Work-life balance and gender: challenging assumptions and unravelling complexity

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Abstract

This chapter critically examines the role of gender in work-life balance research. We contextualise the focal topic by first summarising the changing nature of work and domestic roles and the influence of demographic and social shifts. We revisit the meaning of 'work-life balance' in light of the diverse and sometimes conflicting conceptualisations used by academics and practitioners. A review of the evidence for gender differences in work-life balance needs and experiences is then provided, with a particular focus placed on caring responsibilities. This leads us to consider the policies and practices that are designed to support work-life balance initiatives are then considered, focusing specifically on flexible working, together with the extent to which these are 'gender neutral' both in terms of relevance and uptake. The paper is interspersed with relevant case studies to illustrate the points made. The chapter concludes by setting out priorities for research and practice to promote equitable and effective systemic solutions to improve work-life balance for all.

Keywords: work-life balance; gender; caring roles; flexible working

Summary

This chapter critically examines the role of gender in work-life balance research: to (a) consider why work-life balance remains a gendered issue and to what extent this is warranted and helpful; (b) explore the validity of assumptions about 'female-specific' issues in relation to work-life balance ; (c) critically review existing research evidence in the light of demographic and social shifts. We conclude with recommendations for research and practice to promote equitable and effective systemic solutions for work-life balance, as well as suggestions for advancement in the field to underpin more inclusive perspectives.

Setting the scene: the changing nature of work and domestic roles

The world of work has seen unprecedented change over the last few decades. The rate and pace of such change has been partly fuelled by technological developments that allow many people to work anytime and anywhere (Schlachter et al., 2018). Advances in technology and the increased access to hardware, software and broadband connectivity enable large proportions of the workforce, particularly those employed in the knowledge, service and media sectors, to work remotely rather than being physically present in an office or similar location. The type of work that people do has also shifted from manual and technical, and a particularly steep rise in information technology and knowledge-based jobs has been documented (ONS, 2020). Unemployment is low in many European countries and there is some evidence it is steadily reducing (Eurostat, 2020); in countries such as the UK, sectors such as accommodation and food services are struggling to fill vacancies (ONS, 2020). Moreover, an increasing number of people in Western societies are becoming self-employed or working on short-term contracts. Full or partial employment in the 'gig economy', which refers to a labour market increasingly contingent on short-term contracts and/or freelance work, has risen rapidly and an estimated 5 million people (16% of the total workforce) are doing such work in the UK. In parallel, demographic shifts, such as rising economic globalisation and interdependence (Eurostat, N.D), growing migration (OECD, 2019) and the internationalisation of sectors such as higher education (for an overview see De Wit, 2017), mean that people are working in increasingly diverse and multi-national contexts.

As well as changes in the nature and organisation of work, societies are also evolving. A global decline in fertility alongside growing economic advancement has been documented,

but there is considerable variation between regions. Birth rates have fallen in some countries, such as the US and Australia, and nearly half of all countries currently have insufficient children to maintain their population size (Total Fertility Rate, 2019). Many women are also having children later in life; for the majority of OECD (Organizational for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, the average age of first-time mothers is now 30 or above and, except for Mexico, this has been steadily rising (OECD, 2017). There are several OECD countries where the average age is over 32 (e.g. Japan, Ireland, Switzerland, Spain). At the same time, global life expectancy rose by just over five years from 2000 to 2016, yet there is some evidence that improvements are lower in high income countries such as the UK and the US (ONS, 2019). Socio-economic inequalities in life expectancy are also widening (Raleigh, 2019), with people living in poorer areas in the UK living up to nine years less than those in more affluent regions and gaps between life expectancy and 'healthy' life expectancy (i.e. the number of years of good health that people can expect) up to 19 years for females and 15 years for males.

In response to the general rise in life expectancy, many countries have increased their statutory retirement age for state pensions, meaning that people are required to work for longer. The health benefits of employment for older people are well recognised (Doyal, 2000; Yeomans, 2011), but the wide gap between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy means that some may struggle to meet the demands of jobs requiring physical effort and long hours. Taken together, these trends mean that many employees are likely to be balancing paid work with unpaid caring responsibilities, particularly for a parent but increasingly for grandchildren, during a time when they may be struggling with their own health. A recent report estimates that one in seven employees are currently carers and numbers are expected to increase considerably in the next decade or so (Carers UK, 2019). The report called for employers and policy makers to be more accommodating and understanding of multiple and complex caring needs.

But who carries the burden of domestic responsibilities? Although the number of men involved in inter-generational family care is increasing, it still typically falls to wives and daughters rather than husbands and sons (Hoff, 2015). As well as carrying this 'double burden', older women workers are at increased risk of adverse workplace experiences, such as bullying and discrimination, as well as stress and mental health problems and the adverse effects of biological changes such as menopause (Handy & Davey, 2007; Payne & Doyal, 2010; ONS, 2019). In terms of domestic responsibilities, an analysis of over 50 years of cross-national data

conducted by Atlintas and Sullivan (2016) found signs of increasing gender equality, but there were some differences between countries. Subsequent analysis of the data found that fathers in Nordic countries spend the most time on childcare and housework, whereas fathers in the Corporatist countries (e.g. Netherlands and Germany) were less involved and this had changed little over time (Altintas & Suillivan, 2017). A trend was observed for fathers from the 'traditionalist' Southern countries (e.g. Italy and Spain) to take on more household tasks, whereas in the Liberal countries (the UK and the US), improvements were only found among 'involved' fathers. The benefits of more egalitarian domestic arrangements are acknowledged, as satisfaction with the gender division of housework is strongly linked with couple wellbeing (Atlintas & Sillivan, 2016; Shockley & Allen, 2018). Interestingly, however, there is evidence that men who perform more domestic tasks than their female partners (especially men who are low earners) tend to be seen as weaker and less masculine (Chaney et al. 2017) and have sex less frequently (Kornrich et al. 2013).

