



## Working time and work and family conflict in the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents evidence on working time flexibility and the experience of work and family conflict in the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK, using data from a comparable questionnaire. We find that the experience of balancing work and family life in the different countries yields some surprising and paradoxical results. This is particularly the case in Sweden where, despite the establishment of gender equality and work–family reconciliation policies, we find that higher proportions of both mothers and fathers than in the other two countries report a conflict between their work and family lives. In the Netherlands and the UK it is fathers rather than mothers who are more likely to report conflicting pressures between work and family life. In each country these experiences are related to the hours of work of women and men, but in the context of different working-time regimes and with different compromises and solutions to the unresolved tensions surrounding the conciliation of work and family life.

### **KEY WORDS**

Europe / family / flexibility / gender / time / work

## **Introduction**

**F**lexible employment, working time and the reconciliation of work and family life are central issues of current policy and academic debate. With respect to policy concerns, the European Union, for example, has been a

leading actor in promoting a range of Directives on working time, parental leave and part-time workers' rights. It has also incorporated the promotion of flexible employment and the reconciliation of work and family life into the European employment strategy. In many member states, too, such issues have also come to the forefront of current policy debates. In the UK, for instance, 'family friendly' measures, although still limited, have been part of recent legislation. In the Netherlands public debate has centred on the Combination Scenario<sup>1</sup> which aims to promote the sharing of part-time paid and unpaid work by men and women (Plantenga, 2002).

Academic debate, too, has focused on the increased diversity of working time (for example, Anxo and O'Reilly, 2000; Evans et al., 2001; Mutari and Figart, 2001). There is, for example, a greater dispersion of part-time working, unpredictable or irregular working and unsocial hours, with an associated decline of the full-time, standard working week. Nevertheless, national differences in working hours are still related to differences in national systems for regulating working hours, either by legislation or through collective bargaining (Evans et al., 2001).

A second subject of academic debate concerns differences in gendered working time regimes across the member states (for example, Fagan, 2001; Mutari and Figart, 2001; O'Reilly and Fagan, 1998; Rubery et al., 1998, 1999). Whilst gender time differences are found in all countries, reflecting divisions of labour in the domestic sphere, the extent of these differences also depends on national regulatory frameworks, as well as on the nature of the welfare state and the particular gender order underpinning it.

A third academic concern relates to pressures to reconcile work and family life. As women have increasingly entered the labour market and increased their aspirations for educational attainment, careers and financial independence, the question of how to reconcile work and family has become far more important. Indeed, a number of writers have identified this area as a key pressure point or tension for current policy (see, for example, Applebaum et al., 2002; Crompton, 2002; Daly and Rake, 2003; Duncan and Williams, 2002; Hobson et al., 2002; Tyrkkö, 2002). However, reconciliation policies are extremely uneven across the European welfare states. Such policies also have to be implemented in terms of the pre-existing policy and cultural frames within each country. Further, reconciliation measures also interact with the nature of the labour market and the extent of gender gaps in pay and occupational segregation. If the only way to reconcile work and family life is in low-paid part-time jobs then such work may generate increased gender inequalities in pay and job quality, as well as more employment segregation.

Further pressures for policies to promote work and family balance derive from the fall in fertility rates across the member states as well as European and national targets to increase female employment rates. In both cases there are perceived economic benefits in making it easier for women to be able to engage in paid work and have more children. Thus, as Hobson et al. (2002) have

argued, the new policy logic of an adult worker model (as opposed to the male breadwinner model) has politicized the paid work–care nexus.

This article presents evidence on working time flexibility and the experience of work and family conflict in three west European countries: the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK. We find that the experience of balancing work and family life in the different countries yields some surprising and paradoxical results. This is particularly the case in Sweden where, despite the establishment of gender equality and work–family reconciliation policies, we find that higher proportions of both mothers and fathers than in the other two countries report a conflict between their work and family lives. In the Netherlands and the UK it is fathers rather than mothers who are more likely to report conflicting pressures between work and family life. In each country these experiences are related to the hours of work of women and men, but in the context of different working time regimes and with different compromises and solutions to the unresolved tensions surrounding the conciliation of work and family life.

