

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

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Paper prepared for the ESPAnet annual conference, Budapest, 2-4 September 2010

First draft – please do not quote

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Abstract

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.

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 the Dutch situation, having in mind these experiences in the other 5 countries included in the WOUPS study, a 6-country qualitative comparative research.

Among Dutch caregivers, either mothers of young children or daughters taking care for elderly parents, work is perceived as adjustable and manageable in presence of specific care demands. They show strong attachment to employment and, at the same time, what we call a “detached attitude” toward their job.

We argue that this peculiar attitude, which helps explaining the reduced level of work-life conflict that previous research has detected in the Netherlands, is accompanied by a family-based care ethos, also among employers, and rests on the perceived positive flexibility that the Dutch labour market and its regulation offer to employees, together with the perception of work as a choice.

1. Introduction

The experience of working caregivers varies across 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 their outcomes by using comparative datasets including practices and attitudes. However in doing so, they tend to overlook the mechanisms that sometimes mediate between policies and practices.

Existing research underlines that the Netherlands is a case where the conflict between work and care is reduced compared to other countries in Europe. In our contribution we highlight that the explanations linked to the existence of family policies are necessary but not sufficient and that other factors need to be taken into account. We explicitly focus on the mechanisms that influence the work and care culture based upon interviews with working caregivers, derived from two integrated research projects. The WOUPS Project (Workers under Pressure and Social Care)¹, is a qualitative cross-national study that surveys the experiences, perceptions and practices of workers with child- or elder-care responsibilities in six European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden) (Le Bihan and Martin 2008). For the interviews with workers with childcare responsibilities we approached respondents and received financial resources from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS)² (Dijkstra et al, 2005; 2006)

The first part of the paper focuses on how working caregivers deal with and experience work and care arrangements. Here we point out to a specific and distinct attitude of the Dutch working caregivers towards work which might explain a reduced work strain among working caregivers in the Netherlands: an ambivalent pattern of attachment to employment and detachment from one's job. We then investigated the possible reasons of the peculiarity of the Dutch case and argue that this unique attitude towards work rests on the perceived positive flexibility that the Dutch labour market and its regulation offer to employees, together with the (before the financial crisis) good opportunities offered by the Dutch labour market and the perception that, especially for women, working is a choice.

Our exploration draws on the empirical material collected through the WOUPS and the NKPS projects, The Dutch sample consists of 35 interviews, 15 of which were with mothers of young children and 20 with daughters (in-law) of older dependant people. The fieldwork was carried out in the first half of 2008. A semi-directive interview guide - common to all national studies comprised in the Woups project – has been used to investigate the experience of combining work and the care for either (a) small child(ren) or (an) older dependant relatives. Next to factual information on the

¹ The project was financed by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) under the 2006-2009 funding programme and by the DREES-MIRE as part of the Gender and Social Policies research programme (2006-2008).

² The NKPS project was financed an investment grant from the Dutch National Research Foundation (NWO).

care arrangements, work organisation and family life, the interview guide was aimed at detecting experiences, attitudes and normative views towards work-life balance practices³.

2. A “detached” attitude towards one’s job.

I chose my current job very consciously because I did not like my previous job and was looking for something else. But when looking for a new employer, they have to acquiesce to my demands, because I tell them I have a daughter and I have to take care of her, and if they say they cannot agree to my terms, that is the end of it. (Tineke, mother of a 7 -year old girl and financial administrator for a consultancy firm)

When it is really serious, I just take leave. Then, the firm can turn everything upside down, but then my child is my first priority of course. (Vera, mother of two children and temporary secretary)

These quotations of Dutch mothers of young children are rather illustrative of what can be called a ‘detached’ attitude towards their jobs, which is of striking contrast to the perception of the mothers in the other countries under study. Moreover, this attitude is also present among the older interviewees, daughters who care for their fragile elderly parents.

[My weekly schedule] can vary a lot because, euhm, that is a matter of arranging things, because my parents need me a lot. Also considering the care for my parents, I’m happy I left my job [at the newspaper] because normally you work from 8 o’clock till whenever you are needed if you are working by contract. You also have got evening and weekends that you have to work and so on. Now that’s not the case anymore. (Nienke, currently a freelance journalist, caring for both parents).

