

# Transitions

## FINAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

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

---

Research Report #11

[Http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions](http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions)

---





# Transitions

## Final Report:

## Executive Summary

**Final Report on the project "Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace: Young Adults Negotiating the Work-Family Boundary":**

*Transitions*

**funded within the Key Action Improving the Socio-Economic Knowledge base of the Fifth Framework Programme of the European Union**

---

**Suzan Lewis and Janet Smithson**

With contributions from the other members of the *Transitions* team

**Christina Purcell and John Haworth**

Manchester Metropolitan University

**Julia Brannen and Michaela Brockmann**

Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London

**Ann Nilsen, Sevil Sumer and Lise Granlund**

University of Bergen

**Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and Lars Plantin**

University of Goteborg

**Nevenka Černigoj Sadar, Jana Nadoh and Polona Kersnik**

University of Ljubljana

**Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes, Laura den Dulk and Marijke Veldhoen-van Blitterswijk**

Utrecht University

**Siyka Kovacheva and Atanas Matev**

Paissii Hilendarski State University

**Maria das Dores Guerreiro, Pedro Abrantes, Inês Pereira and Inês Cardoso**

CIES/ISCTE

**Jeanne Fagnani**

MATISSE, University of Paris 1-CNRS

February 2006

Published by: RIHSC: the Research Institute for Health and Social Change (formerly COP Research Group)

Copyright (c) 2006 RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced by any means, or transmitted, or translated into a machine language without the written permission of the RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change, unless under the terms of the Copyright Licensing Agreement, or for use in Education, or for dissemination within an organisation in which case the work must be reproduced in its entirety with acknowledgement of the COP Research Group as its source.

RIHSC Research Reports and Occasional Papers

Published occasionally by the RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change

For information contact the publishers at the address below

ISSN 1359-9089

ISBN 1-900139-04-9

Printed by the Manchester Metropolitan University

***RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change:***

RIHSC is a centre of international excellence and innovation in critical research and consultancy on social change, social inclusion, community participation, well-being, work and leisure, health and social care practices and policies, and the clinical biomedical, behavioural and forensic sciences.

RIHSC: Research Institute for Health and Social Change

Manchester Metropolitan University

Elizabeth Gaskell Campus

Hathersage Road

Manchester

M13 0JA

Tel: 0161 247 2563/2556/2595

Fax: 0161 247 6364

Email: [C.Kagan@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:C.Kagan@mmu.ac.uk) or [S.Lewis@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:S.Lewis@mmu.ac.uk)

## **Preface**

Transitions was part of the Fifth Framework Programme of the European Commission, under the Key Action Improving Human Research Potential and the Socio-Economic Knowledge Base. The three-year project ran from January 2003 until December 2005.

## Abstract

This project extends understanding of the changing contexts in which young parents negotiate the transition to parenthood, based on policy analysis and an international literature review in eight European states and empirical work in seven countries. The overall objective was to examine qualitatively how young European women and men negotiate motherhood and fatherhood and work-family boundaries and how this impacts on their well-being, in the context of different national welfare state regimes, substantial organisational change, and family and employer support. Eleven organisational case studies were conducted in private (mostly finance) and public (social services) sector workplaces, followed by home based biographical interviews with selected parents and some of their partners.

New parents in this study managed work and care in particularly intense, competitive and pressured contexts amid rapid workplace changes and especially the increasingly demanding workloads reported in all the case study organisations. This is compounded by an intensification of parenting as well as of work, as parents in all countries are expected to put growing amounts of effort and time into parenting activities. Nevertheless, the study also highlighted the positive aspects of paid work for many new mothers and fathers who reported their enjoyment of challenging work and contact with colleagues.

National and organisational policies to support employed parents are undermined both by current workplace practices associated with work intensification and, in many contexts, concerns for future job opportunities in rapidly changing job climates. Although the right to ask for flexible working, and longer parental leave entitlements, especially for fathers, are increasingly enshrined in legislation in many countries, parents are often in practice prevented from working flexibly by heavy workloads, or by concerns about their perceived commitment to the job. More important than policies alone, is support from line managers, particularly in the countries with fewer supportive national regulations. However, colleague support also emerged as significant in contemporary workplaces.

National policies and provisions interact with the formal and informal workplace policies, practices and cultures and economic conditions to support and constrain gender expectations and transformations. However, policies for combining paid work and family care are undermined by the persistent assumption made by managers at all levels, by colleagues, and by many of the parents themselves, that these are primarily policies for women. Experiences and well-being of parents of young children depend on multiple levels of context. Good, affordable childcare is regarded as essential, but not in itself sufficient for parental well-being in a context of long working hours and/or unstable employment conditions. Control over work-family boundaries, is also important although parents described a range of preferences and strategies for boundary management. Well-being is also highly related to expectations. Growing expectations of support for parenting, and for gender equity, are associated with transitional tensions if they are not mirrored by institutional changes.

Recommendations from the study include the need for a multi-layered partnership approach to supporting parents in contemporary, changing contexts. This will involve confronting uncomfortable issues about the contradictions between work intensification in the global economic context and the needs of parents and children.