The evidence is drawn from a European funded project, ‘Households, Work and Flexibility’ (HWF). The aim of this project is to understand comparatively how work flexibility affects individuals and their households and particularly their ability to combine family and work. The main research instrument used has been a national survey of around 1000 households in each of the countries based on a comparable questionnaire.<sup>2</sup>

The Netherlands, Sweden and the UK are particularly interesting countries to compare as they differ quite substantially in the extent to which welfare and social policies support the reconciliation of work and family life, leading to very different labour market outcomes for women. In the Netherlands and the UK female part-time employment (especially for mothers) has been a major source of employment expansion since the 1980s, but in the context of a scarcity of child care provision and parental leave measures (Bussemaker and van Kersbergen, 1994; Dex, 1999; DfEE, 1998; Moss, 1996; Plantenga, 2002; Visser, 2002). Indeed, the Netherlands has the highest proportion of female part-time workers in Europe (at 71% in 2001) and such work has been the source of the Dutch ‘employment miracle’ (Employment in Europe, 2002; Visser, 2002). In the UK, female part-time working has remained stable in the 1990s and the early 2000s at around 44 percent, after a particularly rapid rise in the 1980s. In contrast, in Sweden, as is well documented, since the 1970s a configuration of social policies has supported mothers in combining work and family life. These include, for example, extensive and generous parental leave schemes when children are young and the provision of public child care for those who demand it (see, for example, Bjornberg, 2002 for a recent assessment). In the OECD study of working time, Sweden was the only country in which part-time work was used as an interlude in an otherwise full-time career and as a way to combine market work with family responsibilities (Evans et al., 2001).

The Netherlands and Sweden also provide examples of working time regimes ‘where part-time employment has been integrated into a regulated

labour market environment in accordance with the principles of equal treatment in labour law and wage structures' (Fagan and Lallement, 2000: 45). In contrast, in the more deregulated labour market of the UK research has consistently demonstrated part-time workers as a distinct and disadvantaged segment of the labour force with a polarization between female full-time and part-time workers (for example, Gallie et al., 1998; Hakim, 1996, 2000; Walby, 1997).

## Working time arrangements

### Working hours

Consistent with other research, the nature of the gendered working-time regime in the three countries is quite distinct (for example, Fagan, 2001; Mutari and Figart, 2001; O'Reilly and Fagan, 1998; Rubery et al., 1998, 1999). As Table 1 shows the pattern in the Netherlands is one of short working hours for women and especially mothers, with a large gap between men's and women's working hours. The average hours worked by women are 65 percent of the

**Table 1** Working hours in the Netherlands, Sweden, and the UK

	<i>The Netherlands</i> <i>N = 771</i>	<i>Sweden</i> <i>N = 1281</i>	<i>The UK</i> <i>N = 646</i>
<i>Average hours worked per week</i>			
All males	40.5	41.7	43.5
Fathers	41.7	42.4	45.7
All females	26.0	36.5	29.1
Mothers	21.3	35.2	25.5
By females as % of average hours worked by males	65.0	88.0	67.0
By mothers as % of average hours worked by males	51.0	83.0	56.0
<i>Working hours per week</i>			
% men working more than 48 hrs	21	19	34
% men working 40 hours exactly	33	45	22
% women working 40 hours exactly	11	40	12
Part-time employment rate of women without children < 30 hrs per week	40	14	32
Part-time employment rate of mothers < 30 hrs per week	79	18	60
'Motherhood effect' <sup>1</sup>	39	4	29

*Note:*

<sup>1</sup> 'Motherhood effect' = the percentage point difference obtained by subtracting the data for mothers from that of women without dependent children (Fagan and Rubery, 1996). Dependent children are defined as children under 14 years.

average hours worked by men and for mothers this declines to 51 percent. This gender gap in average hours worked is well below the European Union average of 81 percent in 2000 (Plantenga, 2002).