Why are Dutch women more easy going with regard to their jobs, and so firm in protecting their kin keeping and unpaid care work? Many scholars have puzzled with the issue and many explanations have been presented and studied for a few decades. In the 1980s and 1990s many studies focused on individual decisions that on high male wages guaranteeing that a family could afford to have only one earner (Plantenga 1993; 2002), female preferences (Hakim, 2002), high opportunity costs (Van

³ All interviewees got a fake name to guarantee their anonymity.

der Lippe, 1993) or motherhood attitudes (Knijn 1994). From the 1990s on, social policy studies found explanations in the lack of affordable childcare provisions and paid parental leave and also the since the 1980s well regulated and protected part-time labour market.

The quotations of these women however, show a more complicated picture. It is not only that these mothers of young children and daughters of older dependants firmly state that they set priorities and make demands on how they want to regulate and balance work and family life; they also express some confidence in realising their demands and seem to succeed in doing so. It is this kind of confidence and success that is the main and striking difference between the Dutch mothers and those from the other European countries in our study. Hence it is the focus of this paper.

2.1 Attached to employment...

It has to be noticed that in all the countries studied, women report high attachment to work, regardless of their level of occupation (Le Bihan and Martin 2008). For the Netherlands we have selected only women with a (nearly) full-time job, so the Dutch women did not deviate from the ones in the other countries in this respect. Both mothers of young children and daughters of older dependant people are highly attached to paid work. In spite of the high variability of care and work arrangements and of their variation throughout time in relation to events like the onset of disability, sudden or progressive worsening of health conditions of the older parents, the changes in the available informal resources etc., what remains relatively constant in the ways these women manage their life is paid work.

None of the daughters' taking care for their parent(s) stopped working because of care giving, nor substantially reduced their working times according to new emerging needs. In general, for these middle-aged women work is not at stake; work is a constraint in the sense that it represents a limit beyond which care should not go. If some mothers stopped working they did so for the allotted maternity leave and returned to work immediately after that. And if they did stay at home for a short period after their child(ren) were born, it was either because they were on welfare for health reasons or could not find work. Starting one's own business is another option in order to decrease the constraint that work poses upon their care responsibilities.

Of course staying in employment is more a necessity for some women, due to their educational and household income level, or their household situation. More importantly, however, staying in employment also relates to self-fulfilment, interest in what they do, economic autonomy, avoidance of social isolation, and future prospects, among working mothers as well as working daughters. What is striking is that this type of attitude (with different shades and accents) is widespread regardless of socioeconomic conditions. This is true for women who have a high skilled

job and responsibilities, and also for women with low-skilled jobs. Anja, a 51-year-old policy advisor in a hospital has been caring for her mother for years now and is very fond of her job, as she wants to be meaningful in other ways than in caring only. “*The job is for myself*”, as she puts it; it allows her to meet other people, to talk about other subjects than care. Despite having the opportunity to work fewer hours, she does not want to, also not to have a reduced income.

Dorien, a mother who works as a secretary at a university department, explains that:

“[By working] you expand your world [...] you are not just a mother and you are not only occupied with your child, you also have your work and the recognition you receive there. It is also really nice to do something and to see how happy it makes other people. These are very important aspects [of life].”

The same goes for Hiske, a supermarket cashier, 59 years old. She states that she would not quit her job, even if she could retire, because she likes it so much. She enjoys the contacts with customers and colleagues and the informal atmosphere at work.

Finally, the importance of being in employment is present also among professional care workers, even with different perspective and attitudes. Rianne, a part-time care worker, 58 years old, explains that her work protects her against her too demanding dependent mother. She feels that her clients appreciate her more than her mother does and, although experiencing it as a heavy job also in relation to her own health problems, she does not want to quit. It is satisfying for her and a pleasure to help others. This does not imply that it is always easy to combine a caring job with informal care work. Pauline feels that having to care as a job next to having to care as a daughter is emotionally too demanding. No question, however, giving up her work unless she finds a different one, which is very difficult for her, due to her qualifications and experience.

2.2 ... and detached from one's job

Even if work is far from being unimportant among working caregivers in the Netherlands, combining care and work in the Dutch context is marked by a “special” relationship to work, which is not found in any other country included in the study.

In general, work is perceived as adjustable to the specific care demands, be they the care of young children or of older parents. This perception encompasses three different elements.

First, working women in the Netherlands appear to (still) have the feeling (or experience) that it is their own choice to be employed. Although the economic reasons for having a job are sometimes accentuated, this does not imply that the caring mothers and daughters express that they work because they financially have to. If financial arguments are expressed these relate to economic

independence in the relationship as well as from external resources. Both sides of being economically independent are highlighted by Femke (single parent of two children and assistant manager in a small shop):

Well, it is mostly that you are not dependent on other people, that you earn your own money and that it [the combination of work and care] all works out. For me, another point is that I have no debts, nothing.

