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The Work–Life Balance in Social Practice

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This article examines the extent to which the growing attention being paid at EU and national level to issues related to work–life balance is reflected in families' lived experience. It identifies the demands facing families in balancing paid work with other activities, the strategies they adopt to meet them, and the role played by policy interventions. Attention is drawn to diversity in family structures and labour market participation throughout Europe, to differences in the issues encountered by families in achieving a satisfactory work–life balance, and to the contribution of policy to their strategies.

Introduction

Work–life balance has emerged as a social issue in the face of changes that have disturbed the earlier relationship between paid work and family life. Throughout Europe the social practice of modern family households has been subject to a complex array of influences that have a differential impact on the shape of family life in different contexts. Alongside economic and labour market restructuring, political and technological change have run the changing expectations that men and women bring to the family-building phase of their lives (Tóth, 1997; Rubery *et al*., 1999). The interaction of these structural trends with the attempts by individuals to exercise choice about their lifestyles has given rise to various work–life arrangements and created a diverse set of challenges for those seeking to achieve it (Arve-Parès, 1995; Duncan, 2002). This article examines how families in Europe are addressing these issues.

The primary focus is on how families reconcile paid work commitments with the responsibilities of parenting and childrearing. While these are not the only circumstances in which work–life balance issues emerge, they continue to be more prominent in academic and policy discourses than those associated with other life stages. To some extent, this is simply indicative of policy makers' concerns with the pivotal economic role played by this core population group. However, it is also a reflection of the readiness with which European adults themselves – women especially – identify this phase of their lives as problematic (Bjornberg and Sass, 1997). Notwithstanding differences in political and economic systems, family structure and social class, difficulties in achieving work–life balance during the family-rearing phase are widely experienced throughout Europe.

Considerable variations can be found in the types of problem faced by families. The most fundamental division is the broad distinction between the work–life balance issues confronting families that are work-rich and those that are work-poor. For the former, the primary concern is how to balance the time demands of long working hours with the time required for domestic labour and family activities; for the latter it is how to overcome

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the financial insecurity of underemployment to achieve the stability necessary for family well-being. The problems faced by the two groups are, therefore, very different, and so too is the ability of each to act to improve the situation. While highly educated workers in professional occupations may be relatively well positioned to negotiate favourable work conditions, low-skilled employees in insecure employment usually have less scope to do so. Work-rich and work-poor households may, therefore, differ in their level of dependency on policy intervention.

The article first provides a short review of the parameters of work and family life in Europe, identifying key trends in the relationship between family building and men's and women's employment patterns. It then examines the demands facing families and the strategies they adopt to deal with them, including the place of policy and their perception of policy intervention, illustrating the analysis with interview data.[1] The article concludes by considering the extent to which policy interventions offer appropriate solutions for the problems identified.

The parameters of work and family life in Europe

Differences in adult employment levels mean that the parameters of work–life balance vary across Europe. The main conduit for bringing change to family and household arrangements has been the changing roles of women, with the increase in female employment as one of the most dominant and persistent trends in the European labour market (Franco and Winqvist, 2002). The overall upward trend in female employment has, however, masked the contrasting experiences of women from different social classes, urban or rural environments, household structures and cultural groups (Rubery *et al*., 1999). Such differences have created diversity at the household level.

This diversity is evident in the aggregate employment data that provide a starting point for analysis of current social practice. Between 1985 and 2000, the EU average employment rate for women of working age increased from 45 per cent to 54 per cent, largely as a result of the increasing number of women staying in or re-entering employment while their children were young (European Commission, 1997, 2001). However, national levels of female employment varied widely, from 39.6 per cent in Italy to 71.6 per cent in Denmark in 2001. Over the same period male employment was much more stable, declining slightly from 75 per cent to 72.5 per cent. Among the European member states as a whole, the disparity between male and female employment rates was, therefore, reduced, but unevenly: while the gender gap in the Nordic states was 4–10 per cent, in Italy it was just under 30 per cent, and in Greece and Spain, just over. The gap between average male and female employment rates is higher, on average, among the member states than among the candidate countries, but with differences in each group. In some countries, employment levels are high for both sexes (Sweden); in some they are low for both (Bulgaria); in some the gap between male and female employment rates is large (Greece, Spain), and in others very small (Finland, Lithuania).

Although some convergence has occurred in male and female employment patterns, those for women remain much more heterogeneous than for men, showing greater variations between and within countries. The variations can be quite extreme, as in the proportion of employed women who work part time in member states, which ranges from 70.5 per cent in the Netherlands to 7.4 per cent in Greece (European Commission, 2001). Member countries with the lowest levels of female employment overall – mostly

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southern European countries – also tend to have the lowest levels of female part-time employment. Where female employment rates are high in western Europe, they are often so because of high levels of part-time employment.

