a month on childcare. The nanny even takes him to school and picks him up from school, and during school terms she does the shopping and the cooking. This 'extensive delegation' (Wall, Aboim, Cunha, & Vasconcelos, 2001) of childcare allows both to continue working 40–45 hours per week.

One of the reasons that we have a nanny and still have got a nanny now in that he has had quite a lot of time off school just because it's kind of first year at school and stuff. And, you know, when he's just had a cough or runny nose then Y just stays at home with him. And sometimes I've worked at home more, so I say he's not very well, I'll work at home today or my husband's done that, but our nanny is medically trained, so in a way I suppose she's better than we are. So if it's kind of your minor ailment, your cough and your cold and that kind of stuff then she's fine. Y does it and he had chicken pox and Y looked after him. And I guess in those circumstances, we just try and work from home a bit more.

Discussion and conclusions

Our qualitative analysis suggests that social distance between spouses is progressive and does not end at the formation of the couple. Results reveal that gender and class are interconnected through the family division of labour. In fact, (in)equality is built up over the course of marital life and female strategies for reconciling family and work are at the core of this process. In this article, we have observed that gender norms and structural constraints cannot be untangled from marital and family dynamics in shaping those strategies. Challenging the view of the primacy of choice over constraint, we found that the choices of our interviewees are constrained by the conditions to negotiate the domestic work and the availability for paid work. The following conclusions can be drawn from the comparative analysis.

First, our comparison showed the cross-cultural nature of gender mechanisms, which operates within couples as normative power. In fact, most of the Portuguese and British interviewees take all the responsibility for the family–work reconciliation. Their attitudes towards the division of labour demonstrate that the effective weight of gender norms in female decisions goes along with the non-involvement of the man in domestic work. One

major and invariable effect of this marital dynamic is an increase of the social distance between spouses over the course of marital life.

Second, the actual cross-cultural nature of gender mechanisms does not allow to conclude that its consequences are immune to cultural differences. As we have observed, the relational specificities of each marital framework can mould the effects of those mechanisms. In other words, different experiences of inequality can be hidden behind the same gendered strategy for reconciling family and work. For instance, we observed in both Amália and Rachel's work–life biographies the same attitudes towards division of labour and partner's career, as well as their similar effects on social distance between spouses over time. However, Amália did not experienced it as Rachel did, i.e., as a work–life conflict. Amália previously planned all the work–family articulation, extensively delegating domestic work and choosing a family-friendly job in order to preserve a full-time job from any potential work–family conflict. As Rachel did interrupt her work path, this matched pair reveals that the same gender mechanisms do not necessarily have the same effects.

Third, in our study we also observed the strong full-time ethic of Portuguese women, and the differences in part-time options among British interviewees. Nevertheless, even if Portuguese men and women value the fact that both partners have full-time jobs, their gender role attitudes are not necessarily associated with a less traditional division of domestic work. Vanda and Victoria actually illustrate how the same uncritical attitude towards a less gender equitable division of labour hides different decisions regarding working hour regimes.

Lastly, the comparison of work–life biographies showed that the active involvement of both partners in the resolution of work–family conflicts is a major factor leading to equality within the couple. The British biographies of Emily and Andrew contradict the idea of conflict between the demands of family life and a dual-career arrangement, since both partners made career compromises in order to reach a work–family balance. The suitable equivalent Portuguese case of Ana and Alfredo reveals an even more active male involvement in domestic life. This hypogamic case – where the female partner has the highest-status occupational position and seeks a mutual balancing – suggests how relevant the negotiation factor and its potential for gender equality can be.

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Notes

1. An underlying assumption, for example, in the theory of C. Hakim (2002), which places women in 'preference groupings' according to the types of choices that they make to solve the most common dilemmas involved in the articulation of work and family life.
2. The Portuguese work–life interviews were carried out in the scope of the research project 'Marriage and Inequality' granted by Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology/

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