Femke's reference to being financially dependent on 'other people' refers both to her ex-partner, the father of her children, and to social assistance benefits. She feels it as her 'choice' not to depend on either of these and for that reason she experiences her paid job as her own decision. Realistic or not, this perception goes back to the post-war Dutch history in which families could afford to depend on the male breadwinner, as analysed by Plantenga (1993). Also the till 1996 generous social assistance for single mothers and till to-date lasting practice of exempting single mothers from the obligation to work if their caring responsibilities are envisioned too stressful contribute to this persisting perception of women of having the option not to participate in the labour market (see also Knijn & Van Wel, 2001). Second, and because of this perception of choice with regard to employment, caring women expect and demand that jobs are flexible enough to allow the conciliation between care and work, which in most cases turns out to be the case. Third, a job that is not flexible enough is not acceptable and should and can be substituted with another one.

As a result, Dutch women distinguish between *being employed*, which is nowadays an important aim for self-development, social contacts and financial autonomy, and their *specific job*, that should fit to their demands for flexibility. This consists above all in a flexible management of working times by the caring mothers and daughters. Working part-time, even if for relatively long hours, represents, as such, a facilitating element in combining work and care. Moreover, Dutch mothers as well as caring daughters put in place several creative arrangements in order to increase their availability for caring: working extra hours per week and saving these for paid leaves, starting to work early in the morning in order to have time to care left at the end of the afternoon, or working nine hours per day at four days of the week to have a day off for care giving, working night shifts, or being self-employed and working at home. Finally, holidays play a role in the combination of work and care, as it is common among the women to dedicate some of their holidays to care. Dutch employees tend to have many more days for vacation than they on average spend on holidays. These extra days are often used by care givers to fill the gaps in the care arrangement, such as visits to the doctor, to take their parents for a day out or to care for their children at home.

These might be favourable solutions for mothers and caring daughters to balance work and family life, but can be realized only under specific conditions. One condition is that each of these arrangements has to be agreed upon by the employer. According to the mothers and daughters most employers appear to be cooperative in finding a solution for the care tasks women are perceived to have. If not, caregivers are ready to look for another job.

Vera, a secretary and a mother, explains that when she has to take time off from work during care gaps, she needs her working environment to be understanding. Fortunately she says, her employer is usually cooperative, but if this were that not the case, she would not think twice of just leaving work. Vera describes the most recent situation:

Last year, my daughter was in the hospital. That was a very intense and tiring ordeal. Then my husband took some time off and I took time off work too. I told them that I hoped they did not mind, because I could not afford to lose my job, but because of the serious situation, my daughter had to come first. Luckily, they understood; that was nice. Of course that varies, the one time they take it into account and the other time they do not. You have to be lucky and that is what happened. Once my daughter was a bit better, I went back to work immediately.

In addition, Vera explains that she would not be very motivated to work in any case, if her daughter had been ill and she would not have been able to stay with her, thus it is also better for the employer to give her the time off. That way she could return to work and be even more efficient because of the good understanding between her and her employer.

Clara, a 50 year-old woman caring for both her parents is unemployed: she left her job as management secretary, because it did not allow her to care properly for her relatives. She is now looking for a new part-time job and does not want to compromise on this.

Lieke, who works as a secretary at a hospital, explains that luckily her employer is very flexible.

I have to say honestly that my employer is very flexible. My daughter has growth problems and whenever I have to take her to the hospital, a doctor's appointment or when I have to do something at her school, then they [the employer] are very easy in that they give me a day off...but of course I make up for it by coming back during my free days. Also, when there is an emergency or something unexpected, then I can also leave right away.

This does not mean however that no constraints at all are experienced by the Dutch caring mothers and daughters with regard to working times or flexible solutions to combine work and care. Such constraints are mainly experienced by single parents and by women who work in shifts or whose partners do so because of their specific jobs. Femke, a single mother, looks back at the shifts she and her ex-husband took while they were still married:

When you look at it in hindsight, at the time you really lived parallel lives in which you only get to see each other during the weekend. It is a good solution for the children [as there is always someone there to care for them] but it is not a good way to live your life.