In Sweden however, the gap between men's and women's average working hours is much smaller. Women work 88 percent of the hours per week that men do, well above the European Union average. Further, mothers work almost the same hours as women without children. The remarkable differences between the countries are illustrated by the 'motherhood effect' on part-time working<sup>3</sup> (Fagan and Rubery, 1996, see Table 1). This ranges from only 4 percentage points in Sweden to 39 and 28 percentage points in the Netherlands and the UK respectively. In addition, we can see the importance of the statutory and collective norm of working 40 hours per week, as 45 percent and 40 percent of Swedish men and women respectively report working exactly 40 hours per week. In contrast, in the more unregulated labour market of the UK there is a much greater dispersion of working hours and no peak at 40 hours.

The pattern in the UK is one of short hours for women and long hours for men and this is even more pronounced for parents. With respect to long hours, one third of British men work more than the threshold of 48 hours specified in the EU Working Time Directive, compared with around one fifth of Dutch and Swedish men. The gender gap in average hours worked is also almost as high as in the Netherlands, as women work 67 percent of men's average working hours, declining to 56 percent for mothers.

### Working time preferences

With reference to their main economic activity, respondents were asked 'Would you like to work on this activity the same number of hours, more hours or fewer hours?' As Table 2 shows, the majority of respondents state that they prefer to work their current hours in all three countries. However, a substantial proportion of Dutch and Swedish men, around two-fifths, wish to reduce their working hours, although this is the case for only 28 percent of British men. Fatherhood increases the proportion of men who wish to reduce their hours in Sweden and the UK, but not in the Netherlands. The majority of women, though (especially in the Netherlands and the UK), are less likely to state they wish to reduce their hours, which suggests that most are working the hours they prefer.

Overall, however, the preference for fewer hours is lower than that reported in other surveys (for example, Bielenski et al., 2002; Fagan, 2001; Fagan and Warren, 2001).<sup>4</sup> This may reflect differences in the wording of the question as HWF respondents were not asked to take income into account and may have assumed that fewer hours also meant lower pay. However, an additional and optional question asked of respondents in the Netherlands and the UK (although unfortunately not in Sweden) gives us some insight into working hour preferences under certain income conditions. Respondents were asked

**Table 2** Working hours preferences in the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK (%)

Respondents	Fewer hours		Same hours		More hours	
	All	Parents	All	Parents	All	Parents
<i>The Netherlands</i>						
Male N = 398	39	36	57	60	5	4
Female N = 373	22	16	64	66	14	18
<i>Sweden</i>						
Male N = 535	40	47	55	50	5	3
Female N = 478	32	33	58	57	10	10
<i>The UK</i>						
Male N = 283	28	32	65	63	7	4
Female N = 363	20	17	71	73	8	10

'Imagine that you were offered a new job position with twice the salary you have now. Would you be willing to work more than 40 hours a week?'

As Table 3 shows, high proportions of mothers are not willing to work more than 40 hours for twice their salary: almost 90 percent of Dutch and just over one half of British mothers, considerably higher than the proportions of non-mothers. As Fagan (2001) has argued, working hour preferences are expressed from the vantage point of current domestic and workplace circumstances and feasible or desirable alternatives. That is, mothers may answer this question taking account of their present situation, which may act as a constraint on the degrees of freedom they are able to use in any 'choice' that they

**Table 3** Responses to the question 'Imagine that you were offered a new job position with twice the salary you have now. Would you be willing to work more than 40 hours per week?'