Although UK survey data indicate that women do 60% more unpaid work than men (ONS, 2016), qualitative research reveals a more complex picture. Attitudes towards the division of housework are not only linked to 'traditional' gender conventions but also have strong connections with socio-economic status, as those from middle-class backgrounds are able to negotiate a more equal arrangement (Miller & Carlson, 2015). Research findings also suggest that same sex parents divide household labour considerably more equally than heterosexual parents, as the division of duties is negotiated rather than derived from stereotypes of who 'should' do the caring (Perlez et al., 2010). Of course, not all families comprise dual carers and/or dual earners. In the UK, there are around 1.8 million lone parent families; a quarter of all families with dependent children, which is the highest percentage of any OECD country (OECD, 2014). Ninety percent of lone parents in the UK are women and the proportion of single fathers has remained constant over the last ten years (Gingerbread, 2019).

Given such profound and ongoing changes to where, when and how work is undertaken by different groups of people, along with demographic and social trends, it follows that work-life balance issues have also evolved. Organisational policies and practices relating to work-life balance are often included in the 'diversity' agenda, implying that it is a gender issue, or only relevant to a minority of employees. Given the demographic trends discussed above, it seems warranted to re-examine whether gender is a key determinant of work-life balance, or if it is of concern to all. It is also important to set out the priorities for research and practice. More specifically, in this chapter we address the following questions:

a) What are the key gender issues in work-life balance research? What is the evidence for differences between men and women in work-life balance needs and experiences?
b) What are the implications of caring roles for work-life balance and are there gender differences?
c) To what extent do policies to support work-life balance initiatives, such as flexible working, affect men and women differently?
d) What are the implications of the above issues?
e) What are the priorities for future research and practice?

To address these questions, we draw on peer-reviewed academic research and the practitioner literature. We start by exploring the meaning of the term 'work-life balance' which we argue is conceptualised inconsistently and, as a result, is poorly understood.

What is work-life balance? Different meanings to different people

To address the questions outlined above, it is firstly necessary to examine the concept of work-life balance itself. Definitions are broad, varied and occasionally conflicting and the burgeoning body of research in the field of work-life balance has not led to consensus. The issue of 'balance' is itself a point of contention as it implies that life domains are discrete. Scholars have questioned if a dichotomy between 'work' and 'the rest of life' actually reflects people's everyday experiences given that: a) work may be central to many people's identity and could therefore be considered part of the 'life' domain; b) the distinction between what is work and what is not is becoming increasingly blurred; and c) the notion of 'balance' is misleading and potentially damaging, as it implies that a state of equilibrium or harmony can be achieved.

A recent meta-analytic review conducted by Casper and colleagues (2018) illustrates the diversity of meanings attributed to work-life balance and the need for clarification to move the field forward. They sought to elucidate the construct of 'balance' by reviewing definitions used in the literature, as well as examining theoretical bases and measures used. The authors found a staggering 233 definitions of balance between 'work' and 'non-work' across 290 quantitative, qualitative and non-empirical papers. Findings indicated that 'balance' was operationalised uni-dimensionally (an overall appraisal of one's work and home situation) and multi-dimensionally (separate assessments of different life domains). Meanings were clustered into five distinct areas encompassing satisfaction with role balance, effectiveness in balancing

multiple roles, the perceived importance of different role domains, involvement in multiple roles, and the goodness of fit between role demands and the available resources. Evidence was found to support the 'jingle' fallacy (that different constructs are identical because they share the same name), but it should be noted that more recent publications and higher-quality articles seem to be using the term more consistently. Casper and colleagues also found evidence for the 'jangle' fallacy (using different labels for things that are actually the same construct) where researchers have labelled 'conflict' or 'enrichment' and 'facilitation' measures as assessing work-life balance.

Although conflict and facilitation/enrichment could be considered opposite ends of the same continuum, they are, however, very different. Work-family conflict theory stems from role theory which considers the normative expectations, norms and behaviours that are appropriate for socially defined categories (such as mother or employee;).It maintains that competing demands from different domains can impair the quality of personal life via strain-based (when stress from one role spills over into another), time-based (when meeting demands in one role restricts the time available for another) or behaviour-based conflict (where behaviour that may be required in one role is inappropriate for another; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). On the other hand, enrichment and facilitation are derived from role enhancement theory, which holds that experiences in different life domains can be complementary, as positive experiences and skills gained in one domain may transfer to another (Wayne et al. 2007; Crain & Hammer, 2013). Based on their review, the authors offered the following definition for work-life balance (p. 18):

> "The extent to which employees hold a favourable evaluation regarding their combination of work and nonwork roles, arising from the belief that their emotional experiences, involvement, and effectiveness in work and nonwork roles are commensurate (compatible) with the value they attach to the roles."