To sum up; the more or less voluntary commitment to their particular jobs (not to work as such) enlarges the degrees of freedom for Dutch women to adjust their working hours to their perceived care obligations, to take time off or to demand flexible working hours that allow them to care at the 'proper' times of the day and week. Moreover, underlying these degrees of freedom are two rather exceptional institutional and third party phenomena. The third party phenomenon is that employers seem to agree with female employees' prioritized commitment to care tasks and for that reason offer a lot of room for manoeuvring for caring women. This gender paradox on the one hand facilitates an easy-going balancing of work and care, on the other hand it blockades female careers in the Netherlands, as becomes visible in many comparative studies on women in higher ranks of companies, universities and at the level of public functions (Eurostat 2008; Groeneveld 2009; Portegijs et al 2006).

3. Attitudes towards work, work-family life conflict and the institutional context

The attitudes of the mothers of young children and caring daughters presented above illustrate the way Dutch women deal with conciliation of work and care in relationship to "different working time regimes and to different compromises and solutions to the unresolved tensions surrounding the conciliation of work and family life." (Cousins and Tang 2005). Previous comparative research shows that the work-life conflict is relatively reduced in the Netherlands. McGinnity and Calvert (2009) found in a large-scale comparative study on variations of work-life conflict between countries: in Sweden and the Netherlands the level of the conflict is comparatively low. The Netherlands, similarly to the Nordic countries, displays a low level of work-life balance conflict also according to the most recent Eurofound (2010) survey. In the Netherlands especially mothers are less likely to report a conflict between work and family life also compared to Sweden (next to the UK) (Cousins and Tang 2005). Moreover, according to McGinnity and Calvert (2009), upper social classes consistently experience higher conflict than lower classes, with the sole remarkable exceptions of Sweden and the Netherlands, where the difference is either non-significant or very small, particularly among women: these findings are explained as a result of policies supporting the reconciliation between work and family. So, what exactly makes up the combination of attitudes,

cultural settings and family policy configurations in the Netherlands that could explain the particular work-family life balance in this country?

A first consideration refers to the interrelationship between the attitude towards work and the attitude towards caring for children and (older) relatives. A relaxed attachment to work and the gendered perceptions of working women in the Netherlands and their employers have their counter-value in the gendered “preference” for female care work. The comparison between the care attitudes of working daughters and working mothers helps disentangling this first possible explanation.

In fact, care as a “first choice” over work represents a well-known feature among mothers of young children in the Netherlands. In spite of the rapid increase of working women this care attitude still dominates the mindset of Dutch women even if in practice many working women are not realizing their care ideals any longer (Knijn 1994; Kremer 2006; Van Wel & Knijn 2006). An explanation might be that by perceiving the paid job as a voluntary, self-chosen option the way back remains open to full-time motherhood, or to a job that is better adjusted to care. By keeping in mind the exit-from-work option these mothers might feel less guilty on not realizing the still prevailing Dutch ‘care ideal’. Brenda, single mother and elementary school teacher says:

I really feel that if you have a child, then one of two parents should be there. It does not matter whether it is the father or the mother, as long as one of them is there most of the time. That might not be very emancipated, but I feel that is because you make that choice [for having children] yourself

Dorien, who is a secretary at a university department and also a single parent, has her daughter taken care for in a formal childcare centre. However, she leaves no doubt on the discrepancy between her ‘care ideal’ and the current practice:

Yes, there was really nothing else I could do, no other options were available. My mother had passed away, my father is not involved and I have no other family in his area. The father of the child, he is no good. He does not contribute in either practical or financial matters. So I did not have a choice, if I wanted to work I had to make use of this type of childcare.

In contrast to the care ideals concerning childcare care ideals toward older kin are 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 (Da Roit 2010). Also, Dutch elder people, who of course can better express their ideals than young children can, do not want to become dependent on their children for care. They do not want to put the care burden on their adult children and prefer formal care above being cared for by their relatives. They attach high value to being autonomous in relationship to their relatives. Nevertheless, also this care ideal can not be put

in practice any longer. The highly inclusive and comprehensive long-term care system has been under pressure for at least two decades now and continuous reforms have increasingly put the emphasis on informal care. This tendency contrasts the increasing employment of middle-aged women who take up the care responsibility for their fragile older relatives. The ‘detached attitude’ of Dutch working and caregiving adult daughters toward their jobs probably finds its origin in trying to bridge this discrepancy between the unavoidable care needs of elderly relatives, that are not any longer covered by the long-term care system on the one hand, and the preference for a paid job on the other hand.