# Transitions

## FINAL REPORT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report extends understanding of the changing contexts in which young parents negotiate the transition to parenthood and work-family strategies, based on policy analysis and an international literature review in eight European states and empirical work in seven countries. The Transitions project took place between 2003 and 2005. The countries involved in the study were Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK.

#### **Aims and objectives of the Transitions project**

The overall scientific objective of the project was: to examine how young European men and women working in public and private sector workplaces negotiate motherhood and fatherhood and work-family boundaries in the context of different national welfare state regimes, family and employer support.

#### **The specific aims of the project were to:**

- Map national contexts for understanding the experience of becoming parents and parenthood in the partner countries;
- Develop an understanding of the impact of workplace context and organisational change on young adults who become parents, in the partner countries;
- Examine the transition to parenthood (retrospectively and prospectively) in the partner countries;
- Develop an understanding of how young adults negotiate parenthood and work-family boundaries, in the partner countries;
- Examine positive well-being (including its dimensions and its relationship to different work-family strategies), at individual, family and organisational levels in the partner countries;
- Examine the policy implications of the key foci of the study;
- Disseminate the findings to policy-makers at European, national and local levels, employers, trade unions and other stakeholders and make recommendations.

This project develops and extends previous EU studies by focusing on the ways in which organisations are negotiating the transitions of globalisation and changes in national economies while their employees are negotiating parenthood. The background to the empirical work undertaken in this project has been elaborated by a) a mapping exercise to highlight the national contexts for understanding the experience of parenthood and of becoming a parent in the partner countries and b) by a state of the art literature review on the transition to parenthood, organisational change and well-being. The empirical work included eleven organisational case studies conducted in private (mostly finance) and public

(social services) sector workplaces. Methods include focus groups with new parents, interviews with managers of new parents, and a well-being questionnaire. The organisational case studies were followed by biographical interviews with selected parents from these organisations and some of their partners.

## **Major findings of the Transitions project**

The main findings are divided into the three major, interrelated research themes of the project, (1) organisational change and workplace practice, (2) the ways in which young adults negotiate parenthood and work-family boundaries in these changing contexts, and (3) aspects of well-being in diverse contexts.

While this study covers a wide range of issues, the findings highlight in particular the potential contradictions between globalisation and work intensification on the one hand, and the need for time to care for children (and others), in gender equitable ways, on the other hand. One of the overarching conclusions is that experiences of the transition to parenthood, and the well-being of parents of young children depend on many, interrelated, layers of context. This calls for collaborative, joined up policy-making to take account of the challenges presented by transitions taking place in families, workplaces and wider societal contexts.

The conditions under which the transition to parenthood takes place vary. The different welfare state, historical, ideological and economic contexts reflect different dominant models for combining parenthood and employment: an egalitarian model in Norway and Sweden, forms of modified male breadwinner models in the UK and the Netherlands, and different forms of dual earner models in France, Portugal, Slovenia and Bulgaria (Fagnani et al, 2004). Formal and informal resources including education, employment, family supports and workplace conditions also vary. National discourses and debates relating to working and parenting, among policy-makers, employers and the media, are another crucial and dynamic, but often neglected, aspect of context. These tended to shift over the course of the project (Smithson et al, 2005; Lewis and Smithson, in press). Some of these debates, for example, the relative focus on gender equity (fairness) or the business case when discussing employer practices to support parents, reflect the different national contexts. However, some debates and concerns are emerging more widely, for example on demographic issues, levels of stress and sickness, and "work-life balance" or "time squeeze" issues. These generic debates appear to be related to wider European and global trends (see also Wallace et al, 2003; Hantrais et al, 2004), and particularly to the impact of changing workplace conditions and practices.

## **Organisational change and workplace practice**

Parenting decisions and work-family strategies are developed not only in the context of macro social policies and emerging debates but also in the context of the rapid pace of change in contemporary work and workplaces. The different political contexts and, particularly, the reconfiguration of welfare states are shaping different organisational contexts. In particular the dramatically rapid changes taking place in Bulgaria and Slovenia, including liberalisation, new pro-market ideologies favouring employers; rising unemployment and changes in the labour code, together with new regulations that derive from the EU, contribute to the feeling of deep transition, with both positive and negative impacts on workplace policies and practices and on workers' lives. However, all the parents in this study were subject to some degree of workplace change and transition. Within the private sector, organisations fall within a continuum in terms of their support for parents within increasingly competitive contexts. At one extreme, in the relatively newly privatised organisations in Bulgaria and Slovenia, the shift has been from a paternalistic to a task and efficiency orientation, with parents relying on the long standing support from the state for reconciling family and employment, but expecting little from employers beyond compliance with regulation. At the other extreme, in the UK, the Netherlands and Norway, with

varying levels of state support for parents, workplace efficiency and competitiveness are pursued along with some management recognition of the need to support parents in the increasingly demanding workplace, that is, more of a success-through-people approach, albeit not always consistently applied.