	No %	Maybe %	Yes %
<i>The Netherlands</i>			
Males			
Without children	39	13	48
Fathers	29	16	55
Females			
Without children	68	13	19
Mothers	88	5	6
<i>The UK</i>			
Males			
Without children	14	6	79
Fathers	7	7	86
Females			
Without children	28	9	60
Mothers	52	11	37

make. It is noticeable, however, that overall Dutch male and female workers are far less likely than their British counterparts (especially men) to express a willingness to work more than 40 hours for twice their salary. This suggests that even with the positive incentive of earning twice their salary, shorter working times are more preferable for many workers in the Netherlands, whereas for British workers longer working hours are more widely acceptable (see following and also Table 3).

As in other studies there is also clearly a relationship between current usual working hours and working hour preferences (for example, Bielenski et al., 2002; Fagan and Warren, 2001). As Table 4 shows, those working long hours are more likely to wish to reduce their hours and this is most pronounced in Sweden for both men and women. British men, on the other hand, are the least likely to state a preference for working fewer hours. It is also noticeable that

**Table 4** Current hours of work and working time preferences (%)

	1–29	30–39	40–49	50+
<b>Males</b>				
<i>The Netherlands</i>				
<i>(N = 398)</i>				
Fewer hours	–	33	41	47
Same hours	–	62	55	51
More hours	–	6	4	1
<i>Sweden (N = 535)</i>				
Fewer hours	–	46	38	56
Same hours	–	62	58	42
More hours	–	3	3	2
<i>UK (N = 283)</i>				
Fewer hours	–	21	27	44
Same hours	–	69	69	55
More hours	–	10	4	1
<b>Females</b>				
<i>The Netherlands</i>				
<i>(N = 373)</i>				
Fewer hours	14	26	37	–
Same hours	70	60	59	–
More hours	17	14	4	–
<i>Sweden (N = 478)</i>				
Fewer hours	6	23	41	68
Same hours	58	63	59	32
More hours	36	14	1	–
<i>UK (N = 363)</i>				
Fewer hours	5	30	35	60
Same hours	81	65	62	41
More hours	14	5	3	–

**Table 5** Percent of parents who state that 'I want to spend time with my family' as their reason for their working time preference

Preference	The Netherlands		Sweden		The UK	
	Fathers %	Mothers %	Fathers %	Mothers %	Fathers %	Mothers %
Work same hours	10	57	31	56	49	66
Work fewer hours	43	65	77	80	69	68
	N = 203	N = 182	N = 234	N = 242	N = 105	N = 185

high proportions of Dutch and British female part-timers state that they wish to work their current hours, suggesting that this group in particular are working the hours they prefer.

Respondents were also asked to select from a range of reasons why they preferred to work the same or fewer hours. The choice of reasons included 'I earn enough already', 'someone else in the household earns enough', 'I do not want to work long/longer hours' and 'to spend time with my family'. By far the most commonly stated reason for parents' working time preference is 'to spend time with my family' (see Table 5). A particularly high proportion of Swedish parents who prefer fewer hours (80% of mothers and 77% of fathers) give this reason, compared with around two-thirds of Dutch mothers and two thirds of British parents. Interestingly, though, far fewer Dutch fathers give family commitments as a reason for their working hour preferences.

## The part-time workforce

In this section of the article we examine female part-time workers, their personal characteristics, job-related characteristics and job tenure. We focus on educational qualifications, income, control over hours of work and job tenure, as these are less discussed issues in the literature. As the proportion of male part-timers is small in each country, analysis centres on the female part-time workforce.

There are substantial differences in the educational qualifications of the female part-time workforce in the three countries. As Table 6 shows, over half of part-timers in the UK have low or no educational qualifications (ISCED 1 and 2) compared with one quarter in Sweden and just 3 percent in the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with other UK literature which has documented the high share of less well educated women in the part-time workforce (see for example Gallie et al., 1998; Walby and Olsen, 2002). Compared with the other two countries, however, the UK stands out as having high proportions of both full-time and part-time female workers with no or low educational qualifications (37% and 53% respectively) (Tables 6 and 7).

