

# A Pivotal Challenge in the Global Context

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The opening Prologue stories are based on the lives of real people whom we met in the course of researching this book and reflect some of the challenges people face in combining multiple parts of life. When we consider the complex ways in which they, and others like them, combine and value the different parts of their lives, we argue that contemporary debates or policy initiatives promoting ‘work–life balance’ or ‘work–family reconciliation’ seem to only skim the surface of much deeper and more fundamental sets of challenges and constraints. This book explores some of the complex ways in which people are able to prioritise or value various aspects of life in a context in which the demands of paid work and emphasis on its virtues seem to be increasing. We look at the impact of current patterns of paid work on individual well-being and on family, friendship and community experiences. We also explore the connections between contemporary ‘work–life’ pressures and men and women’s identities and male–female relationships. The book focuses on experiences of people in formal paid work, mostly working in the post-industrial knowledge economy.<sup>1</sup> However, these workers do not exist in a vacuum and we also explore some of the ways in which paid work and personal life pressures are experienced by other sectors of society and how this can perpetuate various social inequities. For example, as we saw in the Prologue, the domestic worker employed by Elizabeth’s family in the USA also struggles to manage her own complex life while supporting her employers in managing their lives (dilemmas we will return to particularly in the final chapter). Another example in our opening stories is Sally in the UK, who works in a low paid job at a supermarket. She finds she is unable to seek promotion because this may entail extra and unpredictable hours that are incompatible with her care responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

Below we emphasise and reflect on three critical and related tensions that are connected with challenges people face in combining paid work with other parts of their lives, before discussing the limitations of responses to these challenges that rely on policy alone. We then provide some background to the study on which this book is based and go on to argue that there is a need to move beyond current initiatives and debates about balancing paid

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise that challenges of harmonising paid work with other parts of life are not limited to these sectors of society. Indeed the challenges are much greater amongst the least privileged and most vulnerable members of society. Our participants are all relatively privileged and although some speak for the less privileged there are many other perspectives and many voices unheard.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Crompton and Brockman (2003); see also Toynbee (2003), who discusses some of the difficulties low paid workers have in juggling paid work with care responsibilities and how these struggles can prevent them from seeking work that is better paid and has better conditions.

work with other parts of life, to ask and reflect on bigger questions. Finally we provide a brief overview of the remainder of the book.

## CRITICAL TENSIONS

There are three critical and interrelated factors that we believe are central to discussions about ‘work–family conflict’, ‘work–life balance’, and what we refer to as harmonising paid work with other parts of life (see Chapter 3).

Firstly, paid work has become increasingly demanding and invasive in people’s lives. This may be due, for example, to poverty level pay and the need for multiple jobs; new forms of work and working patterns that put increased pressure on people; the intrinsic satisfaction of some forms of work; or the lure of consumerism and accumulation. Whatever the reasons, the invasiveness of paid work can divert time and energy from other equally important parts of life.

Secondly, time and energy to connect with others and give and receive care – as parents, children, lovers or friends, or even time to care for ourselves – are crucial for individual and societal well-being. Yet these aspects of life can be increasingly squeezed out by current patterns of paid work, or can exclude people with demanding non-paid care responsibilities from much paid work. In the recent past it has tended to be women who have struggled to fit in caring responsibilities and expectations with other activities. Now, as our opening stories illustrate, many men are also struggling to find space in their lives to connect with and care for others across a variety of life situations.

Thirdly, in this context, the ways in which men and women experience and negotiate their roles, identities and relationships with each other are crucial to ways in which paid work and other parts of life are harmonised. But ‘choices’ about how men and women do this are often constrained by assumptions about what men and women ‘should’ do and how they ‘should’ interact with each other. Despite the growth in women’s participation in paid work since the 1960s, there remains less reciprocal change among men, particularly in terms of their participation in care and unpaid domestic activities. This impacts on both men and women’s experiences and family life.

