

ESRI
RESEARCH
BULLETIN
FEBRUARY
2021

WORK-LIFE CONFLICT IN EUROPE

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ESRI Research Bulletins provide short summaries of work published by ESRI researchers and overviews of thematic areas covered by ESRI programmes of research. Bulletins are designed to be easily accessible to a wide readership.

INTRODUCTION

Reconciling work and family commitments has become a key concern in European societies in recent decades, in the context of the increasing paid employment of women, the changing nature of work, an aging population, and concerns over low fertility. Under the traditional 'male breadwinner' model competing demands in the work and family sphere were managed by a division of labour between the sexes, whereby men were primarily responsible for paid work, women for caring. Increasingly EU citizens have to combine both caring and employment roles, with consequences for work-life tension. As an indicator of quality of life, work-life conflict has a potentially negative impact on personal effectiveness, physical and mental health, marital conflict, child-parent relationships, and even child development.

Research on the work-life interface in Europe over the past 20 years has been dominated by the idea of role strain and conflict between roles - that is that the time and energy devoted to one role is not available for the other. The 'demands-resources' perspective distinguishes demands, or role requirements, and resources, which are assets used to cope with these demands. Work typically refers to paid work: 'life' can refer to caring or leisure or (more usually) both. Conflict can take two forms: work-to-life conflict or life-to-work conflict, though work tends to affect family more than vice versa, as life is typically more flexible and the boundaries more porous than work roles and boundaries.

SOME KEY FINDINGS

The present study reviews the main empirical results from this area of research. The findings are based on a balance of evidence across multiple studies, which mostly employ large, representative surveys that ask people directly about their experience.

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: McGinnity F. (2021) Work-Life Conflict in Europe. In: Maggino F. (eds) Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research. Springer, Cham.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_3727

With thanks to my colleague Professor Helen Russell for much collaborative research on this topic over the years, both in Ireland and from a comparative perspective. The encyclopedia entry includes full citations to previous literature.

Work-life conflict is closely linked to paid work demands in terms of time, intensity and scheduling. Long working hours are one of the factors most strongly and consistently linked to higher levels of work-life conflict in Europe: part-time work is consistently associated with lower conflict. Working unsocial hours (evenings, nights, weekends) is also often associated with higher work-life conflict.

Forms of working time flexibility that benefit workers, such as flexitime, allow workers to vary working hours to facilitate family demands, like dropping off children to school, and usually reduces work-life conflict experienced. By contrast working-time flexibility that benefits employers, such as working overtime at short notice, typically increases work-life conflict, particularly if it happens often. People tend to value jobs that are regular and somewhat flexible. Yet demands from work that are not linked to time also play a role in work-life conflict. If a job is very stressful and emotionally demanding, this may leave an individual with reduced resources to engage in their personal life. Research has consistently found that work pressure is closely linked to work-life conflict. Those with the most demanding jobs often experience spill-over to their home life.

In terms of resources, having supportive work colleagues or a supportive boss is, not surprisingly, usually associated with reduced conflict. One might expect that having greater control over the tasks, pace and organisation of work would help alleviate conflict, but research findings are somewhat ambiguous here. Job control often does not reduce conflict for individuals, which may suggest that workers are not using their control to facilitate work-life balance.

Home demands, such as having caring responsibilities for small children or dependent adults, increases work-life conflict, particularly for women. How domestic work (caring or housework) is shared within the household also influences work-life conflict, as does how well gender role attitudes are matched by behaviour.

Comparing work-life conflict across countries, some authors find that 'family friendly' policies, such as support for childcare, tend to alleviate work-life conflict for families. However others find that in countries where family-friendly policies lead to high labour market participation of women, this is associated with greater work-to-life interference, though also women gain more financially from devoting time to work. More generally labour market policies that set limits on working time tend to limit long hours work for most workers, and this indirectly reduces work-life conflict.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Work-life conflict is important to consider as European policymakers try to increase the proportion of the population in paid work, particularly women, to both enhance competitiveness and reduce poverty. Ways to reconcile social and individual investment in child-rearing and adult care with skills accumulation and sustained participation in paid work over the life course need to be considered. At European level, the *European Working Time Directive* (2003) plays an important role in limiting long working hours. The *European Work-life Balance Directive* (2019) introduces minimum requirements for paternity and parental and carers'

leave and to flexible working arrangements for parents and workers with caring responsibilities. By increasing the flexibility of work – such as workers’ ability to reduce their working hours or flexibly allocate their working time – this Directive should facilitate work-life balance, given the available evidence. If the aim is to promote *both* work-family balance and gender equality, these policy measures need to be applied to fathers as well as to mothers, since paid employment and unpaid domestic labour remains unequally distributed between men and women throughout Europe.

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