Guided by notions of person-environment fit theory (see e.g. Caplan, 1987), which we discuss in more detail in the next section, this definition is broader than others emerging from the review that typically conceptualise 'family' as representing the entire non-work domain. Nevertheless, the authors take a firmly individualised perspective, which has inherent assumptions. Firstly, 'balance' is perceived as being enacted through individual roles and it is taken for granted that the individual is able make a rational evaluation of their own functioning.

This is akin to more generic theories of motivation such as Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1965), which holds that people make choices based on an evaluation of the valence they attach to actions and the anticipated outcomes. Although much researched, there is evidence that people are not always so rational in their decision-making and actions (see e.g. Van Eerde & Thierry, 2016). Secondly, the definition takes a highly subjective stance, anchoring work-life balance in the idiosyncratic context of each individual. There are many instances where such a focus is warranted, for instance to guide activities to help individuals understand, and ultimately better manage, their lives. Yet, to elucidate the link between gender, work, life and 'balance', we advocate a wider and more holistic perspective as set out in the next section. In line with the findings of the review by Casper et al., the literature we discuss in this chapter will use the terms adopted by the researchers themselves (e.g. work-family conflict/balance, work-life conflict/balance).

This section has examined the diverse and sometimes conflicting ways that work-life balance has been conceptualised and highlighted the need for consensus. Next, we explore the complex interactions between work-life balance and gender and consider whether women experience more problems at the interface between work and personal life. Also examined is the role played by law and policy as it relates to work-life balance issues, with particular focus placed on flexible working initiatives. Some examples from research are provided to illustrate the complexity of gender differences in work-life balance outcomes.

'Balance', work and gender: a complex interplay

Others before us have noted that work-life balance research is never culture- or gender-neutral (Kossek, Lewis and Hammer 2010; Emslie & Hunt, 2009). Williams and colleagues argued cogently in their chapter in the Annual Review of Psychology (2016) that work-life balance researchers to date have been overly focused on individual experience but paid little attention to systemic issues such as how gender, personal identity and work are conceptualised and interlinked. The authors delineated six perspectives on work-life balance research, albeit with a US-centric orientation, focusing on either:

(a) industrial-organizational (I/O) and occupational health (OHP) psychology that focuses predominantly on research on the individual experience of work-family conflict, where demands associated with roles in different domains are incompatible;

(b) social psychology which also adopts an individual perspective but takes greater account of social norms and context such as gender role perspectives (Gutek et al., 1991).

(c) survey research which considers how working arrangements, including scheduling and location, are changing;

(d) the business case for (or against) initiatives such as flexible and 'family-friendly' working, including several meta-analyses and reviews showing that the evidence is inconsistent (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2010);

(e) action research, including the pioneering work of Lotte Bailyn that used the Collaborative Interaction Action Research model (CIAR) to evaluate work-life balance initiatives based on job-redesign.

(f) cultural comparisons using international data sets such as OECD data on working patterns. This research often examines the number of hours people spend at work and the time devoted to leisure and personal care and also explores demographic differences by country.

Challenging assumptions: are work-life balance issues 'worse' for women?

There is a common assumption that women find managing the work-home interface more challenging than men. Given that evidence from meta-analyses and systematic reviews is purported to be particularly strong (e.g. Harbour & Miller, 2001), what do studies from I/O and OHP research tell us about gender differences? The results of two large-scale meta-analyses, together covering several hundred studies, show that men and women report similar levels of work-family conflict (Allen et al., 2012). Yet, we agree with Williams and colleagues (2016) that large-scale aggregated analyses cannot adequately capture the complexity of the interface between work and non-work. The authors concluded their narrative review by indicating that a key reason for why little is still known about how to best support work-life balance is that the world of work, and arguably society, remains wedded to outdated notions of what it means to be a 'good' woman or man, and a 'good' worker. High (work) performance and dedication to the job continue to be demonstrated by long working hours, although there is overwhelming evidence that this is not the case (Pencavel, 2015). This means that women, who still bear the brunt of caring responsibilities even when working full-time, will experience major challenges. The sociologist Arie Hochschild termed this the 'second shift' (Hochschild & Machung, 2012), raising awareness of the scale and implications of unpaid and taken-for-

granted domestic labour and the emotional investment required. The importance of gender-role expectations is also highlighted in the findings of studies showing that women living in cultures with more 'traditional' gender roles tend to experience higher levels of work-family conflict (Koura et al. 2017; Magadley, 2019).

Although large-scale reviews find little evidence that women report more work-life conflict than men, their findings can mask more subtle gender differences. Research findings indicate that characteristics of the job and the family are likely to be relevant here. A longitudinal study of Australian parents found that having more children predicted chronic work-family conflict for men but not for women, whereas long working hours and job insecurity were the key predictors for women (Cooklin et al. 2016). The outcomes of conflict may also differ by gender; a two-year prospective analysis of Swedish workers found that women who experienced conflict between work and their personal lives were at greater risk of poor self-rated health than men (Leineweber et al. 2013). Another study, also conducted in Sweden, found that work-family conflict was more likely to lead to exhaustion in women than men (Canivet et al. 2010). There is also evidence that women, but not men, are prone to feelings of guilt and distress when engaging in boundary-spanning work tasks outside working hours (Glavin et al. 2011). Mothers of young children, but not fathers, are also at risk of feeling guilty about experiencing conflict between work and family (termed work-family guilt) (Borelli et al. 2017). Nonetheless, a study that examined the experiences of first-time fathers from 7 months gestation to 6 months after the birth found that they experienced considerable tension when trying to balance their desire to be an 'involved' father and the economic necessity to work. This led to feelings of guilt, disappointment and a sense of being excluded, as well as emotional pressure engendered by trying to juggle different elements of their life with little, if any, support (Machin, 2015).