Many people regard the ways in which work can be harmonised with other parts of life as individual concerns and as a small, rather self-indulgent problem in today’s world. In India, for example, we hear that while people are aware that emerging patterns of paid work are damaging some relationships in families and communities, ‘bigger’ issues of competing globally overshadow these concerns. Some feel that worrying about family relationships and well-being is a luxury they as a society cannot afford to address. In the business world in ‘developed’ countries, and among many governments, the importance of paid work and the primacy of economic competitiveness, whatever the personal costs, are almost accepted wisdom. Profits and short-term efficiency gains are often placed before social issues of care and human dignity. Yet the three interacting tensions outlined above are exacerbated by increasing economic competition within and between countries. The ways in which people are able to harmonise work with other parts of life are inherently bound up with debates about the current global economy, associated demands in paid work, and equity and well-being dynamics. Difficulties men and women experience in combining paid work with other parts of life can no longer be considered as purely personal, family, employer or even national concerns. They are global challenges.

## POLICIES ARE NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

Some governments and some employing organisations have developed policies, varying in type and generosity across different countries and workplaces that aim to make it easier for people – particularly women – to combine paid work with the rest of life. Policies are necessary. Government policy packages, which take different forms at different times and in different contexts, include various combinations of time, service and cash provisions that are essential for supporting all employees, including those who do not work in supportive organisations and the lowest paid and most vulnerable workers. Time provisions, which are also made available through some employer policies, include maternity, parental and family leaves, part-time or flexi-time possibilities. Service provisions include child, elder or other types of care support. In addition, cash provisions include benefits that compensate stay-at-home carers or offer cash resources to buy in a range of supports.

Yet while these policies are crucial, and various types and extents of provisions can have differing consequences on equity between men and women as well as different impacts on adult and child well-being,<sup>3</sup> their overall impact has been limited (see Brandth & Kvande (2001); Lewis (1997); Lewis, S. (2001); Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher & Pruitt (2002)). Government policies have to be implemented at the workplace level where they are often undermined by working practices, structures and cultures as well as wider societal norms. Employer policies on flexible working arrangements, for example, are also undermined by these factors.

Policies, while offering varying levels of entitlement and support, tend not to tackle or address cultural and organisational values or deep identity tensions that are so important in implementation. For example, both statutory parental leave entitlements and employer policies on part-time work are more often taken up by women than men, even in countries where father involvement is positively encouraged in policy making. This is due, for example, to assumptions that ‘ideal’ workers do not modify work for family reasons, alongside notions about what is appropriate behaviour for men and women.<sup>4</sup> The result is that people – usually women – who take up ‘work–family’ or ‘work–life’ entitlements tend to be undervalued in workplaces and are often penalised in terms of pay and workplace advancement. What does this say about how various activities are valued? And how might assumptions about ‘ideal’ workers, or about men and women’s appropriate roles, relate to social concerns such as falling birth rates or to an emerging deficit of time available for care? These are the questions we explore in this book.

## THE STORY BEHIND THIS BOOK

We, the authors, represent three generations of women who have been experiencing these challenges within our personal and professional lives at different life course phases over a period that, for one of us, spans more than 50 years. During this time, we have witnessed

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<sup>3</sup> See Gornick and Meyers (2003), in which the authors give a detailed and comparative summary of the impacts of particular policies. For example, they discuss the extent to which longer maternity or parental leaves can impact on women’s labour market opportunities as long spells of exclusion can limit human capital; the extent to which shorter leaves may impact on child well-being; and the ways in which different countries offer support for childcare or flexible working. Their study explores different policy provisions and overall country outcomes such as gender equity, child well-being and poverty risks, and they take a critical view of the current US approach.

<sup>4</sup> See footnote 2.

the ways in which families and the nature of work have been changing, and have noted the developments in government and workplace responses together with their impacts and limitations. Our aim here is to reflect on ‘work–life’ challenges and stimulate further thinking about potential collaborative changes amongst men and women in families, communities, workplace organisations and wider societal contexts that might support the harmonisation of paid work with other parts of life in ways that are potentially more equitable, satisfying and sustainable.

