



Work-life balance across the lifecourse

The phrase 'work-life balance' suggests that the demands of paid employment somehow threaten the rest of life, unless a 'balance' is sought. It is an expression that has emerged in response to social change. Recent and more deeply rooted changes in the labour market, the nature of employment, demographic trends, family life and state policies combine to create a particular sense of tension and pressure between paid employment and the rest of life. Experiences of 'work-life balance' vary across the lifecourse but it is an issue which affects everyone, not just those with direct caring responsibilities. It is the subject of an increasing number of government policies and initiatives, often with the aim of creating greater equality in the workplace, or of supporting families.

In Summer 2004, CRFR held an international conference to explore work-life balance across the lifecourse. This briefing outlines some of the main issues from the conference, explores what we might learn from international comparisons, and makes recommendations for policy and for further research.

Key points

- How to combine earning and 'life', including not only bringing up children and/or elder care but also leisure time and time for family, friends, and intimate relationships, are issues faced by all workers, not just childrearing couples
 - Long and unsociable hours of employment heighten the difficulties; full-time employees in the UK work longer hours than workers in many other affluent European countries
 - Inequalities of gender, class, and ethnicity affect ways in which work-life issues will be experienced, and the ability to balance the demands of work with other needs
 - Women still take prime responsibility for caring and domestic work; women's employment patterns remain much more affected than men's by the need to care for children or others; and women combining full-time work and caring often suffer more work-life stress than men
 - Work-life balance is dependent on a mixture of state policies, individual circumstances and cultural factors. These include norms and assumptions particularly in relation to gender roles and the domestic division of labour
 - The generosity of parental leave provision is variable across countries. Men's take up of parental leave is much higher when the provision is generous and the costs of take up are low
 - Parents on a low income, especially those with few employment options and restricted resources, have particular difficulties with 'work-life balance'
 - A raft of policies and actions are needed and no one provision will benefit all
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Introduction

The often taken for granted separations between 'home' and 'work' and 'work' and 'leisure', or between 'work' and all of the rest of 'life' are, of course, historically and culturally specific, reflecting long term social change. The idea that we should all have leisure time is only possible because the activities necessary to sustain human life need not be full-time preoccupations.

Feminist academic scholars in the 1970s and 1980s devoted time to unpacking the opposition between 'home' and 'work'. They explored the historical processes gendering access to particular jobs and industries, excluding some women, particularly married middle-class women, from paid work, and generating the ideological construction of men as husband earners/providers and women as economically inactive housewives looking after children. Nowadays women's right to legal and financial independence, including equal access to paid employment, is no longer contested. However, gender equality and responsibility for caring remain debated aspects of the current concerns with 'work-life balance'. This was highlighted by Robert Connell, in his keynote talk 'A Really Good Husband': Observations on Work/Life Balance, Gender Justice and Social Change.

Recent changes in the labour market leading to the intensification of the pace of work and long hours are a particular cause of dissatisfaction with 'work-life balance' (Lewis 2000, Taylor 2000, 2001). Households are relatively time-poor, not only because of working hours but because dual earning couples or '1.5 earner families' are now the common pattern among co-resident couples bringing up children. Also, smaller families and greater longevity result in more employees combining paid work with caring for an elderly or dependent person at some stage in their working lives. Government policies have reinforced some of these trends by placing new emphasis on paid employment. In her conference address, State Policies, Labour Markets and Families, Ann Shola Orloff described a shift across a number of states from supporting women as full-time mothers and caregivers to encouraging or requiring employment for all, including mothers.

Some commentators suggest that the heavy demands of employment and the high value placed on 'work' can distort and impoverish life for all (Sennett 1998, 2004). However, there is a body of research which demonstrates a continued morality of wishing to put family and children first among many workers combining caring and providing. This is certainly the case among many low income mothers in the UK, as was demonstrated in the plenary address of Sarah Cunningham-Burley and Kathryn Backett-Milburn, Work-Life Balance in Low Income Families. Many papers at the conference reported research findings bringing further evidence to these debates.