## **The intensification and extension of work and consequences for parents**

Workplace restructuring and reorganisation, including downsizing and other “efficiency” initiatives, that tend to result in an “intensification” of work (see e.g. Burchell, Ladipo et al, 2002; Wallace et al, 2003) are commonly experienced by parents both in the private and public sector organisations in all the countries studied. In the private sector intensification is a by-product of new forms of competition in the global economy, including the transition to a market economy in Slovenia and Bulgaria. An issue for social services workers in many of the case studies is increased pressure of client workload, as a consequence of a low or reduced level of welfare state provision and new public management (Clarke and Newman, 1997), with increased pressure on social services to be efficient.

The experience of intensification of work in all the case study organisations is a particular challenge for new parents, who must manage work and family in a particularly demanding, competitive and pressured context. Experiences of intensification of work contribute to the rise in stress-related illnesses (see e.g. Wichert, 2002) associated with the high levels of sick leave and early or staggered retirement which are on the increase in several of the countries studied (especially Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, the UK and Slovenia) (see e.g. SOU 2002), and may also be one of many factors contributing to low birth rates.

Intensification of work impacts on the implementation and experience of national and workplace policies to support parents. The national contexts – particularly lengths and payments of leaves, childcare options and opportunities to work part-time or flexibly, as well as economic conditions and levels of unemployment, especially in the new and candidate EU member states – make a difference to the ways in which new parents experience both paid work and parenting. However the impacts of different policies (national and organisational) are undermined both by current workplace practices associated with work intensification and, in many contexts, especially in the private sector, by new parents’ concerns for future job opportunities in rapidly changing job climates.

Some workplace changes and technological developments can be associated with formal or informal flexibility of working hours. However, while flexible working policies and practices can bring opportunities to integrate paid work and family, particularly if this is associated with greater autonomy, in the context of the intensification of work it can also lead to blurred work-family boundaries or long working hours that intrude on family time or energy (see also Wallace et al, 2003). Flexible ways of working can also generate inequality in workplaces. Employees in direct client contact faced different, less flexible, working conditions than others in many of the case study organisations.

While a decade ago, managers’ attitudes to flexible working often prevented employees from requesting or being allowed to work flexibly ((Lewis 2001; Bond, Hyman et al. 2002)), this study demonstrates that parents are now more likely to be prevented from working flexibly by heavy workloads. For example, parents are often reluctant to take family related leaves because work is rarely covered fully while staff are away, and often work is passed to overburdened colleagues, or accumulates to be dealt with on the return to work. This trend thus undermines the right to ask for flexible working which is enshrined in legislation in some countries (see e.g. Fagnani and Letablier, 2004).

The intensification of work reported by some parents in all the case studies and long hours culture cited in many contexts, can clearly be problematic for working parents, particularly combined with the intensification of parenting, which we discuss below. However, in some contexts new forms of work can be very satisfying. The pleasure of challenging work and contact with colleagues was mentioned by many of the new parents. This can be associated with positive well-being and “flow” (Haworth and Veal, 2003), although it can also intensify conflict and tension in managing work and family boundaries. This presents challenges for social policy-makers and employers.

## **Gendered workplace cultures and policy-practice implementation gaps**

The effectiveness of national policies in supporting employed parents depends on how these are implemented in the workplace, in the context of ongoing organisational change and wider labour market trends. For example, long parental leaves can create practical difficulties when the pace of workplace change is very rapid, and be perceived as risky in the context of subjective job insecurity. Persisting gendered organisational values and assumptions, such as the widespread assumption that ideal workers do not work part-time, especially in higher status jobs (Lewis, 1997;2001; Rapoport et al, 2001), contribute to an implementation gap between policy (national and workplace) and practice in all the case study organisations, albeit to varying extents. This implementation gap, found in many other studies in a wide range of countries (Gambles et al, 2006) is exacerbated by the intensification of work, which can, for example, make it difficult for parents and their managers to deal with family related leaves. The study highlights the continuing **gendered expectations**, in all the countries (to varying degrees, least in Sweden) that policies for combining paid work and family care are primarily, or only, for women. This assumption is often made by managers at all levels, as well as by many of the parents themselves. This phenomenon mirrors and interacts with the persistence of gender asymmetry in family involvement and the division of domestic labour.

## **The crucial role of line managers and increasingly colleagues, in supporting parents or as barriers to flexible working practices**

Line manager support or lack of it is of crucial significance for working parents' options for negotiating their paid work and family responsibilities. While this is true in all the case studies, it is particularly so in the countries with fewer supportive national regulations, or a shorter history of people taking up family supportive initiatives, and in organisations where there are limited resources to cover absent personnel (for example in sections of the social services organisations in the UK, Bulgaria and Sweden).

However, interviews with managers in the case study organisations highlight some of the dilemmas that they experience. Changing conditions including heavy workloads and targets for managers can reinforce task rather than people-centred management styles. Middle and lower level managers in particular have to negotiate intensified targets, changing working practices and parents' expectations of support. There are also wide differences among managers within the same organisations, particularly between “new style” managers who embrace change and those who cling to old ways of working. In some contexts new style managers are more supportive of parents and of flexible working arrangements, while in others, for example in the Bulgarian and Slovenian private sector organisations, parents find new style managers to be less supportive than the

more paternalistic older style managers. Management support for flexibility is most effective when it is directed at all employees. Some parents felt that it can be divisive if directed only at employees with children, risking the emergence of “backlash” against employed parents. This emerged particularly strongly in the UK context.