With a grant from the Ford Foundation, for a project we called *Looking Backwards to Go Forwards: Work–personal life integrations in seven countries*, we explored ‘work–life’ challenges in India, Japan, The Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. In this book we draw from these explorations to discuss how situations and ways of thinking about combining paid work with other parts of life have evolved in various countries since the 1950s. We also explore persisting and emerging barriers that appear to hold back more progressive change with a view to thinking about strategies and processes for moving forward in more optimal ways.

We explore the trends and challenges experienced in seven countries with different levels of government or workplace support for harmonising paid work with other parts of life and at varying stages of economic development. We include Norway because of government commitment to equality between men and women backed up by well-established social policies to support the reconciliation of employment and family life. The Netherlands is included as a country that has come more recently to these issues, but is now developing more public policy and public–private initiatives and supports to enable women to be more involved in paid work. The UK is discussed because there is currently a great deal of hype about ‘work–life balance’ among government, employers and others. Living in the UK, it is also the context we know best. The USA is included as a contrast in that there is minimal social policy support but much attention has been paid to work–life issues at the workplace level. Japan also offers an interesting case. There are long working hours and a culture that tends to espouse particularly ‘traditional’ notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. Yet there have been recent government policies and drives to change workplaces to make them more ‘women’ or ‘family’ friendly, motivated in large part by a dramatic decline in the birth rate. As we are also interested in how these challenges are affecting a ‘developing’ country connected with the global economy, we include India.<sup>5</sup> The technological revolution taking place in India and the high level of outsourcing of workplaces from ‘developed’ countries enables us to observe the impact of global mobility from a ‘recipient’s’ perspective. However, India is a very diverse country. It is important to note that we focus mainly on the capital city, New Delhi, and on experiences of people who are more directly connected with new economy developments.<sup>6</sup> Finally, South Africa is also included as a country with mixed levels of economic development, which is being transformed, post-apartheid, and where attention to diversity issues is central to this transformation. Again, our particular focus means that our participants, though diverse, cannot reflect the whole social spectrum.

The Ford Foundation grant was given to stimulate a ‘think’ piece (rather than an exhaustive piece of empirical work) about the ways in which people are able to harmonise paid

<sup>5</sup> We recognise that using the terminology of ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ countries is problematic as it implies that developing countries should be working towards and incorporating approaches and strategies adopted in developed contexts. For the sake of clarity, we use the terms ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ but place these in inverted commas to remind of the difficulty of these labels and problems that may emanate from using these terms.

<sup>6</sup> This book does not deal with some of the greatest hardships in the poorest countries, such as malnutrition or absolute poverty.

work in the global knowledge economy with other parts of life: to explore what has happened in a range of countries and current situations, and to generate ideas for moving forward. In order to do this we explored the experiences, perspectives and reflections of a range of 'experts' connected in some way or another with contemporary 'work-life' challenges. These experts – whom we refer to as our participants and co-researchers – are connected with issues about harmonising paid work with other parts of life as: academics and researchers; politicians or policy makers; people working at various levels in formal workplace organisations, including public, private and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs); external consultants; trade union officials; and journalists. Our participants offered their own grounded insights from experience, research and individual understandings of their own countries, workplaces, families and personal circumstances and collaborated with us in the process of mutual enquiry.

Our research approach is qualitative and our methods were chosen to encourage our co-researchers to engage with us in reflection and collaborative thinking. Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln (1998, p. 3) argue that 'qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, international and visual texts that describe routine and problematic moments in and meaning in people's lives . . . qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter to hand'. We have used a variety of methods for precisely these reasons: to explore past, present and future tensions with our participants in different contexts.

In the course of our research, where possible, we compiled *country timelines* with the help of some of our participants from the different countries, to capture something of the history, and shifting evolutions of harmonising paid work with other parts of life. The compilation of these timelines involved looking at developments since the 1950s, which included relevant legislation, workplace policies and potential and emerging levers for change. The timelines, albeit limited by our perspectives and the perspectives of those who helped construct them, enable us to view the historical process over time.