Differences in the type of work done by men and women also shape work-life balance experiences. There is some evidence that women may be at greater risk of strain-based work-life conflict (van Daalen et al. 2006), whereas men are more prone to behaviour-based conflict (Watai et al. 2008; Kinman et al. 2016). It is likely, however, that differing job characteristics can help to explain such effects; for example, women are more likely to be employed in the 'helping' professions,which is a known risk factor for strain-based conflict, whereas men

typically do the type of work associated with behaviour-based conflict, such as policing and firefighting (Dierdorff & Ellington, 2008). A meta-analytic review of gender and work-family conflict conducted by Shockley and colleagues (2017) shows that differences in work-family outcomes are minimal where men and women do similar work. Recent research on crossover (where states of wellbeing are transmitted between closely related people, usually partners) also supports this view. Early studies found that the psychological effects of men's work were frequently transmitted to their wives. For example, a survey of 60 working couples conducted by Jones and Fletcher (1993) found significant associations between a man's work-related stressors and his wife's mental wellbeing, with particularly strong effects observed in couples where men were employed in high strain jobs (i.e. those combining high demands with low control). Such studies, however, tended to utilise samples from male-dominated professions (particularly security and the armed forces) and included couples where the majority of wives were either homemakers or employed in part-time or relatively undemanding jobs. More recent research that has sampled couples with similar job status has found that the women's work stressors and strains (e.g. anxiety and depression) are more likely to cross over to their male partners than vice versa (Demerouti et al. 2005; Crossfield et al. 2010). There is some evidence that this effect may be explained by women preferring to talk about their stressful experiences at work (therefore 'transmitting' their distress), whereas men may be more likely to withdraw from such discussions (Crossfield et al. 2010).

The need to 'drill down' and consider potential reasons for any gender differences found (or not found) in studies is highlighted in Box 1 below.

Box 1: Work-life balance in male-dominated jobs: gender neutral?

People working in the emergency and security services are at high risk of work-life conflict; this is particularly the case for the 'uniformed' professions such as the police, firefighters and prison officers (McDowall et al. 2014; Kinman et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2018). It might be assumed that women with caring responsibilities who work in these male-dominated jobs find it particularly challenging to achieve work-life balance, as working cultures are highly gendered, work can be dangerous and long, antisocial hours in hazardous conditions are the norm. Many studies, however, find few gender differences in levels of work-life conflict

(Janzen et al. 2007; Griffin & Sun, 2017). A study of UK prison officers conducted by Kinman et al. (2016) found no evidence that women had a poorer work-life balance than men – in fact, men reported a higher level of conflict than women. Interestingly, however, women with dependent children reported a similar level of conflict (time-based, strain-based and behaviour-based) to women without caring responsibilities. No significant relationship between the number of dependent children and work-life conflict was also found, and women officers who were working 'family friendly' hours did not report a better balance than those who worked standard hours.

These findings could be taken at face value (i.e. that work-life balance is a gender-neutral issue in the prison service), but alternative explanations should be considered. Female prison officers with dependent children might, by necessity, have developed more effective strategies to juggle their caring responsibilities with their work demands; for example, they may set firmer boundaries between domains, or be more adept at 'switching off' from work concerns. Female officers with caring responsibilities may also have more domestic and/or supervisory support to help them balance their roles. The most likely explanation, however, is that women prison officers who found the demands of the job to be incompatible with childcare, or who had less support available to them, would have left to seek another type of work. The finding that women did not seem to find so-called 'family-friendly' hours helpful suggests that the prison service should develop work-life balance initiatives that are more inclusive and fit for purpose. Work-life conflict appears to be a common reason for wishing to leave this type of work (Lambert et al. 2013), so gender appropriate interventions to improve balance are urgently required.

While many studies have examined gender differences in work-life balance, few have considered the male perspective. As discussed earlier in this chapter, women appear to experience more feelings of guilt and distress in response to work-family conflict than men and they are generally more likely to take up 'family-friendly' initiatives to try to improve their situation. Flexible working, defined as "a way of working that suits an employee's needs, for example having flexible start and finish times, or working from home" (Flexible Working, N.D.) is the initiative that is most frequently offered by organisations. Although there are widespread attempts to highlight the benefits of working flexibly for all employees (especially parents), men are often discouraged from taking advantage of such initiatives despite wishing

to be more involved in their children's upbringing. This is due to their perceptions that mothers find it easier to access flexibility as they are considered the primary carer, and organisational assumptions about men's central role as instrumental economic providers (Gatrell et al. 2014). Such concerns appear to be grounded in reality, as studies find evidence that men who wish to take up family-friendly options are perceived negatively. For example, Rudman and Mescher (2013) found that hypothetical male employees who requested family leave were seen as less dominant and ambitious and less worthy of promotion. Interestingly, female participants were just as likely to stigmatise men who requested family leave, but they tended to express stronger views that such men were "poor workers". Other scenario-based studies find evidence, however, that requests for flexible working tend to be less stigmatised and attract fewer career penalties in female-dominated industries (Krstic & Hideg, 2019).