**Table 6** Personal and work related characteristics of female part-timers (< 30 hrs)

	<i>The Netherlands</i>	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>The UK</i>
<b>Personal characteristics</b>			
<i>Educational level</i>			
Higher (ISCED 5–6) %	31	14	18
Middle (ISCED 3–4) %	67	60	30
Low or no education (ISCED 1–2) %	3	26	53
<b>Work related characteristics</b>			
No employment contract %	6	1	27
Hours of work (mean)	17	21	17
% in lowest income quartile	73	13	72
% working 1–9 hours in lowest income quartile	90	*	76
% working 20–29 hours in lowest income quartile	57	11	62
% decide own working hours or decide together with their employer	78	38	59
<b>Job tenure</b>			
Duration of job less than one year (%)	12	13	26
Duration of job between 1–5 years (%)	31	29	37
Duration of job more than 5 years (%)	58	60	38
	<i>N</i> = 206	<i>N</i> = 79	<i>N</i> = 164

Note:

\* not included as numbers are small

The average usual hours of work of part-timers in both the Netherlands and the UK are short at 17 hours per week. These short hours are associated with a high proportion of part-timers in receipt of a low personal income: that is, nearly three-quarters in both countries receive an income in the lowest quartile of the income distribution.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to interpret this finding, as the principle of equal treatment in the Netherlands means that part-timers receive an hourly pay rate pro-rata with full-timers and the pay penalty associated with part-time work is smaller in the Netherlands than elsewhere (see also Rubery, 1998). In the UK, on the other hand, research has consistently demonstrated that female part-timers receive a lower hourly wage on average than their full-time counterparts (more recently, Anderson et al., 2001; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2001; Walby and Olsen, 2002). Evans et al. (2001), for example, found that the median hourly earnings of Dutch female part-timers were 93 percent of those of female full-timers, whilst in the UK the corresponding figure was 70 percent.

Unfortunately, we cannot compare the hourly rates of pay of HWF respondents, as they were not asked to give this information but rather to choose from an income range. However, there does appear to be a stronger association between hours of work and pay levels in the Netherlands than in the UK (see Table 6). That is, the incidence of low pay is more widespread across a range of

**Table 7** Personal and work related characteristics of female full-time workers

	NL > 30 hrs N = 167	SW > 30 hrs N = 405	UK > 30 hrs N = 199
<b>Personal characteristics</b>			
<i>Educational level</i>			
Higher (ISCED 5–6) %	54	41	29
Middle (ISCED 3–4) %	46	51	34
Low or no education (ISCED 1–2) %	0.6	8	37
<b>Work related characteristics</b>			
No employment contract %	2	0.2	6
Hours of work (mean)	37	40	39
% in lowest income quartile	16	17	29
% of those with tertiary level education in lowest income quartile	7	21	14
% decide own hours or negotiates with employer	75	53	49
<b>Job tenure</b>			
Duration of job less than one year	14	12	14
Duration of job between 1–5 years	36	33	39
Duration of job more than 5 years	51	56	47

hours in the UK than it is in the Netherlands. This also applies to female full-timers, as almost twice as many in the UK (29%) than in the Netherlands (16%) fall into the lowest income quartile (Table 6). In Sweden, in contrast to the other two countries, only 13 percent of part-timers earn a low income on this definition, reflecting longer average working hours as well as the persistence of wage solidarity policies in this country despite changes to wage structures in recent years.

Respondents were also asked who decides their working hours: the respondents themselves, their employer or the respondents together with their employer. As Tables 6 and 7 show, around four out of five Dutch part-timers have some degree of time autonomy in that they decide their working hours themselves or they negotiate with their employer. This compares with nearly two in five and three in five in Sweden and the UK respectively. In the Netherlands the high degree of control over work hours reflects conditions of what has been called ‘negotiated flexibility’ with respect to working time (see, for example, Grimshaw et al., 2000).<sup>7</sup>

