

# **Family policies, flexible work relations and work-life balance in the Netherlands in comparative perspective**

## **Outline**

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The experience of working caregivers varies in European countries in relation to family policies flexible labour market policies (leaves and transition policies) and the availability of care services (for children and elderly people). Many studies approach these relationships and its outcomes by using comparative datasets including practices and attitudes. However in doing so, they tend to overlook cultural mechanisms that sometimes mediate between policies and practices and sometimes even inspire policies and practices. In our contribution we will explicitly focus on these cultural mechanisms based upon interviews with working caregivers in 7 European countries (data derived from the Work Under Pressure project WOUPS).

The focus of the paper will be on how working caregivers deal with and experience flexible work and care arrangements given the family and work policies in their respective countries. Starting from the Dutch situation we will systematically compare this country's particularities with those in the other 6 countries included in this study.

Care giving in the Dutch context is marked by a "special" relationship to work, which is not found in any other country included in the study. Far from being secondary and unimportant, work is however perceived as adjustable and manageable in presence of specific care demands, be they the care of young children or of older parents.

Care as a "first choice" over work represents a well known feature among mothers of young children in the Netherlands. By contrast the "obligation" to care toward older kin is much less of a traditional feature of the Dutch society, also in relation to the early development of a highly inclusive and comprehensive collective long-term care system.

In spite of this difference, Dutch working caregivers generally report what we call a "detached attitude" toward their job that goes beyond the specific meaning of care for children or for other dependants.

We argue that this detachment rests on the perceived positive flexibility that the Dutch labour market and its regulation offer to employees. Female employment exploded since the end of the 1980s, alongside the development of part-time work arrangements that was progressively regulated so that it does not represent, as it may be in other countries, a discriminated sub-sector of the labour market. Part-time employees are explicitly provided with a right to equal treatment, such as wages, holiday pay and entitlements, bonuses, training and pension rights, and have the right to adjust their working hours, unless specific commercial or work-related reasons make this impossible.

Furthermore, a labour market characterised by labour shortages in virtually every sector (at least until before the recent financial crisis) has clear effects. On the one hand, it provides employees with a broader range of possibilities and room for negotiation with their employers with respect to working times and other arrangements that favours the conciliation strategies of the workers. On the other hand, it makes employers and employees more sensitive to conciliation issues.

After illustrating the specificities of the Dutch institutional context in comparative perspective the paper deeply analyses the experiences, practices and dilemmas of working caregivers in their relationship to work. The contextual analysis of child- and elderly care situations allows the analytical distinction between these different types of reconciliation policies and practices.