There is some evidence that women differ in their beliefs and behaviours about paternal involvement in childcare and this can have implications for their work-life balance. An early study conducted by Allen and Hawkins (1999) found that 'gatekeepers', who thought that mothers are better equipped to do certain activities, undertook a considerably larger share of housework than 'collaborators' who believed in equal sharing of duties. More recent research using dyadic data found that, even after controlling for spouses' respective evaluation of the parenting relationship, maternal encouragement strongly influenced fathers' involvement in care (Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2008). More recently, Radcliffe and Cassell (2014) drew on diary and interview data to investigate the link between work-life conflict, flexible working and maternal gatekeeping behaviours in 24 dual-earner couples. The results demonstrated that traditional gender beliefs continue to influence who works flexibly and how conflict is resolved, but negotiations between partners appeared to be complex. Where women were flexible workers, they took unilateral responsibility for resolving conflict, whereas this was solved in a more egalitarian manner where men worked flexibly. This study highlights the importance of focusing on such micro processes to understand the subtleties of negotiations about conflict at the couple level, but also the need, highlighted throughout this chapter, to legitimise and encourage flexible working practices for men. Even in supposedly progressive countries, such as Norway, some traditional expectations remain even amongst women who are of more senior status (Milne, 2018).

A study conducted by Tomlinson (2006) took a trajectory perspective drawing on Hakim's preference theory (2000), which broadly seeks to explain women's investment in work or reproductive choices by their preferences for certain lifestyles and the centrality of

work or family (2000). Findings indicated that: a) the availability of care networks; b) employment status and c) the welfare policy context influenced women's choices about whether to transition to part-time work. The type of work done should also be considered when considering the work-life balance implications. The gig economy, discussed above, is widely believed to benefit working parents as it can help them balance employment with caring responsibilities. Nonetheless, as the availability of work can be inconsistent making arrangements for child-care can be challenging. Recent research in the UK also highlighted a 'caring penalty', particularly for women who work in the performing arts whose earnings are on average considerably lower (McDowall, Teoh, Gamblin et al, 2018). In turn, this creates a cycle of being unable to afford childcare and therefore being unable to take up future work opportunities, as outlined in Box 2 below.

Box 2: Caring penalties in the Performing Arts

Much research that has examined work-life balance issues has concerned itself with a relatively narrow range of sectors and occupations, whereas other types of work have received far less attention. The performing arts (Music, Theatre and Dance), notably absent from research in this area, were the focus of a large-scale UK study (McDowall, Gamblin, Teoh, Raine, 2018) with over 2,500 participants, where artists and those working off-stage were surveyed about their experiences of balance and conflict. Work in the performing arts presents unique challenges, as long hours, touring, regular weekend and bank holiday work and regional differences in terms where work is available are commonly encountered.

The findings showed that carers pay a 'career penalty' as they earn on average £3,000 less per annum than those without caring responsibilities. Carers also make 'caring sacrifices' as three-quarters of the sample reported having to turn down work opportunities when they were unable to combine them with their caring responsibilities. Once again, women were particularly affected and were also far more likely to work part-time or freelance when becoming carers. Notably, 60% of carers said that the main source of support was their own network, particularly the family and partner; support was unlikely to come from the workplace. Only 10% had taken shared parental leave. This is likely because over half (54%) of participants were either freelancers and/or contract workers; UK systems make it very difficult for people doing this type of work to apply for parental benefits.

Law, policy, work-life balance and gender

Returning to the wider context, work-life balance legislation and policy varies considerably in different countries. A recent survey of the best countries to raise children found that Sweden, Denmark and Norway were the top three (Clark et al. 2020). The Nordic countries have long been held up as a bastion of progressive policy and effective practice, due to more egalitarian gender ideology and a range of supportive mechanisms (such as enhanced parental leave structures that are expected to be shared between parents and accessible workplace solutions for childcare; Hein & Cassirer, 2010). As discussed above, cultural context is a key facilitator for work-life balance initiatives in relation to gender-role ideologies, but it also has a strong influence on whether access to workplace initiatives such as flexible working is encouraged and supported. For instance, Finland passed a law in 1996 (Working Hours Act, 2010) that allowed all employees to work flexibly by starting and finishing earlier or later, meaning that nearly 25 years later flexibility has become normalised, based on mutual trust between employers and employees and a widespread recognition of its benefits. More recently, Finland has taken a step further by granting workers the right to decide when and where they work for at least half of their working hours (Working Hours Act, 2020). In due course, these initiatives will hopefully highlight the conditions required to optimise the benefits of flexible working for all.