At its most general, the public issue is how to achieve caring-societies, caring-lives and healthy economies, in the context of global capitalism. This means economies with jobs that not only provide livelihoods and taxable income for the state to buy desired public goods but also a structuring of work that enables rather than undermines civil societies, families and personal lives. The personal issue is often how to combine earning and 'life', including not only bringing up children and/or elder care but also

leisure time and time for family, friends, and intimate relationships. These are issues faced by all workers, not just childrearing couples. However, despite some common problems across all workers, issues of inequalities of gender, class, and ethnicity continue to emerge in more recent research literature. In terms of the possibilities of government sponsored policies and practices easing these issues, it is clear that a raft of policies and actions are needed and that no one provision will benefit all.

Comparing international policies

In her plenary address, Women's Employment and Work Life Balance in Britain and Europe, Rosemary Crompton indicated that the success of reducing 'work-life stress' is dependent on a mixture of state policies, individual circumstances, and cultural factors, including norms and assumptions in relation to gender roles and the domestic division of labour. Crompton concluded that 'work-life stress' appears to be lowest in countries where there are policies designed to support dual earner families and work-life balance. These include flexible work opportunities and good childcare provision, as well as factors which encourage men to assume a larger share of domestic work. Recent research suggests, for example, that exceptionally good nursery provision in France is not associated with an equivalent reduction in the stress of working mothers because divisions of labour between men and women in the home typically remain rather more traditional than in many northern European countries. Whilst increasing numbers of countries are introducing policies aimed at supporting work-life balance, there remain huge differences between the level and nature of policies, as well as the outcomes for women, men and children at different stages of the lifecycle. This was demonstrated by many of the papers at the conference.

Some Nordic countries have 'cash for home care' policies which allow families to choose payment instead of daycare if they want to care for their own children. In Finland, creating more generous leave for parents wishing to care for their children at home resulted in a decrease of women in paid employment and the reinforcement of traditional divisions of labour between men and women bringing up children together. There was little cultural support for men taking periods out of their working life.

Policies have tended to focus on maternity and paternity provisions, with Nordic countries introducing these in the 1970s, whilst Japan, for example, made its first provisions in 1991. In some cases, policies have been broadened out to include all who devote time to unpaid care for others, not just parents caring for children. However, many of these policies have supported a gendered division of care, with women much more likely to use and, indeed, more expected to use, leave provisions than men. Paternity leave provisions are still much less developed than maternity leave in many countries and paternity provision has not always had a high take-up. In Sweden mostly mothers use the right to paid leave to care for a child, even though the provision is available to fathers.

British research shows that men are less likely than women to accept arrangements designed to facilitate 'work life balance' if these involve a drop in salary (O'Brien and Shemilt 2003). The role of main provider remains a key

aspect of fatherhood for many men (Warin et al. 1999). Workplace cultures in which few men take paternity leave can continue to foster the belief among career conscious men (and perhaps also women) that willingness to take a pay cut will be seen as a lack of seriousness concerning their career. In Iceland, a very high profile government led campaign endorsed by major employers helped produce a high take up of new paternity provisions. Their new scheme of parental leave allows for 9 months paid leave – 3 months for mothers, 3 months for fathers and three more months which mothers and fathers can choose to use as they please. Although Iceland is not in the EU, they used an EU directive to develop this provision, which states that mothers and fathers should have equal rights to parental leave.

Working hours

Many conference papers discussed rates of labour force participation of men and women and trends in and the impact of particular patterns of working hours. The proportion of workers working over 40 hours a week increased in Australia, Britain and the USA between the 1960s and 1990s, while the trend in many wealthy European countries was to lower average working hours. Women's rates of participation in employment have markedly increased in this period, but women remain less likely than men to work very long hours. The rate of part-time working among women in Britain is one of the highest in Europe and is particularly high among women with young children. Some papers demonstrated the popularity of flexible working hours for a range of employees, not just mothers adding to the picture built up by published UK research (Coyle 2003, Dex and Sheibl 2002).