The emerging **role of colleagues** as agents of support for or agents of social control of parents is also highlighted, especially in the context of work intensification. With heavy workloads and a decreasing likelihood of official replacement for employees taking leave for family reasons, the support or disapproval of colleagues is increasingly significant. On the positive side, in some contexts parents display considerable solidarity in the context of the intense demands from both paid work and parenting, helping out by covering for each others’ absences. However, work intensification combined with “high performance” management techniques (White et al, 2003) such as relatively autonomous teams can also generate feelings of guilt about colleagues who may have to cover for parents who take leave, for example if a child is ill, and can undermine parents’ willingness to make use of their entitlements.

### **Experiences of work in public and private sector workplaces are different, but these distinctions are blurring in contemporary contexts**

While many differences remain between working experiences in the public and private sector, some of the distinctions between the two sectors are blurring as the traditionally better (non material) conditions and higher job security in most of the public sector organisations are eroded, and as private organisations (in some countries) become more attuned to flexible working and part-time working practices.

### **The exclusion of agency or contracted workers**

There is a danger that parents who are agency or outsourced workers can be excluded from debates and supports for employed parents. With the increasing tendency of organisations to outsource work, especially the lower skilled jobs such as cleaning or catering, many of the most vulnerable parents are not defined as employees of these large organisations, so are not eligible for organisational entitlements and benefits.

### **How young adults negotiate parenthood and work-family boundaries in changing contexts**

#### ***The salience of gender and class***

A frequently recurring theme across the countries is the ways in which **gender shapes parenthood** and makes motherhood different from fatherhood both in everyday family life and in workplaces. The transition to parenthood appears to be a critical “tipping point” on the road to gender equity. On becoming parents, decisions have to be made at the household level about how to manage work and family demands. Even in countries with a strong egalitarian ideology, the experiences of motherhood and fatherhood are very gendered, shaped by structural, cultural and practical factors. Socio-economic status is also important, influencing supports and constraints for combining parenthood and employment. The study confirms that gender and class are still major factors that structure and shape experiences of working and parenting across the countries as found by many other studies (e.g Webster, 2001; Perrons, 2004). Although levels of

inequality differ across the countries studied (Fagnani et al, 2004), social inequality is a very persistent aspect of European society, and may be exacerbated by the growing gap between core and peripheral workforces. Structural inequalities persist amongst parents in workforces, affecting their prospects of even taking up policies.

### ***Decisions about and timing of parenthood***

Timing of the transition to parenthood needs to be understood in terms of the different layers of context in which individual lives are embedded. Socio-economic status, education, ethnicity and migration, availability of affordable housing and childcare, are all important factors that shape parents' experiences. The lower the level of education, the earlier in life the transition to parenthood is likely to happen in all the countries.

The experience of intensified workloads and demands also appear to impact on decision making on the timing of parenthood and family size. Two full-time jobs are often difficult to sustain, especially jobs with inflexible hours, and this is reflected in the lowest birth rates in countries where there are fewest opportunities for part-time work. In contexts where alternatives to two demanding full-time jobs are available and affordable, parenting and employment may appear more feasible, through the use of part-time work, although this then tends to reinforce gendered strategies for working and caring when children are very young. Thus there are implications of contemporary working practices for fertility rates and/or gender equity in different European contexts.

### ***The intensification of parenting***

The intensification of paid work across Europe was a recurrent theme in the project. There is also an intensification of parenting (Brannen and Moss, 1998), which is an important aspect of some societal contexts that influences strategies for working and caring and the need for permeability of work-family boundaries. Young parents, and prospective parents, expressed high expectations of what a "good" parent should do, which typically involved far more care and parental input, as well as more financial resources, than their own parents had been able to provide. Pressure to conform to "intensified" parenting came both from parents' expectations, but also from wider societies, and, in some countries, from national initiatives to encourage more parental involvement of various forms. There is little consideration at policy level as to how this is to be achieved at a time when parents work longer hours or more intensively than previously. This points to the importance of "joined up thinking" at national and European policy levels. The study also highlighted the increasing pressure of material expectations in bringing up a child, which can impact on strategies for working and parenting. In Northern European countries, the pressure was typically to be able to provide a high level of material goods for family and children, while in accession countries and Portugal, there was more pressure to provide the basics of good housing and living standards and, in Portugal, education (Nilsen and Brannen, 2005). But in all these cases parents felt the pressures and compared this to the lower material standards expected in their own childhoods.