We also held *country meetings* in some of these countries that were organised and convened by local colleagues who brought together diverse participants whom they knew to be working or engaging with 'work-life' challenges. The aim of these country meetings was to unearth perspectives from a range of people grappling with these challenges to explore what is currently being said and felt in various contexts. In these meetings we encouraged diverse groups of people to reflect on what was going on in their own lives and also more broadly on the country situations and to identify and discuss current debates. As the meetings were convened by local colleagues, the format differed slightly in each country. For example, some lasted for one day, others for two days enabling informal discussion and reflection to take place overnight. We felt that the latter structure was optimal but it was not always feasible.

In addition we held *in-depth interviews* with some of the participants from the country meetings – as well as with some others who did not attend the meetings who were also closely connected with 'work-life' issues in varying ways – so as to generate personal stories and engage in deeper level discussions and thinking.

During this research we were very struck by people's eagerness in all seven countries to talk about experiences and discontents in relation to combining paid work with other parts of life. Yet it was difficult for them – and also for us – to think about how things might change. Assumptions about the primacy of paid work as well as assumptions about

particular identities of men and women, and what they ‘should’ be attached to, are particularly endemic and inherent within conventional ‘wisdoms’. This can block creative and unrestrained thinking. Perhaps this is reflective of observations made by Frederic Jameson: that conceptualising beyond capitalism in its current forms has become harder than contemplating life beyond death.<sup>7</sup> It was this seemingly impenetrable impasse that prompted us to embark on a fourth aspect of our study: *an international meeting using scenario techniques*. The aim was to continue our discussions with some of our international participants in collaboration with professional scenario planners. Scenario planning draws lessons about possible futures. This meeting aimed to envision future harmonisations of paid work with other parts of life and to think about creative strategies for more optimal changes at multiple levels – including individual mindsets, families, communities, workplaces and wider society and international levels – that could be disseminated in some way within and across the different countries in our study.

Researchers always have a particular stance towards the questions being asked. As David Silverman (2002, p. 2) puts it, ‘whatever we observe is impregnated by our assumptions’. In interpreting our data, we are aware that our own positions – as white, middle-class women, albeit at different stages in our life courses – have influenced what we have probed and focused on, as well as what we document in this book. We come from different academic disciplines in the social sciences but share similar standpoints, including looking at these issues through gender, social justice and sustainability lenses and a focus on processes of change. We set this out in more detail in Chapter 3.

Our topic is huge. Conventional approaches to qualitative research warn against taking on topics that are too big and risk saying a little about a big social issue (see Silverman, 2001). We agree that in-depth analyses of specific issues or problems can help elucidate situations and reveal useful new perspectives and understandings. However, at the same time we argue this can be part of the problem if pursued in isolation. It is the very failure to look at the bigger picture of the ways in which people are able to harmonise paid work with other parts of life that has stopped people from asking taboo questions about, for example, the impact of dominant forms of market practices on people’s lives. So, perhaps the first conventional wisdom that we challenge is that research questions need always be small and manageable (though our methods are manageable, including the number of participants that we have been able to engage in the process).

## ASKING THE BIG QUESTIONS

As we reflect on the total process of this project we identify ‘big’ questions connected with the underlying tensions and undercurrents we feel continue to hold back change.

Firstly, there is limited thinking about alternative forms of capitalism that value social needs as much as profit. This is despite what dominant forms of neo-liberal capitalism appear to be doing to the well-being and quality of life of people in many societies. How do we make systems more responsive to human needs? How might it be possible to really move beyond the conventional wisdom that profits and efficiency are more important than people?

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Moss (2003), in which he explores barriers and obstacles for widespread use and implementation of parental leaves and reflects on tensions between ethics of care and ethics of paid work.