However, it is with respect to employment protection that we see the largest differences between the countries. Whilst the proportion with no contract of employment is negligible for part-timers in Sweden and accounts for a small percentage of Dutch part-timers (6%), as many as 27 percent of female part-timers in the UK state that they have no contract of employment.<sup>8</sup> There is also a large gap of 21 percentage points between British part-timers and full-timers in this respect, but little difference between part-timers and full-timers in

the other two countries. We can also see substantial differences in job tenure of part-timers in the three countries. Over one quarter of the part-time workforce in the UK have been employed in their job for less than one year, and therefore do not qualify for employment protection. This is twice as many as their part-time counterparts in the Netherlands and Sweden. Conversely, fewer part-timers in the UK have been in their current job for more than five years, compared with part-timers in the Netherlands and Sweden. There is little difference between part-timers and full-timers with respect to job tenure in the Netherlands and Sweden, but twice as many British part-timers than full-timers have been employed for less than one year.

### Experience of work/family conflict

In this section of the article we consider the extent to which work and family impinge on one another and the extent to which this generates conflict. Respondents were asked if they had experienced the following in the past three months.

- Work makes it difficult for me to do household tasks.
- Work makes it difficult for me to fulfil family responsibilities.
- Family responsibilities prevented me from working adequately.

Table 8 shows, unsurprisingly, that higher proportions of parents compared with non-parents in all three countries agree that work makes it difficult to do household tasks or fulfil family responsibilities, although this is less pronounced for Dutch women. With respect to the third question in which it was asked, conversely, if family responsibilities prevented respondents from working adequately, there was more reluctance in general to agree with this statement. Over one quarter of British fathers, however, agree with this statement, rising to 37 percent of those working more than 50 hours per week (Table 9).

However, it is striking that in the Netherlands and the UK fathers are more likely than mothers to state that work makes it difficult to do household tasks or fulfil family responsibilities. As Table 9 shows, though, parents' experience of conflict between work and family involvement does appear to be related to their working hours. On the one hand, fathers working long hours are more likely to report the experience of a conflict between work and family life, whilst on the other hand, far fewer mothers working part-time state they experience difficulties between work and family. It can be suggested here that women working short hours have already accommodated the demands of family life by reducing their working hours and are therefore less likely to experience work and family conflict.

In the Netherlands, for example, writers have pointed out that in the context of a lack of public support for care work, parents have to find their own

**Table 8** Experience of work/family conflicts in the Netherlands, Sweden and UK (% of respondents saying sometimes, often and always)

Country	Work/family conflict	Men	Women	Fathers	Mothers
		without children	without children		
<b>NL</b> N = 771	Work makes it difficult for me to do household tasks.	39	42	55	42
	Work makes it difficult for me to fulfil family responsibilities.	20	28	42	30
	Family responsibilities prevented me from working adequately.	7	7	14	15
<b>SW</b> N = 1281	Work makes it difficult for me to do household tasks.	35	44	57	61
	Work makes it difficult for me to fulfil family responsibilities.	29	38	51	51
	Family responsibilities prevented me from working adequately.	7	8	15	15
<b>UK</b> N = 646	Work makes it difficult for me to do household tasks.	42	33	55	36
	Work makes it difficult for me to fulfil family responsibilities.	24	22	46	29
	Family responsibilities prevented me from working adequately.	15	8	28	17

individualized solution to combining work and family (Plantenga, 2002; Visser, 2002). There is also a strong continuation of a traditional preference for care of children within the family (Pfau-Effinger, 1998). This has meant that women have adjusted by opting for short hours participation in the labour market, with many having high degrees of autonomy over their hours of paid work. In the UK, too, there is, as we have seen, a strong preference for part-time working by mothers. This preference could be said to reflect the difficulties of long hours working for those in full-time work, as well as limited public child care and family-oriented policies (see, for example, Dex, 1999; Fagan, 2001).

