

Transitions

**Report on National Debates on
the reconciliation of family
and employment**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

for the EU Framework 5 study
'Gender, Parenthood and the
Changing European
Workplace'

Executive Summary of Research Report #9
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Summary Report on National Debates on the reconciliation of family and employment

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Summary Report for the *Transitions* project on National Debates on the reconciliation of family and employment

This report provides an overview of national debates on work and family, based on national researchers analysis of discourses within the media, government, employers and trade union, in the eight participating countries, during the period of the Transitions research project (2003-5). We were interested in what is on the political and social agenda in each country, what is driving change in policies and practices, and what are the public and media reactions to these debates – for example about fertility concerns, disability, parental leaves, funding for childcare, and changing gender role expectations. This report is part of the Context Mapping workpackage (WP3). The Context Mapping report (Transitions Research Report #1) aimed to provide a broad outline of the principle economic, social and demographic characteristics of the eight participating countries.

We collected initial data on national debates relevant to work and family in spring 2003, at the beginning of the 3 year project. It was apparent that the debates were changing rapidly in each country, and so we repeated the exercise in spring 2005, towards the end of the project to provide a picture of the ways in which national debates are changing and developing across this time frame. In the first stage of the exercise, in 2003, native work-life experts in each country located what they considered to be the relevant national debates on working, parenting and care at this time. They were prompted by a common framework of general questions, derived from relevant literature and personal experience and expertise within the team. The national chapters are structured according to this framework. The national authors also added data on other debates which they viewed as significant in their context. Topics which were not originally considered but which emerged in some countries during the first stage of the research included “Superwoman syndrome” (mentioned in the UK and Norway) and concern about sickness absence rates (mentioned in the Swedish, Norwegian and the Netherlands first reports). The second stage considered in more depth how these new debates were related to work and family in national discourses.

In the second stage of the exercise, in 2005, the same authors repeated the exercise but extra questions were added, to include the additional debates that had emerged in stage one. The authors again also added new debates which they perceived as emerging in their national context at this time. In addition, the authors reflected on how the national debates have been changing over the two year period.

This method arguably has the limitations of privileging the perceptions and perspectives of the authors – their understanding of the debates in the media, the government, academic and policy circles. On the other hand the process whereby native work-life experts, with in-depth knowledge of the issues, and many years experience of studying the issues in this field, pick out what they considered to be the relevant national debates can also be considered a strength of this method.

A summary of the main national debates on reconciling paid work and parenting in each country in 2003 and 2005 can be seen in tables 1 and 2, overleaf.

The full report: Transitions Research Report #9: Report on National Debates on the reconciliation of family and employment for the EU Framework 5 funded study “Gender, parenthood and the changing European workplace, is available on request from the Manchester Metropolitan University: Research Institute for Health and Social Change (RIHSC).

Table 1A: Summary of national debates 2003

	Work-family terminology used	Business case arguments	Fertility debates	Trade Union Debates
UK	Work-life balance Flexible working	High profile	Few in recent years but suddenly increasing.	They do deal with these issues but not got a very high profile.
FR	Conciliation of work and family	High profile	Interest in fertility.	
PORT	Work-family conciliation	Not much. Gender equality debate	Not really.	Work organisation and schedules, flexibility
NL	Work-family reconciliation; work-life balance; family-friendly policies; flexible working patterns	Social equality debates. Also sickness absence as a business and work-family issues; satisfied employees as an important argument for employers to offer family-friendly policies	Not really debates on fertility initiated by the government. However, articles in papers and research projects on rising age of mothers giving birth to first child. Some worries about increasing childlessness.	Collective agreements include measures on childcare, leave arrangements and childcare. Trade unions often take the initiative
SW	Reconciling work and family Work-family balance	Not really Gender equity debate. Sickness absence increasingly an issue	Recent decline in fertility sparking debates. Links found in Sweden between this and labour market and welfare regulations.	Debates about wage levels and work conditions more than family-work issues.
NOR	Family friendly Work-life balance	No, gender and social equality and children's needs Sickness absence becoming an issue.	Not really	Yes. Focus on "inclusive labour market," gender equality and measures for a better work-family balance including reduced working hours.
BULG	Reconciliation of family and work/ employment.	Arguments mainly on society in transition. Employment regulations, flexibility and security	Yes, falling population an issue, fuelling much discussion. High emigration an issue.	Preserving employment in companies being privatised. Security for adult workers.
SLOV	Reconciliation of work and family life	Gender equity	Yes, population replacement an issue	Overtime and long hours including effects on family life.