Women's employment rates also display a high level of differentiation within national labour markets (Daly, 2000). Employment levels are generally highest among the most educated women, but countries differ in the degree of variation between high and low-educated women (Rubery *et al*., 1999). By 2000, the largest 'education gap' in female employment rates for women aged 25–49 among EU member countries was in Italy, where the employment rate for women who had completed minimum compulsory education was 38 per cent, compared to 79 per cent for women with higher education qualifications: a gap of 41 per cent (Eurostat, 2000). At the other extreme, the employment rate for women with minimum qualifications in Finland was 67 per cent, and for women with higher education 84 per cent. There was virtually no corresponding difference for men: on average, the employment rate for men with minimum qualifications in EU member countries was only 1 per cent lower than it was for those with higher education.

Differences in male and female employment patterns are reflected at the household level in gender differentiated patterns of parental employment. The net effect of rising female employment has been a growth in dual-earner households, which now make up the majority of households with two people of working age in the EU member states (Franco and Wingvist, 2002). Dual participation has risen most among couples with children, and in a growing number of households both parents work full time. However, the more common arrangement is for the father to work full time and the mother part time. Again, strong national variations are found: parents' working hours are most equally matched in Portugal, where it is commonest for both to work long full-time hours, and most polarised in the UK, where fathers typically work long full-time hours and mothers work short hours (under 20 a week).

The differences in male and female employment levels, within and between European countries, raise a number of issues about household strategies for achieving work–life balance. Although women's employment levels have increased, their labour market involvement remains strongly differentiated from that of men. Overall, 'there is little evidence of household working arrangements emerging that are compatible with a more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work' (Franco and Winqvist, 2002: 5), which is clearly likely to affect work–life balance strategies.

Achieving a work–life balance

The extent to which couples freely choose how they seek to achieve work–life balance is a much-debated topic. The commonly used terminology of individual and family 'choices' and 'strategies' carries everyday connotations of rational, pro-active decision-making, which can underplay the constrained context within which many courses of action are developed (Trifíletti, 1999; Tobío, 2001). It is not within the scope of this paper to explore these complexities, and in the discussion below the focus is not on these processes *per se* but upon their behavioural outcomes.

The analysis uses the concepts of 'strategic' and 'day-to-day' levels of work–life balance as a device for reviewing evidence of how these issues emerge at a number of levels of family life. The first part of the discussion concerns the extent to which preferred 'strategic' choices about family life, concerning family building (family size, timing of child

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birth) and household patterns of economic productivity (who works, and how much), are affected by the feasibility of achieving a balance between the household's activities. This analysis draws attention, in particular, to families that are most constrained in these choices, identifying the support of poorer families as a substantial policy issue. The second part concerns how families strive to achieve appropriate balance within this overarching framework, namely the issues that arise in the day-to-day management of family life.

Strategic issues for families

The paramount issue for families in achieving work–life balance is access to employment. In the context of reducing social expenditure, labour market participation is critical to achieve the financial security on which family well-being is dependent. The absence of financial security is a major obstacle to families achieving work–life balance. It is also an issue that affects substantial subsections of the populations in EU member states, which, like other economically advanced regions, have witnessed an internal polarisation of wealth. Throughout Europe, low-income families are regarded as less able to achieve their preferred form of family life, more dependent on state policy to provide basic material security, and thus more vulnerable to limits in state provision.

The problem is particularly acute in the candidate countries in Central and Eastern Europe. They have moved from a period of very secure full-time work for both men and women pre-1989 to soaring unemployment. They have, therefore, experienced many of the consequences of labour market structuring that have affected western European countries, but more dramatically and in a compressed period of time (Wallace, 2002: 8–9). These trends have also been accompanied by the collapse of the support systems that upheld the earlier labour market: 'in most [applicant] countries, the legacy of childcare facilities, generous maternity leave and other forms of support enabling mothers to work full time have also been under threat' (Wallace, 2002: 9). The combined impact of these changes has affected household employment profiles, patterns of family formation, and family living arrangements. The changes have also had a dramatic effect on men's and women's adult roles, and hence on gender relations.

Despite the obvious differences in social, political and economic contexts, low-income households elsewhere in Europe have also experienced many of these effects. Among current EU member states, lone-parent households, ethnic minority and migrant populations, and certain labour market sectors, including low-educated adults, workers in many types of flexible employment, and rural workers in southern Europe, are all vulnerable to financial insecurity. As in the candidate countries, this has a number of very direct impacts on the day-to-day living arrangements of families.