Men's working hours are not typically reduced in response to the birth of children. Indeed, fathers with young children are more likely to work long hours in Britain, as work funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission shows. On average, they spend more hours in employment than men of the equivalent age without children, while the opposite is true for women (O'Brien and Schemilt 2003). The difference in working hours between men and women is most extreme when children are young. Nevertheless, research also suggests that the time fathers spend caring for their children has increased (Fischer et al. 1999) and there are a minority of 'hands on' or 'fully involved' fathers. Many fathers who work long hours complain that they do not have enough time with their families (Lewis, 2000).

Gender

Gender issues ran through all of the conference papers. Although the breadwinner/housewife model of family has been challenged in many ways, the transition to motherhood continues to have practical and emotional consequences. These tend to reinforce gender inequalities in the labour market and domestic realm. Women typically still take prime responsibility for domestic labour and the care of children. Some conference papers confirmed that some fathers are spending increasing time with their families, particularly if they are educated, have a working spouse, and have more than one child. However, working long hours is (unsurprisingly) associated with less time spent with children and, as already noted, this becomes more, not less likely, with fatherhood.

The literature reviewing men's time with children makes a distinction between sole childcare, time spent looking after children that is often freeing women for employment, and joint child care or 'family time'. Research presented at the conference suggests that men who have greater control over their working hours typically use the flexibility to engage in 'family time'. Their engagement with children is part of wider family activity and often not as the main carer. Men who work atypical or unsociable hours, on the other hand, often do more sole childcare frequently enabling their partners' employment but at the cost of 'family time'.

Class

There are also class-based differences in how mothers combine employment and caring for children, resulting from differences in their access to and uses of formal child-care provision and in partnered women's divisions of labour with their partner. Many parents' first choice of care does not involve professional carers but somebody that the child knows, such as the child's grandparent. Some conference papers suggest that professional mothers are more likely to use and stress the value of professional child care services, while dual-worker couples on low incomes are the least likely to use nurseries. A number of studies make it clear that parents struggling on a low income, with few employment options and restricted resources have particular difficulties with 'work-life balance'. For some parents, it is their low earnings which have most impact on their room for manoeuvre in work-life balance. Lone mothers with poor qualifications have particular difficulty in entering paid employment, and in feeling they are able to supervise and care for their children to their satisfaction. Improved availability of high quality affordable nursery care would clearly benefit many parents, an increase in the minimum wage might have more impact for some.

Research implications

Normative assumptions

Most research focuses on parents, with particular emphasis on the preschool phase and on mothers as carers, although there is a growing body of work on fathers. There is little research on other kinds of caring, apart from parenting, or on other kinds of households apart from traditional families, or older people either as carers or cared for.

Children's voices

There are very few children's voices in the research. There is a need for more research which reflects children's experiences of the arrangements that are made for them while their parents are at work, including quality of care, and the outcomes for children of parents' work-life issues. Little has been done to research young people's attitudes, either to their own caring responsibilities in the future or to what extent they are influenced by normative assumptions, their own family experience, their gender etc.

Carers and older people

There is less research about caring for older people (Phillips et al, 2002), or the implications of caring as people age, including the impact of spending time outside paid work, or with reduced hours working on pensions.

Policy and behaviour

There is little exploration of the influence of policy on people's everyday behaviour, in the short or long term. Similarly we need to know more about the extent to which working time directives, leave for parents and carers influence the ways in which households organise their work-life issues and the messages that are passed on to the next generation.