The Scandinavian experience suggests that the current stigma surrounding the uptake of flexible working options, particularly for men, may reduce over time but under current conditions interventions are needed to encourage more positive attitudes and support uptake. Other evidence points to the importance of the attitudes of families in influencing positive and negative views about equality and different ways of working. Drawing on data from 77 Swedish managerial fathers, a team of Scandinavian researchers (Allard, Haas & Hwang, 2007) investigated the link between flexible working, gender attitudes and levels of work-family conflict. Findings revealed that fathers with more egalitarian attitudes and favourable views about workplace flexibility experienced less conflict, but the impact of actual working hours and the use of flextime (a schedule that allows workers to alter workday start and finish times) was less important. This may be because working hours are relatively low in Sweden compared to other countries and there is a strong culture of prioritising leisure, particularly during the

summer months. Nonetheless, it is important to consider whether increasing opportunities for flexible working is the best (or only) way to support work-life balance.

A recent study conducted in Germany suggests that flexible working is not necessarily a panacea, as outlined in Box 3 below.

Box 3: Potentially unintended consequences of flexible working - evidence from Germany

A recent study conducted by the Hans Böckler Foundation in Germany, used panel data to investigate if greater uptake of flexible working results (including working from home) in additional leisure time and whether women's and men's experiences differ (Lott, 2019). Although Germany is often thought to exemplify a productive country, it is also deeply conservative and stereotypical notions of the 'ideal worker' prevail. Mothers are perceived more favourably if they put their family before work, whereas men are typically expected to prioritise their job. Women unsurprisingly devote nearly three times more hours to childcare than men. Although public and subsidised childcare is available, it often fails to meet the needs of full-time working parents.

Interestingly, the findings of the study revealed unintended consequences of home working. Both mothers and fathers worked longer hours when at home, but mothers spent additional hours on childcare. Fathers who frequently worked at home, however, put in an average of six hours of work overtime, compared to those who never work at home who only put in an additional two hours. There was no beneficial effect of flexible working on leisure time, with mothers having on average 1.5 fewer hours per week compared to fathers. The report concludes that gender stereotypical work expectations continue to promote the double shift for women and that flexible work arrangements, such as working at home, are not an effective way of solving this problem and may even result in less leisure time.

A recent European comparison of working hours for full-time employees shows striking differences between countries, once again highlighting an interplay of cultural and policy influences (Eurostat, 2018). The average working week across the EU is just over 40 hours, where men clock up on average nearly two hours more than women (41.0 compared with 39.3). Denmark has the shortest working hours at just under 38 per week, followed by Italy (38.8), the Netherlands and France (both 39.0), and Finland and Ireland (both 39.1). At the other end of the spectrum, people in the UK work the longest hours (42.3), in second place is Cyprus (41.7), Austria is third, (41.4), Greece is fourth (41.2) and Poland and Portugal share fifth place (both 41.1). The reasons for such differences are complex as, for example, a high

proportion of Austrians and Greeks are employed in tourism and hospitality where long and erratic working hours are commonplace, whereas France has a 35-week in many sectors and employees are protected by strong unions and labour laws.

In Europe, political ideologies, particularly between the 'West' and 'East', have been found to influence work-life balance policies and practices. In the former communist (and now post-socialist) countries, equal access to work for men and woman was guaranteed; now the challenge is not the need to address inequalities, but to increase employment for both sexes (Watson, 2010). The post-socialist countries have a history of state-regulated and extensive childcare provision which, combined with the availability of shared parental leave, is a further reason for international differences. The cost of childcare varies across countries, with the most expensive being New Zealand, Australia, the US and the UK (where a couple with two young children earning the average wage have to devote between 31.1% and 37.3% of their income), whereas in Finland and Canada it is 21.5% and 22/9% respectively (Global Risks Report, 2020).

At the organisational level, there are initiatives at board level to increase gender equality across the ranks, but the main focus is on senior positions. Again, the Scandinavian countries have been at the forefront in introducing such policies. For instance, as highlighted above, it is the norm rather than the exception for parental leave to be shared between parents and other structural mandates to further equality in the workplace, such as quotas for company boards, have long been in place. A recent international comparison of board-room quota legislation and policies (Terjesen, Aguilera and Lorenz, 2015), however, found varying degrees of success for top-level quota initiatives which is contingent on three factors: (1) greater support for female labour participation; (2) left-wing government coalitions and (3) a prior history of gender equality initiatives. Their analysis also provides examples of organisational-level gender initiatives. For example, Deutsche Telekom (N.d) has committed to increasing the number of women in senior management, specialist and board positions and 40% are now women. To accomplish this, the organisation introduced initiatives such as female quotas on leadership programmes and on recruitment and promotion short-lists. Comparatively less focus was placed, however, on how these women might be supported to meet their caring responsibilities and protect their work-life balance after promotion. To be successful, such initiatives should be tailored to the national and cultural context. As highlighted by Bailyn in the early 1990s (1992), not every initiative or support mechanism is suitable for each

organisation and each individual, so solutions should be co-produced to ensure they are fit for purpose and to maximise uptake.

This section has critically examined the popularly held notion that work-life conflict is more frequently experienced by women and found little evidence for this. This does not mean, however, that men and women have different experiences of managing the interface between work and personal life or that initiatives to improve balance are 'gender blind'. The next section considers life-course perspectives on work-life balance and gender, focusing on the shifting priorities and needs of employees of men and women through the life span.