Table 1A contd: Summary of national debates 2003

	Conditions for having children	Employers debates	Media debates	Main social policy discussions
UK	Higher educated more securely employed women have fewer children	Flexible working hours regulation	Much discussion of work-life issues. Working mothers. Fathers also discussed	Flexible working legislations, working hours.
FR	Despite relatively high fertility rates, family associations would like to provide French families with the opportunities to have more children if they want to	Regulation of the 35 hour week.	Benefits and drawbacks of 35 hour week and effects on work-life balance.	Fighting unemployment The increase in flexible work schedules
PORT	Concerns about poverty for larger families.	Labour law, working conditions, flexibility	Gender equality in the workplace	Poor and single parents' benefits. Children's rights.
NL	Higher educated women have fewer children. Rising proportion of people without children.	More flexible labour relations; people need to work longer hours, employers say	'Pros and cons' of childcare; rush hour family; caring fathers, more balance in life	Increase of elderly people and pension costs; how to keep older people in labour force; the life course perspective; the future of welfare states
SW	Higher educated more securely employed women have more.	Not really, sickness absence, early retirement are issues	Frequent discussion of work-life issues and gender	
NOR		Not really as it's regulated by the state.	Welfare policies, benefits for single parents. 'Compulsory' daddy leave.	Gender and social equality. Children's needs
BULG	Higher educated more securely employed women have fewer. Concerns about Roma having more children.	More freedom to hire and fire workers. Workforce reduction.	Rarely on work-life issues. Women and their "natural functions" e.g. childcare. Unequal representation of women in politics	Women's education, employment, and poverty. Reducing unemployment and poverty. Low levels of pensions.
SLOV		Flexible working practices, discrimination (gender?)	The role of women. Gender equity. Fertility replacement	Employers' obligations. Workplace discrimination

Table 1B: Summary of national debates 2005

	Work-family terminology used	Business case arguments	Fertility debates	Trade Union Debates
UK	Work-life balance Hardworking families	High profile and influential	New in last couple of years. Increasing in frequency.	Interested in long working hours issues. Some recent interest in working parent issues.
FR	Articulation travail/famille, conciliation de la vie professionnelle et de la vie familiale Equilibre vie privée/vie professionnelle	Some big companies deal with the issue of access of women to higher responsibilities. Women are always underrepresented among the members of advisory boards of the 500 largest companies	Not really because the demographic situation is relatively good compared to other EU member countries	Gender discrimination on the labour market Gender wage gap Over-representation of women among working poors
SW	Gender equality, reconciliation work-family, the best interest of the child	Not found	Not at present	About sick leave
POR	Work-family conciliation Work-family articulation/combination	Not much. Gender equality debate	Yes, recently increased	Work organisation/schedules flexibility. Training; Flexibility recently introduced in New Labour Law brought the discussion of W-F balance; Trade unionist women raise the issue of equal pay
NL	Work-family reconciliation Work-life balance Family-friendly policies Flexible working patterns	Yes, work-family issues are (sometimes) framed as a business case. Sickness related absence as a business case in relation to work-family issues; Satisfied employees as an important argument for employers to offer family-friendly policies	The limited number of debates that did occur were initiated by the government. However, there were articles in papers and research projects on the rising age of mothers giving birth to first child. Some worries about increasing childlessness No targeted policies to facilitate having children at an earlier age	Collective agreements between employers and unions include measures on childcare and leave arrangements Trade unions often take the initiative The necessity of childcare as a basic provision for all parents, recently stipulated by the largest union
SLOV	Reconciliation of work and family life Balancing work and family Integration of work and family	Gender equity	Yes, population replacement an issue Labour force shortage	Decline of industries (textile, leather) New Social Agreement*
NOR	Work and family Parents' and children's needs	Not high profile Reducing sick-leave Increasing effectivity	Recently emerging. Remarks on relatively high fertility in Norway in the European context Increasing focus on "dangers" of delaying first birth.	Against temporary contracts and weakening welfare state regulation Changes in the pension system
BULG	Reconciliation of work and family	Not high profile, less on transition than in 2003, more on European legislation, flexibility of work, anti-discrimination	Falling birth rate still an issue, less talk about emigration	Still preserving employment in companies being privatised, against more flexibility in employment contracts