Tables 8 and 9 show also that higher proportions of mothers in Sweden than in the other two countries state that work makes it difficult to do household tasks or fulfil family responsibilities. That is, over one half of Swedish mothers compared with around 30 percent of mothers in the Netherlands and the UK report the experience of conflict between work and family life. This is a rather surprising finding, given the nature and extent of 'women-friendly' policies in Sweden. Table 9 shows, though, that this is related to the longer weekly hours worked by Swedish mothers. However, a concern to balance work and family life does appear to remain a female issue in Sweden. For example, Tyrkkö (2002) in her review of the literature on this topic notes that although Sweden has a 'social/political ideology which stresses equality and that parent-

**Table 9** The experience of work/family conflict of parents in the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK by working hours (% respondents saying sometimes, often and always)

Hours of work per week	Netherlands		Sweden		UK	
	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers
Work makes it difficult for me to do some of household tasks that need to be done						
< 30	*	44	*	36	*	42
30–39	44	59	44	65	13	52
40–49	53	*	56	64	59	*
50+	72	*	79	*	83	–
Work makes it difficult to fulfil my responsibilities towards my family						
< 30	*	31	*	32	*	32
30–39	42	41	33	59	20	43
40–49	36	*	51	49	43	*
50+	57	*	71	*	70	*
My responsibilities towards my family prevented me from doing my work adequately						
< 30	*	11	*	7	*	15
30–39	12	*	19	18	13	20
40–49	14	*	15	10	24	17
50+	19	*	10	*	37	*
	N = 203	N = 182	N = 234	N = 242	N = 105	N = 185

Note:

\* Not included in this table as the numbers are small.

hood and paid work should be possible to combine', in practice 'women are more anxious than men to integrate paid work with the rest of their lives. It is women who discuss the conflict between demands and ambitions at work and demands and ambitions outside work' (Tyrkkö, 2002: 116–7). Björnberg reaches a similar conclusion; it is 'Women who continue to adapt their work to the needs of the family and many men take this adaptation for granted' (2002: 44). Nevertheless, whilst higher proportions of Swedish mothers report experience of work/family conflict, Swedish fathers also appear to be somewhat more concerned than their counterparts in the other two countries that their work makes it difficult to fulfil their family responsibilities (Table 8).

## Discussion

With respect to the possibility of combining work and family life the Netherlands and Sweden could be said to provide institutionalized solutions, which nevertheless still result in a gendered distribution of working time. In the Netherlands, since the late 1990s the Combination Model has been promoted, with the aim of combining part-time paid work with part-time and equal sharing of unpaid work for both parents. This comes close to the Universal

Caregiver model proposed by Fraser, 1997 (Plantenga, 2002). However, as Plantenga has argued, and as the evidence discussed in this article has shown, it appears that so far it is women who have adjusted their paid working hours. The norm for men is still 41 hours per week and 42 hours for fathers. We have also seen that fatherhood has no impact on working hour preferences and that fewer Dutch fathers than their Swedish or British counterparts give family commitments as their reason for their working preferences. Nevertheless, female part-timers express a preference for their current hours over which they have high degrees of control. Female part-time workers are also less likely to experience a conflict between their work and family lives. However, such work brings a high wage penalty and a lack of financial independence, even for the highly educated.

The solution of part-time hours for mothers, therefore, suggests a strong 'gender compromise' (Fagan and O'Reilly, 1998). We could even call this an 'unchallenged' gender solution to working time, in which it is the accepted norm that mothers work part-time, and such work is not seen as atypical or flexible. Whilst the balance between work and care is high on the political agenda, as Wallace has remarked 'a gender bias is built into the system of reform' (2002: 20).

In Sweden the configurations of employment and welfare state policies have enabled women to combine work and family, attain financial independence and continuous lifetime employment. These policies have led to an emphasis on gender equality in paid work and a greater economic autonomy for women. It would appear from the evidence presented here that there are greater aspirations and expectations to balance work and family life. For example, higher proportions of parents than their Dutch and British counterparts wished to reduce their working hours, and higher proportions give family commitments as the reason for their working time preferences. We also found that more mothers than in the other two countries report a conflict between family and work life. It was suggested that although there is a social/political ideology of gender equality and equal participation at work, in reality this is still hard to implement and parenthood still remains a female problem. It would seem that even where gender equality and policies to reconcile work and family are pursued there are still difficulties in establishing the required balance between work and family life.