Policy implications

Joined-up policy

The work-life issues that were apparent from the conference suggest the need for flexible adaptable solutions. High quality and universally accessible childcare and child support provisions are important but not the whole solution. A wide range of policies are needed: maternity, paternity and care leave policies; fiscal support for people who provide unpaid care; flexible working hours and career breaks; elder care provision; as well as childcare provision; regulation of working hours; and the avoidance of provisions that discriminate against taking time to care, for example, in access to education and training, conditions of service or pensions. It is also important to monitor how the raft of existing policies impact on the experience of work-life balance and seek an overview of how they may interact.

Work policies and choice

A number of UK researchers are asking whether the policy objective to increase women's participation in the labour market runs contrary to the policy objective of improving work-life balance. Policies which route children into childcare provisions from an early age, rather than opening up choices for each household about how to organise work-life issues, are under particular scrutiny. Those who wish to see the state in the role of enabler argue for state policies which facilitate choices; choice has emerged as an important and complex issue.

Research shows that employees who feel their working hours are not giving them enough time for their family, nevertheless, may not choose current options for their reduction. It has been noted that flexible work options that reduce income seem particularly unattractive to those who experience themselves as the main provider of income for others, a position more common for men. Similarly, the potential benefits of part-time hours for older workers may be negated if the result is a permanently reduced pension. It is important to develop policies that do not penalise workers struggling in a wide range of circumstances to reconcile paid work with their family and personal lives.

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This Briefing was written by Lynn Jamieson and Sarah Morton with editorial input from Esther Breitenbach and Kathryn Backett-Milburn.

Papers by the following people were presented at our conference, 'Work-Life Balance Across the Lifecourse', in June 2004.

A full list of the presentations and some of the papers are available on our website at www.crfr.ac.uk

Louise Ackers, Laura Airey, Kathryn Backett-Milburn, Maureen Baker, Wendy Ball, Matt Barnes, Roderic Beaujot, Alexandra Beauregard, Suzanne Bianchi, Michael Bittman, Sophia Bowlby, Berit Brandth, Esther Breitenbach, Deborah Brennan, Irene Bruegel, Michelle Budig, Samantha Callan, Jo Campling, Lynne Casper, Nickie Charles, Sara Charlesworth, Robert Connell, Rosemary Crompton, Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Kerry Daly, Barbara Davey, Laura den Dulk, Shirley Dex, Liz Doherty, Simon Duncan, Rosalind Edwards, Carol Emslie, Colette Fagan, Janet Fast, Elsa Fontainha, Richenda Gambles, Stephanie Gaudet, Julia Gibbs, Anne Gray, Jenny Hockey, Goretti Horgan, Annie Hughes, Jody Hughes, Zoë Irving, Sarah Irwin, Ragni Hege Kitterod, Hilary Land, Jane Lewis, Poppy Liossis, Wendy Loretto, Charlotte MacCrimmon, Jean Mackenzie Leiper, Suzi Macpherson, Anna MacVicar, Anna Madill, Yukifuma Makita, Simonetta Manfredi, Paula McDonald, Moira McGarry, Linda McKie, Nicola McNeil, Christine Millward, Karina Nilsson, Margaret O'Brien, Julia O'Connor, Elizabeth Oliver, Ann Shola Orloff, Bram Peper, Silje Vatne Pettersen, Maire Phaidraig, Vicky Philips, Kerry Platman, Anu Pylkkanen, Zenaida Ravenera, Katja Repo, Robert Reyes, Tapio Rissanen, Laura Ritchie, Emma Roberts, Victoria Robinson, Wendy Saunderson, Sharon Seiling, Christine Skinner, Alison Smith, Eileen Spencer, Gay Stinson, Mattias Strandh, Lyndall Strazdins, Sevil Sümer, Maria-Letizia Tanurri, Jennifer Tomlinson, Geertje van Daalen, Tanja van der Lippe, Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes, Sandra Vegeris, Jason Walker, Ruth Weston, Peter Whalley, Jane Wheelock, Tineke Willemsen, Sarah Wise, Minna Zechner.

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