### ***Individual and household strategies***

A commonly preferred strategy for working and parenting after the transition to parenthood is for households to have one full-time and one less than full-time earner, particularly in the Netherlands and the UK, but also in Norway and Sweden, that is, where part-time work (although differing in nature cross nationally in term of length regulated, protection and associated entitlements), is

widely available and levels of affluence permit this strategy. Across Europe most fathers work full-time, so that part-time work, where it exists, is largely perceived as an option for mothers, often with negative implications for women's occupational careers if they do take up part-time working. There is some evidence from our interviews, which echoes conclusions from other studies (e.g. Wallace et al, 2003, Lewis, Smithson, Cooper and Dyer, 2001), that part-time employees feel their commitment to work is questioned. Part-time work can therefore be regarded simultaneously as a resource for the families but a career risk for women employees. In Portugal, Slovenia and Bulgaria where the option of part-time work is rarely available or affordable, limiting family size is a common strategy for managing income provision and caring.. However, the absence of part-time work opportunities does not necessarily enhance gender equity at work or at home, particularly in Bulgaria and Slovenia, where there are low expectations of gender equity in the family. The workplace model of the ideal (full-time) worker and subsequent undervaluing of part-time workers together with pensions systems and persisting differences in expectation about mothering and fathering underpin the reluctance of most fathers to work less than full-time.

### ***Childcare strategies and possibilities***

Options and preferences for childcare were very variable across the countries studied (Fagnani et al, 2004). Some countries have a long history of formal childcare provision, while in others this is relatively new. The study highlighted the increasing expectations not just of availability but also quality of childcare, with discussions about the benefits and costs to children being a salient feature of national debates in the UK, Sweden, Norway and France, while in Portugal, Bulgaria and Slovenia, debates about childcare focused more on schedules and affordability. Affordable childcare can ease the negotiation of work-family strategies. However this study also demonstrates that while high quality, affordable childcare is a crucial basis for negotiating work-family boundaries, it is not sufficient. Attention is also needed to workplace practices that create difficulties for employed parents in many contexts, even when good childcare is available.

### ***Day to day strategies***

Parents develop different types of strategies for negotiating work-family boundaries on a daily basis as they move backwards and forwards between their work and family lives (Nippert Eng, 1996; Campbell Clarke, 2001; Reynolds, Callender et al, 2003). Strategies can be conceptualised along a continuum between integration and segmentation, according to the extent of permeability of work-family spatial, temporal and psychological boundaries. There are also differences in the direction of permeability. For example, spillover of family concerns into work time may be acceptable to parents but not vice versa.

High status parents were more likely than those of lower status to have permeable boundaries, particularly from work to home, prior to the transition to parenthood. However, after becoming parents flexibility or permeability of boundaries often became problematic particularly when work intruded into private life. What appears to matter to parents, in most contexts, is not just the level of permeability of work-family boundaries, but whether they are able to adopt their preferred strategies, be they largely separating or integrating, and to have some control and autonomy over their work-family boundaries.

Workplace policies and practices influence the permeability of boundaries. These policies and practices are shaped by national and local regulations, but this study shows that they are also increasingly a matter of daily and informal negotiation with managers in local organisations. Increased flexibility of employees' working

time and place, enhancing potential integration of work and family spheres emerged as a major trend of organisational change in all the countries. However, the process by which this is achieved is ambiguous. Often it involves overcoming a great deal of resistance and requires complex negotiations among employers and employees, leading to *ad hoc* configurations in each organisation. The influence of unions and other collective agents is very different among European countries, but is generally low in these case study organisations, especially for the age group studied, and for work-family topics.

Parents are far from passive in this process. They develop proactive, personal strategies for managing boundaries between their work and family spheres, switching between integration and segregation on their own terms, albeit with greater or lesser difficulty in diverse contexts. Some parents used ICTs to blur the boundaries by, for example, checking email at home, or texting partners during the day, and this study demonstrates that technology can also be used by parents in proactive ways to support complex strategies, combining elements of segregation and integration. Nevertheless intensified workloads can make separation very difficult, especially when work cannot be accomplished during the working day, or when, for example, work related training must be undertaken during non-work time.

### **Gendered experiences of combining paid work and family life**

Experiences of being an employed mother or an employed father continue to be very different. Women continue to do the major share of unpaid work, on average, in all the countries. Further changes in mothers' roles require reciprocal change from fathers, as well as changing organisational expectations (Gambles et al, 2006). As other recent studies confirm the wider perception of a fathers' role, across Europe, still tends to be that of wage earner rather than earner and carer (Hearn et al, 2004).

This study shows that national policies and provisions interact with formal and informal workplace policies, practices and cultures and economic conditions to support and constrain gender expectations and transformations, in complex ways. For example, national policy has long been based on equal opportunities ideology in Sweden and Norway and also under the former communist regimes in Bulgaria and Slovenia, but the outcomes are very different. In the former Eastern bloc countries women have been disproportionately affected by the transition from a socialist to a market-based economy (Metcalf and Afanassieva, 2005). They are more vulnerable to unemployment under the new regimes, and more likely to bear the consequences for new arrangements for state childcare (Watson, 1997; Domsch et al, 2003). Moreover, the focus is on equality of opportunities for men and women in terms of labour force participation and not gender equity in the home.

Often grandparents or siblings, usually sisters, can step in to help working parents, but although this can help to manage work-family boundaries it tends to absolve men from the need to change and perpetuate gendered responsibilities. Expectations for managing work-family life appear to be more easily met in less affluent societies especially where gender equity ideas are not yet widely discussed. While Swedish and Norwegian couples demonstrated relatively high levels of conflict in negotiating work-family boundaries, Bulgarian parents, despite working long full-time hours, perceive no conflict as they see this as necessary to survival (see also Wallace et al, 2003).