The UK would appear to provide an example of a 'non-institutionalized' and de-regulated response to working time and its reconciliation with family life. Men in the UK work the longest hours of the three countries and this is complemented by female part-time working hours. Fewer British men than their counterparts in the other two countries wish to reduce their hours, except for those working very long hours. However, men's long working hours are related to difficulties in fulfilling family responsibilities, and, indeed, for some their family life prevented them from working adequately. The strong preference of females for working part-time would appear to be a response to the expectation of long hours working for full-time workers, the long working hours of their partners,

and a lack of institutional support for combining work and family. Whilst measures to facilitate work and family balance in the UK have been the subject of much recent public debate and limited policy intervention, solutions have, as in the Netherlands, so far been resolved by couples on an individualized basis.

## Conclusion

As Daly and Rake (2003) have argued, in some countries women have to make severe compromises or trade-offs between employment and family involvement. In the Netherlands and the UK the compromise for women is much shorter hours of work, which do appear to lead to fewer difficulties in balancing work and family life, but attract less pay and financial independence. Dutch women do have, however, much more autonomy over their working hours as well as more secure, stable and protected part-time work than British women, but in both countries paid work remains a male norm. In Sweden women are able to participate in paid work on a more even footing with men and gain more financial independence but they still experience difficulty in balancing work and family life. This is also reflected in preferred working hours in that more parents than in the other two countries would prefer to reduce their working hours, the large majority giving family commitments as their reason.

Crompton has argued that 'the growing tensions between employment and caring brought about by the erosion of the male breadwinner model, together with the increase in women's aspirations, will be reflected in organizational and institutional adaptations' (2002: 541). The findings presented in this article suggest that this increased pressure and tension around working time and the ability to reconcile work and family life will become more acute in the future. Sweden provides a benchmark and model of best practice with respect to policies to reconcile work and family. Yet even after three decades, there are still high proportions of Swedish parents who report difficulties in achieving a balance between their work and family lives and parenthood is still predominantly a female issue. Clearly, the issues are complex and reflect changing gender relations as well as changing aspirations and expectations on the part of both men and women. All European countries are under increasing pressure to introduce new policies to balance work and family in accordance with the European employment strategy and social inclusion strategy, and European and national targets to increase women's employment rates, as well as the need to address fertility decline. There will, therefore, be a need for even more innovative policies in order to balance paid work and care.

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## Notes

- 1 Recommended by the Netherlands Task Force on Future Scenarios of the Redistribution of Unpaid Work, 1997.
- 2 The national surveys were carried out in Spring 2001 using a standardized questionnaire. The sample sizes were 1007 households in the Netherlands, 2292 in Sweden and 945 in the UK. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the UK, although, because of cost constraints, interviews in the Netherlands and Sweden were by telephone.
- 3 We are defining working less than 30 hours per week as part-time work, in accordance with the OECD (Van Bastelaer et al., 1997) recommendation.
- 4 For example, in the Bielenski et al. (2002) survey 57 percent of men and 44 percent of women across Europe stated a preference for reduced hours working.
- 5 The low proportion of Dutch respondents with no or low educational qualifications may reflect a very low response rate of this group to telephone interviewing.
- 6 In the UK this was less than 1187 euros (£780) per month and in the Netherlands less than 1134 euros.
- 7 That is, there is a moderate level of statutory regulation with respect to working time and a strong tradition of collective bargaining and negotiation between the social partners or individual agreements between employers and employees.
- 8 Furthermore, in the distribution, hotel and retail sector in the UK as many as 40 percent of female part-timers had no contract of employment.

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