These impacts become most evident with the arrival of children, which exacerbates financial hardship and prompts changes in parental work and domestic roles. Although mothers in European countries commonly reduce their labour market involvement, in poorer households, both parents may need to seek paid work. Other strategies include parents — especially the father – working extended hours, and either or both parents – but again, usually the father – taking a second job. Interviews in the candidate countries have found that, in extreme cases, the scarcity of adequate local employment can lead to men living and working away from the family home area to obtain a higher wage. Men in low-income families, therefore, follow the broad European pattern of increasing their work hours with the onset of fatherhood if they can, but this may take an exaggerated form.

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In Central and Eastern Europe, the financial situation of many families has been further exacerbated by post-transition housing policy. Housing provision that was available under the Soviet regime has been largely privatised, fostering division between those families that have been able to afford to become private owners and those that have not. One consequence is that some poorer families have been forced to live in multigenerational households. In Estonia, a 43-year old divorced mother of two suggested that financial circumstances had become so unfavourable in the post-Soviet period that they could affect family building, to the extent of discouraging parenthood altogether:

> To my mind it all goes back to material issues. If you have no money to feed the kids and buy them clothes. . . . At work there are so many young women, they don't dare to have a child. I would like to have another child but I don't dare either. If my first ones had not been born during the Soviet period, I hardly believe they would have been born at all.

There is some evidence that these effects may be moderated by state policy. Hungary experienced similar economic, political and social changes to Estonia following the democratic transition in 1990. However, the culture of state responsibility for childrearing remained deeply embedded, and the tradition of extensive state support for families continued in the post-1990 period, albeit in modified form. Hungarian social policy is supportive of family building, promoting a family size of three children as the preferred norm. Provision for mothers is fairly extensive: childcare allowance paid to women allows them to spend a period at home after the birth, lasting as much as four to five years for those who bear more than one child. In addition to women's withdrawal from the labour market being balanced by fathers having to work increased hours to meet the financial needs of their family, problems can also arise for groups that do not fit the specific criteria for support, including very poor households unable to support three children and to qualify for the higher levels of allowance.

Two main policy issues arise from the problems faced by low-income families. Firstly, although the belief is widespread throughout Europe that family matters are primarily a private responsibility for the individuals concerned, the one area in which the state is considered to have a duty to intervene is in securing the 'material' well-being of families. In communities where the preference is for traditional parenting roles, in which women wish to be allowed to stay at home to care for their children, this requires sufficient financial support to make it unnecessary for mothers to work to ensure adequate income for their families. Secondly, in cases where mothers wish or need to work, their ability to take up employment is dependent on the adequacy of childcare provision (Gornick *et al*., 1997), and also the availability of flexible working time arrangements (Wallace, 2002). While access to childcare affects all mothers seeking employment, the availability of state provision may completely determine the arrangements made by low-income families who are unable to pay market rates for childcare.

The day-to-day management of family life

The management of family life requires the demands of paid work, caring and domestic activities to be met and reconciled on a day-to-day basis. Throughout Europe, this is widely regarded as problematic for families with young children. The crux of the problem lies in the difficulties in providing sufficient human resources to meet both the obligations

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of paid work and the responsibilities of childrearing. The widespread encouragement for women to further their education and training and equip themselves for employment has not been matched by the necessary infrastructure to support increased labour market activity by parents. Formal childcare is frequently inadequate: provision may be limited or too costly; the hours covered by childcare may not match those of work; and irregular situations, such as when a child is unwell, are rarely covered. Informal childcare, provided either within the household, through the extended family or by friends and neighbours, may also be limited. Changing intergenerational relationships and living arrangements make it less likely that working mothers can turn to their own parents for support. As one father in Spain described it, for many families 'bringing up children is like an obstacle race'.

The strategies through which families attempt to overcome these difficulties are highly gendered. To some extent, this is a predictable corollary of the continued gender differentiation in the labour market. Women's employment levels remain lower than men's, and differences are particularly marked at the household level. Although the number of non-working mothers is declining, women are seldom their household's primary earner: in the great majority of dual participation households, the male partner works longer hours than the woman, and in many households works much longer than she does outside the home. This in itself is a reflection of the constraints on working parents, but it also reinforces the perception that the labour market is primarily the man's domain and the domestic sphere, by implication, the primary responsibility of the woman. The impact of women's increased employment on gender relations within the home is, therefore, muted.