In contrast to the situation in Slovenia and Bulgaria, the egalitarian ideology and related policies in Sweden and Norway address gender relations in both families and workplaces and raise expectations of change, but this can at times create intra-family tensions that are not experienced in countries where there are fewer

aspirations to gender transformation. Moreover, even when supportive social policies are in place, other institutions do not necessarily change at the same pace. **Transitional tensions** can be experienced and exacerbated by lack of commensurate change at the workplace level. It is likely that the intra familial tension or “transitional tension” is a necessary phase of unsettling people for progress to occur towards transformation of the gender order. Policies to support gender equity can help, but are undermined by lack of change at other levels, particularly in the workplace. This again points to the need for social partners to work collaboratively to ensure support for employed parents at multiple levels.

## **Expectations and Experiences of Parenting**

How do young parents' expectations match up with their expectations before starting a family? In a previous study undertaken by some of the *Transitions* team, it was found that young adults' expectations broadly reflected the practical possibilities they saw in their country. Those in Sweden and Norway expected strong support from state for reconciling paid work and family life, and also expected or hoped for an egalitarian division of labour within the home, while those in the UK and Portugal, with far lower levels of state provision, expected little support from employers or state, and women expected less practical support from future partners (Lewis, Smithson et al, 1999). This lower sense of entitlement to formal support was, in this earlier study, accompanied by generally higher expectations of support from family (grandparents and siblings) for childcare in the UK and Portugal (Brannen et al, 2002; Lewis and Smithson, 2001). In the *Transitions* study, some of the expectations in the earlier study have been borne out. New parents in the Nordic countries both expected and received higher levels of support from the state, and generally experienced more egalitarian sharing of parenthood and domestic tasks than elsewhere – strongly supported by leave and policy provisions which explicitly target gender equity and fathers' involvement in parenting, although there remain persisting structural constraints to gender equity that are difficult to change.

It is notable that the expectation of support from grandparents, especially prevalent in Portugal in the earlier study (Lewis et al, 1999; Brannen et al, 2002), is weaker in this study of new parents. While grandparents and other family members were drawn on extensively for support in Portugal and the UK, there were many problems with this. Grandparents were increasingly likely to be in the labour market themselves, or ageing and needing care themselves. Parents were increasingly likely to have moved away from their family of origin and therefore away from possibilities for regular family support. These demographic changes suggest that the reliance on family support for childcare may be increasingly problematic, or unfeasible for growing numbers of parents in the future and underlines the importance of public policies on child care provision.

## **Well-being in the transition to parenthood**

The study sought to identify factors which contribute *positively* to the well-being of these young adults and the factors which have a negative impact. However, this is far from straightforward, particularly because of the effects of diverse aspects of context on expectations and social comparisons, which, in turn, influence parents' well-being experiences. Well-being is complex, multi-layered, context dependent, fluid, dynamic and cannot be separated from expectations and aspirations.

The qualitative, multi-methods approach to well-being across time as well as national borders, used in this study, provides a much more fine grained understanding of parents' experiences than the more usual quantitative

approaches. Our analysis demonstrates that contentment, or lack of contentment among new parents is complex and multi-faceted, often varying throughout the day, and context dependent. Well-being depends not only upon the resources available to parents, but also on the resources available to those with whom they compare themselves. For example, relative satisfaction with employing organisations, even those undergoing rapid changes that could make life more difficult for parents of young children, was often sustained through comparison with other organisations in the same or another sector, which parents believed would be even more difficult places to work in. More generally, parents from Portugal, Slovenia and Bulgaria emerge as relatively content with their lives compared with their more affluent peers in Sweden and the UK, because their expectations of support and resources are lower and thus more easily satisfied.

Higher expectations and sense of entitlement to support can sometimes be important in generating constructive tension and pressure for change. This is illustrated in the example of transitional intra-familial gender tensions discussed above, when expectation of gender equity are high, or in the demands for more support in the workplace, pushing the boundaries of management thinking. In some contexts higher expectations relate to materialistic goals in consumerist societies, which sometimes result in parents working more than they would ideally like to do, creating additional strain. As other research has shown, beyond a certain level, greater material wealth is not necessarily associated with more positive well-being (Layard, 2003).

### **Organisational well-being and “good practice”**

The study examined the notion of organisational well-being, which was found to be problematic. Notions of a caring organisation (Sevenhuijsen, 2003) or “healthy organisation” (Newell, 2002) were evident in some contexts. Both of these concepts assume that the organisation’s performance can be enhanced by caring for employees in their wider lives, or a dual agenda of employee well-being and organisational effectiveness (Rapoport et al, 2002). However, many problems remain with this notion. In particular this study shows that pervasive organisational trends such as the intensification of work perpetuate a male model of work and undermine the reconciliation of paid work and parenting. Moreover, there are also often different perspectives among managers and subordinates about whether the organisation can be considered to be “caring”. There are also problems about what constitutes an “organisation” as parents’ experiences vary across departments or units in all the case studies.