Life-course perspectives on work-life balance and gender

Work-life balance needs and priorities are likely to change over the lifespan. For example, when building a career, people may be prepared to sacrifice their personal life to ensure career progression. Work may become less of a priority, however, following major life transitions such as the birth or adoption of a child, or when facing retirement. It may well become more salient again when children leave home, or if people embark on a career change later in life. Nonetheless, it is crucial not to make assumptions as there are many sociodemographic and other individual difference factors that will influence people's trajectories. As yet, however, little research has considered how work-life experiences and needs fluctuate through the life-course and via lifecycle changes. Biographical approaches have particularly strong potential to shed light on personal experiences of work-life balance across the life-course. Schilling (2015) used this method to analyse the work-life trajectories of older female employees in the public sector in Germany. Many women perceived that responsibility for work-life balance had shifted over time from the employer to the individual; while this implies that people now have the freedom and self-determination to construct an ideal balance to meets their needs, they found it challenging to determine what is 'feasible' from what is 'aspirational'. Participants often appeared to re-construct or re-interpret their biography to create an image of a life that was "successful, well-planned and well-balanced" (p. 491).

Longitudinal data using a representative sample is also needed to demonstrate the effects of life transitions at a population level. Analysis of data from the US Study of the

Changing Workforce (Allen & Finkelstein, 2016) found that that perceptions of work-family conflict vary over the lifespan, being highest when children are under five and lowest in mid-life when children have left home. Moreover, women typically reported more family interference with work than men when children were younger, but this was explained by a gender stereotypical division of domestic responsibilities. Men, on the other hand, perceived more work interference with family when the youngest child was a teenager. Such findings are likely to reflect a complex and highly gendered interplay between the need to spend time and energy caring for children when they are younger and to meet the financial obligations of raising older children. Real life interpretations are likely to be more complex still, and vary by parental socioeconomic status and child's gender not least as raising girls is significantly more costly (Moneysupermarket.com, N.D.)

Mid-life is also a significant transition in the life cycle that can influence work-life balance experiences and preferences. Women, in particular, are likely to experience several life events and major role transitions during midlife relating to health, physical appearance, sexuality, caring responsibilities and employment (Etaugh, 2018). As discussed above, however, people's experiences will vary as they are shaped by their life histories and socio-cultural norms. Emslie and Hunt, (2009) conducted in-depth interviews with men and women in mid-life to compare their experiences of work-life balance. The findings showed that participants' perceptions remained highly gendered even though they were no longer caring for young children. Women still felt the need to juggle different roles, whereas for men this was a thing of the past when their children were younger and more dependent. These findings suggest that women may internalise, and continue to enact, stereotypical caring roles and it may impact on the wellbeing and quality of life of both parents.

The 'boomerang generation' (e.g. Berngruber, 2015; Stone, Berrington & Falkingham, 2011), refers to the increasing number of young people returning to their family home as they cannot afford to live independently. Recent data from the UK indicate that there has been a 46% rise in the number of 20 to 34-year olds who are living with their parents (ONS, 2019). Research that examines the implications of this for parental wellbeing is sparse, but a recent study that drew upon longitudinal data from a cross-national EU survey found that parents with adult children who had returned to live at home experienced a decline in quality of life to a similar degree to having contracted an age-related disability, such as losing mobility (Tosi &

Grundy, 2018). Parents with returning children who were unemployed experienced particularly negative effects. Gender differences were not examined in this analysis, but it is likely that women would feel obliged to resume the caring role and their expectations of independence at this life stage might be violated.

Surprisingly few studies have examined work-life balance among older workers, but there is evidence that it has a strong influence on health and productivity in later life and influences people's retirement decisions (Casey & Berger, 2015; Uriarte-Landa & Hebert, 2009). The ability to work reduced hours, or on fewer days, is linked with more positive attitudes towards retirement (Raymo & Sweeney, 2005). Phased retirement (where an employee who is approaching retirement age can continue with a reduced workload) can help facilitate this key life transition. Flexible working, therefore, has some potential to help older workers remain in the labour market and have some choice over their retirement options. Research with older Australian women (Everingham et al. 2007) also found that it can open up new working opportunities and lead to life transformations. A study conducted by Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015) provides some insight into the experiences of older people who make decisions to work flexibly and the role played by gender and age. Analysis of interviews with 96 people aged 50 to 64 highlighted strong gender differences in attitudes towards flexible working and the type of work done. For men, the decision to work flexibly was mainly driven by a desire for control and autonomy, often by becoming self-employed. Women, however, frequently saw flexible working as a way of 'fitting in' paid work around enduring caring responsibilities and domestic roles, or 'helping out' in an ad hoc manner. After retirement, however, there is some evidence that responsibility for domestic tasks may become more equitable. An analysis of UK panel data suggests that the traditional gender divisions are far less pronounced in couples who have both retired than those who continued to do any paid work (Cebulla et al. 2007).

This section has considered how work-life balance needs and priorities shift through the life-course and the key role of gender. Finally, we examine the future challenges for investigating work-life balance and gender and highlight some priorities for research.