The extent to which the burden of reconciling the conflicting demands on the household falls upon women is a constant theme in accounts of family life. Findings from interviews are in line with Eurostat data (European Commission, 2002), which show strong inequality in the distribution of domestic tasks. However, the issue of gender equality in households' internal arrangements for undertaking work and family tasks is complex. While almost all women and men agree that women have more responsibility for domestic and childcare responsibilities than men, views diverge over the extent to which this is problematic. The different cultural contexts within Europe mean that very different subjective perceptions are held of situations that appear objectively similar.

Traditional views of gender differentiated adult roles are widely held throughout Europe. They are particularly evident among older generations, rural communities, less-educated women, and specific cultural groups. From this perspective, differentiation in men and women's roles is fundamental to family life, as a Hungarian woman explained:

> There's the husband who works and provides financial security for the family. Then there's the woman, the wife, the mother, who creates a warm family home. This is my ideal.

A Greek woman aged 40, who worked full time, nonetheless claimed total control over the domestic sphere: 'I'm satisfied, because I don't want Kostas to help. It upsets me, and I'm serious. I don't even let my mother touch my home.'

When women are dissatisfied with these roles, the consequences may, however, be painful. Two divorcees from Estonia cited their former husbands' traditional expectations of their wifely role as key factors in their decisions to dissolve their marriages. The older

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woman (68) described her husband as 'like a god in our family; he was raised to be served', while the other (42) drew contrasts between her own situation as a working parent, and his:

> Husband came home from work, he was tired and impatiently demanded dinner to be served. . . . but that I also worked, and the children were small, really meant nothing to him. . . . Every situation has its limits somewhere. I could not tolerate this situation any longer. We got divorced.

Many women are critical of men who contribute little within the home, yet couples do not necessarily look to a redistribution of domestic responsibilities as a full solution to the work–life balance problems that parents encounter. Problems are not always seen as a household issue, but as conflicting demands on the woman's time. Men are especially likely to feminise the problem and distance themselves from its solution. During the IPROSEC interviews, fathers in Ireland explained that improved childcare was needed to make things fairer for women who worked and more equitable between couples; similarly, a Spanish father expressed his criticisms of the inadequacy of state support solely in terms of the implications for women:

> The government seems to promote female employment but does nothing in the way of childcare facilities, obliging women to stay at home to look after the children, unless they wish to invest most of their wage on a private arrangement.

Women are less likely to individualise the problem and are, therefore, readier to identify men as necessary to its solution. A Greek mother felt changes were required in both the private and public sphere:

> Primarily, men should accept their responsibilities as parents and members of the household so that women don't have to do everything. Then, public provision should be better adapted to the situation of women.

Problems and policies

Throughout Europe, men and women face extensive problems in reconciling work and family life. For policy makers the core question concerns the extent to which these problems are amenable to policy solutions: that is, the extent to which families consider policy intervention to be appropriate, and the extent to which such intervention is effective.

Judging the acceptability of policy intervention by families is a complex matter. Questioned at a generic level, European citizens generally resist the notion of state intervention in family life, except in those countries where a long tradition of state responsibility towards families exists (France and Sweden, and the former communist countries). Elsewhere, the predominant view is that family issues are private matters to be resolved by the individuals concerned. However, a rather different picture emerges if state involvement is more specifically related to particular issues faced by families. Despite expressing resistance to state 'interference', families support – and in some instances expect – some forms of state involvement, most obviously in relation to their economic security. Such involvement includes direct financial assistance to low-income families,

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and measures to improve access to employment, including those that address women's needs for childcare provision. Most countries are considered to have substantial policy deficits in these areas.

To what extent do such deficits impact on social practice? In line with their view of family life as private, many men and women consider family decisions to be personal matters primarily based on emotional considerations. But it is clear that, among lower-income groups in particular, inadequate earned income, and insufficient state support to compensate for it, can affect decisions to marry, patterns of family formation, parents' employment profiles, and household living arrangements. In some countries, where levels of state support are linked to family size, the influence of policy is quite explicit. Some indications are also found that the logistical difficulties of arranging household activity patterns to accommodate paid work hours and childcare responsibilities may be affecting decisions about family size and parental employment for some better-off couples. Women's *de facto* responsibility for reconciling these conflicting demands is likely to retrench rather than challenge traditional gender roles. While the role of policy is undoubtedly limited in influencing intra-couple negotiations that underpin these patterns, potential exists for improved infrastructure support for families that addresses structural constraints on men's and women's roles.

Notes

1 The interviews with families were carried out in 2001–02 for the research project 'Improving Policy Responses and Outcomes to Socio-Economic Challenges: Changing Family Structures, Policy and Practice', funded by the European Commission under Framework Programme 5 (ref HPSE-CT-1999-00031). See http://www.iprosec.org.uk, 5 February 2003, for details. The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the Commission or the other contributors.

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