The difficulty in conceptualising well-being at an organisational wide level is reflected in problems in defining good practices, which are also context dependent. Satisfaction with organisational or managerial support for managing work and family boundaries varies not just in terms of the supports available but, again, according to expectations, social comparisons and sense of entitlement. Sense of entitlement to support is influenced by welfare state context and the gender contract on which it is based, as demonstrated in an earlier study of young Europeans’ perspectives on work and family (Lewis and Smithson, 2001; Lewis, Smithson and das Dores Guerreiro, 2001). Other factors also come into play however, including economic and labour market context as well as sector; there is generally a higher sense of entitlement to support and for workplaces to be caring organisations in the public than the private sector organisations. Good practices cannot therefore easily be transferred across different contexts. Nevertheless a number of principles were identified that underpin practices that parents experienced as supportive and helpful in different case study organisations. These include: realistic workloads; implementing statutory policies, not in a minimal way but with attention to necessary changes in structures, cultures and practices; management support; consistency and trust; mutual

understanding and flexibility; collaboration and attention to gender equity. Well-being is enhanced if a parent has a choice and some control over temporal and spatial flexibility.

Thus the introduction of “supportive” work-family policies are an not end point of process in consumer-led and gendered society. Rather, policies and practices to support working parents are part of a process of change that involves shifting values and practices. Further support in the changing European workplace is likely to involve empowering parents by raising their expectations of, and sense of entitlement to, support in order to be able to negotiate gender equitable strategies for managing work and family boundaries. To do so, may involve transitional tensions in workplaces as well as in families, but these may be a part of a necessary phase for supporting parents and in the transformation of the gender order in European societies.

### **Seeds of positive change**

There is evidence of some positive changes but these are often accompanied by transitional tensions as commensurate changes in other layers of context take place more slowly. Examples include the growing involvement of fathers in parenting in Norway and Sweden as a consequence of social policies to support fathering. This raises expectations of shared parenting, which can create tensions when some employers continue to expect men not to take family leaves, or if some mothers are reluctant to relinquish their main responsibility for children. Value shifts are therefore needed at workplace and family levels. It is not only social policies that bring about positive changes. Other changes come from the family and workplace levels, For example, there were examples in case studies in the UK, Bulgaria and Slovenia of parents reversing earning and caring roles. This usually came about for practical reasons, but provided opportunities to challenge gender expectations. In every case, however, both parents experienced some gender identity tensions. At the workplace level, organisational change can raise expectations of support for managing work and family boundaries. For example, in the UK private sector organisation a drive for culture change including more flexibility and trust, raised expectations of support among parents, some of whom were able to work very flexibly. Tensions arose in this context because of management inconsistency in applying the new culture, due partly to intensification of work, but also the lack of change in the values and skills of many managers. In other contexts, positive changes emerged from employees themselves. For example, in the Swedish social services solidarity emerged among workers who were parents, which facilitated greater flexibility of working arrangements within teams. Tensions emerged however, because of intense workloads.

Transitions can create tensions at multiple levels; within individuals as they adapt to changing gender practices and expectations at a personal level; within households as parents adapt relationships at an interpersonal level; and within workplaces, or units within workplaces, where the pace of change is too rapid or is uneven. The challenge is to seize opportunities of positive change by looking beyond transitions in one layer of context to support change in other interrelated areas.

### **Implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for social partners**

- **Overall, interrelated implications for policy and practice include:**

Fundamental tensions between contemporary working patterns and the needs of mothers and fathers to be able to care for children.

Parents across Europe are facing growing demands both in the workplace and the home. The study highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing tensions between contemporary working practices in the context of technological advances, international competition and efficiency drives, as well as growing consumerism, on the one hand, and the needs of individuals and families on the other, as noted by a number of commentators (Bauman, 1998; Sennet, 1998; Gambles, et al 2006).

- **Implementation gaps, organisational change and intensification of work**

Some national social policies can help parents to develop equitable and satisfying strategies for negotiating work and family boundaries. However, there are implementation gaps between policies (government and organisational) and practices, in all the case study organisations. Policies to support working parents are increasingly undermined by changes in the nature and practice of work in the context of global competition in the private sector and efficiency drives in the public sector, which in turn, reinforce gender inequities. Experiences of intensification and also insecurity of work undermine policies to enhance flexibility for parents.

- **A persistent need to address gender issues in organisations, families and wider societies**

The widely reported experiences of intensified workloads are difficult to reconcile with parenting and perpetuate gendered working patterns. The transition to parenthood appears to be a critical “tipping point” on the road to gender equity and therefore a crucial focus for policy-making at different levels to address the well-being of parents. However, while the transition to parenthood affects both mothers and fathers, the different experiences and starting points of mothers and fathers, which also vary across national contexts, still need to be acknowledged.

- **A persistent need to address social inequalities and social exclusion**

Social class as well as gender shapes experiences of working and parenting. The study points to the importance of identifying and supporting the most vulnerable parents. Across Europe low skilled work is increasingly likely to be contracted outside large organisations. Workplace policies and practices experienced as supportive by parents in the case studies are unlikely to benefit the most vulnerable workers. This is particularly relevant to European discussions on agency workers and to the objective of combating social exclusion.