Secondly, there is limited thinking about how people who want a 'life' outside the workplace or those who have other needs and responsibilities can be valued in workplaces. How is it possible to overcome the reluctance or even apparent lack of awareness of the need to address workplace structures, cultures and practices that persist in penalising people who make changes in their individual working practices? Is it possible to value diversity of background, skills and ways of working, or to recognise that experiences from all parts of life may enhance relationships in the workplace and overall workplace effectiveness?

Thirdly, despite all that has been written about men, women, femininity and masculinity, there is a lack of widespread thinking about changing identities, changing roles and changing relationships between men and women in the context of harmonising the many parts of life. How is it possible to overcome resistance to thinking about deep identity issues that arise from changing relationships between men and women in different societies? Is it possible to develop widespread awareness of how structures, cultures and practices that shape all levels of society affect and prevent men and women from developing new identities, roles and relationships with each other in ways that enhance experiences of well-being or equity between them?

Fourthly, there is limited thinking about the connections between problems of combining paid work with other parts of life and many other social concerns. How is it possible to overcome the marginalisation of challenges in harmonising paid work with family or personal life and approach these dilemmas in wider and more radical ways?

Finally, there is limited thinking about the actual processes of change. How is it possible to overcome a focus on quick fixes and appreciate and address the complexity of change processes necessary for wider and deeper change?

We appreciate these are normative questions. Yet these are important and big questions that need to be asked at all levels of society; by *individuals* in the everyday organisation of their lives; by *families*, households and people in intimate relationships who value equity, companionship or connectedness with others; by *workplaces* seeking to recruit, retain, motivate and utilise diverse workers; in *communities* hoping to sustain or revive local participation and civic spirit; and *societies as a whole* that need to consider how to respond to changes in families, work, workplaces and communities in an increasingly globally connected world. Such questions and potential solutions require collective – and ongoing – thinking and discussion. Yet in a world characterised by perceived growing individualism and busyness, this seems increasingly difficult.

An important barrier is that many people have difficulty *hearing* the argument that harmonising paid work with other parts of life is connected to many other significant issues facing people and societies today. Approaching the ways people harmonise paid work with other parts of life in wider and more radical ways may be too challenging. It can feel too big, too complex and too difficult to talk about. Talking and thinking about paid work and other parts of life in deeper and more fundamental ways requires people to operate across all levels of society and confront some very basic assumptions and identities. This can feel risky, and so questioning many of the deeper assumptions connected with the harmonisation of paid work with other parts of life – such as assumptions that profits and shareholder value are more important than individual, family or community well-being, or assumptions about men and women's 'proper' roles – are often considered taboo. Nevertheless, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman (1998, p. 5) in his discussion of the human consequences of globalisation: 'questioning the ostensibly unquestionable premises of our way of life is arguably the most urgent service we owe to our fellow humans and our selves'.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the next chapter we begin the process of ‘looking backwards to go forwards’ by exploring potential levers for change since the 1950s, government and workplace responses, and current concerns and emerging potential levers for change in relation to harmonising paid work with other parts of life in the seven countries. We explore some of the changes and developments that have occurred over the last 50 or so years, pulling together what we have heard from our participants alongside insights from relevant research. In Chapter 3 we discuss the need for thinking about change at multiple levels and set out our criteria for optimal change: equity, well-being and sustainability.

In the second part of the book we explore the connections between paid work and other parts of life in more detail in terms of three interrelated themes, mirroring the critical undercurrents identified at the beginning of this chapter. In Chapter 4 we explore experiences of paid work in the current global context. In Chapter 5 we look at experiences of families, communities, friendships and leisure in the context of current experiences of paid work. We then go on, in Chapter 6, to explore some of the connections with these experiences and relationships between men and women, which we feel are critical to this whole set of challenges.

In the final part of the book we begin to think about ways of moving forwards. We discuss possible future scenarios and think about possible strategies for change across multiple levels, that may move us beyond the current ‘myth of work–life balance’, urging wider collaboration amongst people within and across different societies.