Future challenges for investigating work-life balance and gender

Changes in demographics and the nature of work means that research is urgently needed to explore the challenges and opportunities for work-life balance and wellbeing. Some of the

key issues have been discussed in this chapter. The number of working people with eldercare responsibilities will grow substantially over the next 20 years. This has major implications for their health, work performance and retention and consequently threatens the wellbeing and economic stability of workers and organisations (Griggs et al. 2020). Insight into the work-life experiences of the growing numbers of 'sandwich' or dual carers is particularly needed. There are currently around 1.3 million people in the UK with multi-generational caring responsibilities (due to a combination of women tending to have children later in life, the Boomerang Generation and longer life expectancy (ONS, 2019). Clearly, dual carers are likely to require more targeted support from understanding employers, but it is important to recognises that caregivers experiences and needs will differ. Working flexibly may be particularly important for people who are trying to balance paid work with unpaid caring roles while experiencing failing physical health and stamina. Caring for family members with dementia is likely to be particularly challenging, especially when combined with paid work. There is evidence that this can engender role strain and depressive symptoms, particularly where work is low in flexibility (Wang et al. 2011). Data from a Japanese study, although somewhat limited by the rudimentary measures used (Sakka et al, 2019), show that both the care burden and the resulting psychological impact of caring for elders with dementia has a significant impact on work-family conflict. The importance of acknowledging cultural context is emphasised, however, as women in Japanese society are typically responsible for home caring.

There is evidence that women who work in the healthcare professions are particularly likely to take on informal caregiving for a family member (Boumans & Dorant, 2013). These 'double-duty' caregivers are at particular risk of overload and work-life conflict, so further research is warranted to examine their experiences. Another challenge that has received insufficient attention is caring for disabled children. Baker and Drapela (2010) demonstrate how mothers' careers and employment options are disproportionately affected by caring for children on the autistic spectrum. Other aspects of caring roles also require further attention. Most research on work-life balance tends to be conducted in narrow occupational groups (mainly white-collar work and the professions), whereas women from low-income countries are often forced to leave their own children in the care of other migrant workers and seek care-related jobs abroad: a phenomenon known as 'global care chains' (ILO, 2015). Insight into these women's experiences is clearly required.

Research has also paid scant attention to the major changes that are occurring to home and family structures, such as the increase in single-sex couples, lone parenting (referred to earlier in the chapter), 'patchwork' families and reproduction through assistive technology (for an overview from a developmental perspective see Golombok & Tasker, 2015). Over 40,000 people in the UK use Medically Assisted Reproduction each year, but there is a dearth of research that examines the work-life balance of individuals who have extended, or are wishing to extend, their families through reproductive assistance, or through adoption and fostering. For example, individuals undergoing fertility treatment will need time off work to attend appointments for scans, blood tests, egg collection and embryo implantation, but there is no statutory entitlement to absence or flexible working and organisational support is generally poor. A UK study of over 500 individuals undergoing such treatment highlights the need for targeted support, but only a quarter of the sample had received this (Payne, Seenan and Van Akker, 2019). Many respondents had chosen not to disclose that they were undergoing treatment for several reasons, the most common being a wish for privacy. The emotional impact of undergoing fertility treatment was also highlighted, and this can have a stronger impact on employees' work-life balance than the time demands of treatment (Payne et al. 2019). Another issue for further examination is that, although it is often believed that caring for young children brings the biggest challenges, the reality is far more complex; teenagers exploring their independence and encountering difficulties at school are likely to have a major impact on parents and they will typically have less recourse to out-of-hours care facilities than they had for younger children.

Gender and Work-life Balance: how do we move forward?

Are organisational work-life balance initiatives gender neutral, or can they be in the future? Women are still less likely than men to progress into senior roles without affirmative support and, as we have seen in this chapter, are also disproportionately affected by caring duties often for a major part of their working lives. Organisational policies may be introduced, and practices designed to be equally applicable to male and female workers, but a complex interplay of organisational, socio-cultural and individual difference factors means that their uptake remains highly gendered. Clearly, organisations have a duty of care to ensure that all employees are supported to achieve a healthy balance between their work demands and their

personal life regardless of their gender, life-stage and caring responsibilities. Nonetheless, outdated notions of gender roles, such as the perceived 'appropriateness' of men working flexibly, mean that even where national policies are in place and organisational initiatives are available, the uptake is not equitable. This means that women and men are frequently unable to fulfil their personal responsibilities or do so at the cost of their own wellbeing or by compromising their job prospects. It is possible that existing work-life balance initiatives will become more accepted as organisational and societal attitudes towards gender continue to evolve and equitable approaches become more firmly embedded in working life. Failure to ensure that work-life balance initiatives are equitable and fit-for-purpose, however, will mean that the health and job performance of workers will suffer and other organisational challenges such as turnover will increase.

When planning gender-neutral interventions, it is crucial for organisations to ensure that they are evidence-based and fit for purpose; simplistic, one-size-fits-all strategies are not likely to be effective and will be probably met with cynicism by employees. It is also important for researchers and practitioners to be aware of the current and future challenges that may threaten the work-life balance of staff that we have outlined in this chapter, and help organisations ensure that their policies and practices reflect the shifting realities of working life. Demographic changes mean that people will need to work for increasingly longer, often when they are experiencing failing health and energy levels. Family structures have also become more fluid and less influenced by 'dual carer' stereotypes than hitherto. Crucially, we advocate that solutions are developed via a more consultative, context-sensitive and co-creative approach to ensure that diverse needs are met. Ultimately, the starting point must be the need for 'good work' and 'good lives' to foster a holistic perspective. Our review has shown that initiatives such as flexible working can clearly benefit some but can also have unintended consequences to the detriment of others. It is a priority for research to capture such nuances through action research and an inter-disciplinary perspective.

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