- **The importance of addressing well-being in all its complexity and recognising transitional tensions**

Well-being is complex, multi-layered and context dependent, fluid, dynamic, and related to aspirations, rather than being a fixed state. Raising expectations and aspirations, whether for gender equity, support for reconciling employment and family life, or general levels of affluence can unsettle people. Transitional tensions can be experienced if new aspirations are not supported by changes in values and/or resources at multiple levels of society. But some transitional tension and pressure may be strategic and necessary to start change processes.

- **A focus on “good practices” at the workplace level can overlook the impact of context and the double edged nature of many workplace practices**

Employer good practices are context dependent. There is a need to look at specific principles and processes of change rather than seeking to transfer generalised good practice. For example, greater flexibility can enable parents to manage multiple roles and enhance well-being in the short-term but can also enable parents to work more, with paid work intruding into family life.

- **The importance of a multi-layered and joined up approach to policy-making and change initiatives**

The focus on multiple layers of context in this study points to the need for a multi-layered approach to policy-making. Although supports and constraints vary in diverse contexts, parents' work-family strategies are still largely negotiated at the household level, and in gendered ways, because of lack of interrelated change at multiple institutions. Changes in legislation alone are of limited value without shifts in organisational values and practices, family and community practices.

- **The need for a focus on long-term outcomes for sustainable societies and workplaces**

Socially sustainable families, workplaces and societies in Europe require long-term thinking as well as interrelated changes at many levels. For example, trends such as the declining birth rate in most partner countries can be related to the strategies that men and women are able to adopt in relation to family formation, in the context of intense workplace demands and uncertainties about jobs.

## **Recommendations**

The findings from this study do not lend themselves to simple policy solutions. Rather they raise some very crucial issues that need careful consideration at many levels in relation to the Lisbon agenda of generating balanced and sustainable growth which benefits all, helping workers to adjust to change and providing new opportunities for prosperity and social equality. Specifically the study highlights the potential contradictions between globalisation and work intensification on the one hand and the need for time to care for children (and others), in gender equitable ways, on the other hand. The task of elaborating new social models and standards in a context of organisational change needs to take place with the full participation of all the social partners. Below, we first consider some important overall recommendations requiring collaboration at many levels and then make specific recommendations for governments and employers.

### **General recommendations**

- **Confront uncomfortable issues about the contradictions between work intensification and the needs of parents and children**

There is a need for focused debate and collaboration between governments, employers, trade unions, NGOs and others, at EU and national levels, asking bigger questions about European goals and values.

- **Take a long-term strategic approach**

The social partners need to take a long-term approach to encourage socially sustainable work (Webster, 2004; Brewster, 2004) to support new parents in their paid work and caring work and support sustainable societies in the future.

- **A multi-layered partnerships approach is needed to support parents at many levels of society, in contemporary, changing contexts;**

The multiple goals of sustainable economic growth which benefits all, sustainable families and social equality, including gender equity, requires partnerships and interrelated change at many levels of context. Neither governments nor employers alone can bring about the necessary changes. Nevertheless, we make some recommendations below about ways in which social policy, and employers and unions can set the necessary conditions for multi-level supports for parents in changing European contexts.

**Recommendations for social policy (*to be considered in conjunction with the recommendations for collaboration above*)**

- Gender mainstreaming and joined up thinking in policy-making are essential.
- Employment and working time policy need to take account of changing experiences of work, especially intensification of workloads.
- National governments, together with the social partners should develop a national vision and strategy on the importance of good parenthood, on the needs of children, on responsibilities of mothers and fathers, and on the importance of children for long-term national welfare.
- Raise expectations of support for reconciling employment and caring.
- There is a need to promote and develop affordable, high quality, pre-school childcare provision, where this does not yet exist. This is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for supporting working parents.
- National governments should identify the most vulnerable parents. Policies that would help such parents include affordable, good quality housing in big cities for key workers in social care and health services as well as locally available, high quality, affordable childcare.
- Recognise the need to support parents through transitions and associated tensions at diverse levels of context.

**Recommendations for organisations: employers, managers and trade unions (*to be considered in conjunction with the recommendations for collaboration above*)**

- Employers, managers and unions need to be aware of the contradictions between work intensification and the needs of parents and children. This is not just a “soft issue” – it is crucial to the future of our societies.
- Move beyond implementation gaps to systemic and sustainable workplace change; focus on practices and process.
- Develop active strategies to support fathers as well as mothers in negotiating work and family boundaries.
- Support seeds of positive change where they emerge.
- Take a life course perspective on employees’ occupational careers, e.g. consider matching those who work part-time during early parenthood with older workers who may wish to work less than full-time .
- Monitor the effects of workplace changes on parents of young children.
- Support and train managers, supervisors and self managing teams to empower them to support parents.

- Consider the work and family needs of outsourced and other peripheral workers.
- Further EU support is needed for furthering debates and for change initiatives directed at win-win solutions for parents and organisations, and society.