Table 1B contd: Summary of national debates 2005

	Conditions for having children	Employers debates	Media debates	Main social policy discussions
UK	Concerns about women “choosing” to postpone parenthood until mid 30’s.	State the importance of regulations being “voluntary” and “market driven”	Overworked mothers. Long working hours. Pressure on “hard working families”	Affordable childcare. Long working hours. Social inclusion?
FR	Affordable housing, family-friendly working schedules, access to a stable job Unemployment is an obstacle to childbearing	Employers would like a less ‘rigid’ labour legislation Claim changes in the labour code Impact of the 35-hour laws on the economic situation	‘Glass ceiling’ phenomenon Wage gaps between men and women Social inequalities and gender (women over-represented among working poors and more often unemployed than men)	Economic and social impact of the 35-hour laws; the effects of unemployment (has reached a record high of 10%) on families; soaring house prices: effects on young parents; gay parents and the right for gay couples to adopt a child
SW	Parental insurance pressure on fathers, gender equality		Extensive about gender equality	Parental leave insurance, sick leave, violence against women, lesbians as parents
POR	To have a stable job	Labour law, working conditions, flexibility The silent (small group) debate: the big extent of maternity leave Women’s performance as professionals	Mostly on gender equity	Poor and single parents’ benefits. Children’s rights. Unemployment; Childcare solutions
NL	Higher educated women have fewer children; higher educated women postponing parenthood or choosing not to have children; having children or not is seen as a private matter; no direct interference of the state.	More flexible labour relations: people need to work longer hours, employers say; Employers have no objections to part-time work in general; however, they are not in favour of part-time work in managerial positions	‘Pros and cons’ of childcare Rush hour family Caring fathers More balance in life	Increase of elderly people and rising pension costs; how to keep older people in the labour force; life course perspective; future of the welfare state; cutbacks in Disability Law and Unemployment Law; lack of economic growth
SLO	Resolved housing problem, permanent work contracts	Organisational change; human resource management; more flexible work arrangements	Role of women, gender equity; fertility replacement, discriminated groups, social policy reforms	Change of social policy acts to increase economic effectiveness and the quality of life; relationship between generations, equal opportunity issues
NOR	Postponement of first birth Focus on education and secure work before having a child	Not high profile Reducing sick leave Related to following EU regulations about max. working hours	Time-squeeze Low representation of women in top management Gender equality Time-use patterns Increasing divorces and break-ups	Supply of public day-care Further investment to increase day-care places for children below the age of 3 Changes in parental leave regulations (increasing the fathers’ quota)
BUL	Debates about poverty and financial insecurity of families Debates of 2003 continue: higher educated more securely employed women have fewer; Roma having more children.	Employers would like less ‘rigid’ labour legislation (more freedom to hire and fire), suggestions (not accepted) to make the parental leave shorter (than two years) but better paid (than the minimum salary).	Poverty and social integration (of people with disabilities, the Roma), unemployment, gender discrimination – cases of sexual harassment.	Changing regulations for health insurance – limited access to health care; pension reform concerning mainly older workers, lifting the ‘ceiling’ (upper limit) for pensions, changes in parental leave.

