

Transitions

CASE STUDIES EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

Executive Summary of Research Report #3
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CASE STUDIES

Executive Summary

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Transitions is a qualitative cross-national research project which aims to examine how young European adults negotiate motherhood and fatherhood and work-family boundaries in the context of labour market and workplace change, different national welfare state regimes and family and employer supports. The project is examining individual and household strategies and their consequences for well-being at the individual, family and organisational levels. This is studied in the context of parallel organisational contexts and macro levels of public support in the 8 participating countries: France, Portugal, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, the UK, Bulgaria and Slovenia.

Executive Summary of Consolidated Case Study Report

Case studies were carried out in one public sector (social services) and one private sector (primarily finance) organisation in Bulgaria, Norway, Portugal and the UK, a private sector company in the Netherlands and Slovenia and a public sector organisation in Sweden. Methods used included focus groups with parents, interviews with managers, document analysis and short well-being questionnaires.

The **objectives** of the organisational case studies were:

- To understand specific workplace contexts in which employees (aged 25-39) negotiate the transition to parenthood and develop work-family boundary strategies in different sectors and countries
- To examine elements of workplace change and transition and the way in which changes are reflected in workplace policies and practices affecting parents, in public and private/transitional sector organisations in 7 countries (including EU and accession states)
- To examine structural and cultural aspects of organisational change and practice from the perspectives of both managers and groups of employees who are parents of young children
- To examine and compare experiences of organisational supportiveness for parenthood and experiences of positive well being at individual and organisational levels in the different contexts
- To relate parents' experiences of their employing organisations to national policy contexts

Changing contexts

- In the context of economic, technological and social changes at the global level and changes in welfare state regimes at national levels, European workplaces in both the private and public sectors are facing new challenges and are also undergoing massive changes
- Global competition and the opening up of new markets in the private sector, new public management trends in the public sector, and the transition to a market economy in Slovenia and Bulgaria, are all associated with workplace efficiency drives that involve reducing the size of the workforce and expecting surviving employees to work harder. Employees in all of the case study organisations report the widespread experience of intensification of work. This is a particular challenge for young parents,

who must manage work and family in a particularly intense and competitive context. While a minority of employees experience this intensification as challenging in a positive way, the majority appear to experience this as negative, but nevertheless inevitable

- The growth of flexibility, in its many forms, is double-edged. It brings both insecurity and opportunities for parents. Contractual flexibility evident in the private sector, and also a trend towards individualisation of contracts in many public sector organisations, brings job insecurity. In Slovenia and Bulgaria this is a relatively new experience to which parents must adapt. Flexibility of working hours can bring opportunities to integrate paid work and family life, particularly if this is associated with greater autonomy. However, in the context of the intensification of work it can also lead to long working hours that intrude into family time or energy. Trade unions in some countries can play a role in resisting the more negative aspects of flexibility
- New technologies bring important changes to daily work organisation although their impact is often double-edged – they can facilitate flexibility but speed up intensification. New technologies feed into the knowledge society. The spread of knowledge is being incorporated into the employers' role, as organisations increasingly promote training, albeit in a range of different ways
- The different political contexts, and particularly the reconfiguration of welfare states, are shaping different organizational contexts. In particular, the dramatically rapid changes taking place in Bulgaria and Slovenia, including liberalisation, where new pro-market ideologies favour 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 subsequently on workers' lives
- In this context there are new discussions on gender and work-family reconciliation, framed by a wider discussion on caring organisations in some countries. Nevertheless, the male model of ideal workers who do not need time or energy for family work remains dominant

On Work

One of the main tasks in this project was to examine changes in workplace policies and practices in European organisations, from the perspectives of

both managers and groups of employees who are parents of young children. Major findings include:

- There is a significant implementation gap between formal policies and current practices. Managers play a decisive role in the implementation of policies. Colleagues can also act as agents of social control, especially in the context of tight staffing and intense workloads, where parents working flexibly or taking leaves can exacerbate colleagues' overload
- Workplace policies and practices are shaped by national and local regulations, but they are increasingly a matter of daily and informal negotiation in local organisations. The influence of unions and other collective agents is very different among European countries, but appears to be greater in the public sector
- Employees' statutory entitlements are implemented in very distinct forms according to (a) the nature of the work, (b) professional status, (c) type of contracts and (d) access to information
- Most managers still believe that caring about employees' family commitments, and meeting organisational needs are mutually exclusive rather than mutually reinforcing. Managers' priorities appear to be highly conditioned by national and organisational contexts as well as their values and experiences. Gender of managers is not always a decisive factor
- "Family friendly" or flexible working policies and entitlements are still largely perceived as benefits for women workers. Consequently, both men and women feel a growing sense of inequality. Employed mothers feel that this interpretation may prejudice their careers, while caring fathers feel that they have fewer opportunities than mothers to care of their children. The focus generally remains on policies at the margins, rather than systemic changes which might challenge male models of work. Women are particularly disadvantaged by this
- Flexibility of times and place 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

- Although there are well-defined leave entitlements for parents, in practice, leave is usually taken through “mixed arrangements”, that is a set of formal and informal procedures. Often these prioritise organisational needs, but may sometimes also extend opportunities available to employees
- Training courses are also considered a core practice of organisational change and modernisation. However, time pressure and economic constraints make their implementation difficult. Consequently, they often end up taking place outside the employees’ weekly schedule, which increases the experience of intensification of work and is particularly difficult for young parents

Comparison of public and private sector organisations

Case studies in different organisations allowed not only a comparison among different countries but also between the private and public sectors. This study has shown that:

- Very significant differences between policies, cultures and practices of private and public sectors are still evident across the seven countries, although these distinctions vary from one country to another. Further, both sectors are experiencing deep dynamics of change, blurring some traditional contrasts between them
- Men are dominant in the private sector, while women are more oriented to public sector work. This is at least partly due to different organisational demands and family responsibilities, shaping gendered careers and projects
- “Ethics of care” and “ethics of business” were found in all organisations. However, the former tends to be dominant in public organisations and the latter in the private ones
- Public and private organisations appear to have a different approach to “family friendly” policies: the former strictly following legislation, the latter using a more flexible approach, which has both advantages and disadvantages
- Insecurity is a major concern among young employees in both sectors, but its meaning varies. The private sector is characterised by “daily insecurity”, with good conditions but fear of being dismissed. The public

sector on the other hand, is governed by “future insecurity” with less favourable conditions, ambiguity regarding the future, but more effective support for the reconciliation of work and family

On Organisational well-being

- This study focuses on factors contributing to positive well-being rather than simply the absence of negative well-being. We explore a collective notion of “organisational well-being” or “healthy” organisations from the perspectives of employees who are parents, as well as their managers
- Healthy organisations tend to be defined in the literature as those which can meet the needs of employees as well as those of the organisation. The view that workplace effectiveness can be enhanced by looking after the workforce is explicit in organisational discourses in a minority of the cases studies. However, this view is not always shared by managers and therefore, there is often a gap between theory and day to day practice
- A number of problems and issues emerged in conceptualising organisational well-being. In particular it is difficult to determine the meanings of meeting employers’ and employees’ needs because a) there is a question of whose perspective to take, as the perspectives of managers and subordinates often diverge and b) participants’ evaluations of the organisation in meeting their needs are influenced by national context, subjective and cultural expectations, social comparison and sense of entitlement to support
- A distinction can be made between a fragmented notion of organisational well-being that takes account only of experiences in the workplace, and a more holistic approach which addresses employees’ needs within and beyond the workplace.
- The notion of a caring organisation that is evident in some contexts, can raise expectations of “healthy” organisations that can enhance performance by caring for employees in the wider context of their lives. However, even if gender equity is incorporated into the conceptualisation of organisational well-being, many problems still remain. Pervasive current organisational trends such as the intensification of work perpetuate a male model of work, and undermine the equitable reconciliation of work and parenting

- The conceptualisation of organisational well-being, and its relationship to individual and family well-being conceptualisations, in addition to incorporating notions of good practice, is an ongoing part of the *Transitions* project. The Good Practice report and the forthcoming Well-being Report (to be published in 2005) continue to develop these concepts