Annemiek is 40 years old; she is married and has two children, 5 and 7 year-old, and a very demanding and well qualified job. Her attitude is ambivalent as, on the one hand she feels that care giving is unavoidable and she does not want to outsource the care if the quality is not good, on the other hand she wants to protect her life, work and family:

I just want to live my own life; I do not want all that care. I am busy enough with my job and my own children so to say. I do not want to pay attention all the time to my parents. During the years the pressure increases. And at a sudden moment you think ‘it has been enough. [...] He [father] is registered for an elderly home, which he does not know himself. But the problem is that in that home people have to share a bedroom. We think that is degrading and a bridge too far. But if he gets a room of his own and if my mother has to go to hospital again, it shall be. If something happens and we will have to take turns to stay with him during the night, we will do it again, but there are limits (...). My sister and I, we think it is too much at the moment. We have not chosen our parents, and I am the youngest of the family, and it costs so much time of my already busy life with a job and two young children.

Aafke is a pedicure: she likes her job for different reasons. She works part time at a beauty centre. It is relaxing and flexible and makes it easy to combine it with the care of her mother. The work at the hospital is a bit more stressful but she likes it because it takes her mind off things. Her colleagues are important, as they are key contacts for her and a crucial support. Lately she has been under a lot of stress and sometimes has called in sick. On those days she did visit her mother.

She recently discovered that her mother is not well fed by the staff of the nursing home where she is living. Also she received a letter from the nursing home asking family members to help out more because of staff shortages and cutbacks:

I'm truly furious about that. We've been informal caregivers for 15 years, I never go on vacation for more than a week and if I go, I have friends that visit my mother. The last few

years my parents lived at home, we did so much it almost cost me my marriage. And after you've done all of that, the nursing home dares to ask even more of the family.

Finally, a third-party phenomenon has to be added, implying that female employees can only perceive room to manoeuvring if they have reasons to assume that their employers tend to agree with female employees' prioritized commitment to care tasks. There appear to be several routes towards getting the employer's permission to work flexible hours. For instance, Chantal, mother of three children, works 32 hours per week as a secondary schoolteacher. While such a contract normally implies that teachers have to work reduced hours during 5 days a week, Chantal has a very flexible boss who allows her to work 3 days a week and to work at home for a half day. The disadvantage however appears to be that the additional work (preparing lessons and grading exams) never seems to stop, reason why Chantal in spite of her clearly structured working week hardly has any time for her own leisure activities. Tineke who firmly states she would quit if her employer cannot meet her demands for reconciliation, also works overtime if the job demands it and does not mind if her employer or her colleagues call her on a free day. In doing so she builds up credits for taking caring time if her daughter needs her attention. Rita, mother of 4 children, who has a full-time job by combining a 24-hours contract as a marketing employee at an IT firm with her 20 hours working for own international business firm, was even surprised when her new employer accepted her conditions:

That was a precondition. Look, I liked the job; I didn't want to reject it. I thought how can I get rid of this [opportunity]? I rather have that someone decides for me, in such a case. So I requested a ridiculous high salary and all the flexibility of the world. And he gave me that. And then I could not say no of course.

Working daughters, next to flexible working-time arrangements generally have friendly work environments. Interestingly many caregivers point at the fact that their employers (or managers) as well as their colleagues are familiar with the situation because they themselves, or people they know well, deal with the same problems. The impact of the greying society on personal and family life is experienced by almost all middle-aged people, which contributes to a consensus on the need to support those employees who have actual care responsibilities. For instance, Monique, 53 year old, married with two children now living out of the home, has for a long time cared for her mother who spent seven years in a nursing home before passing away. During these years Monique worked full time and hardly took any time off for care, while going to see her mother every day after work. Her colleagues are approximately the same age as her and many of them are in a similar situation. Her employer knew the situation and showed very understanding:

I am really a very good employee. So my boss says, 'please relax, if you have to go I will take it over', or a colleague will do. I really discussed it with him; also at the time my mother was very sick. And he said, 'well let us see what will happen, just do what you need to do and if you have to leave again, just send an e-mail and go'.

In sum; not only Dutch mothers and daughters perceive care work as an important priority of women in the family, also employers of women in the Netherlands appear to be rather cooperative in arranging flexible working conditions that facilitate caring women to balance work and family life. This is most typical for all the employed caring mothers and daughters, with the exception of few women who have deliberately decided to work fulltime and not to adjust their work arrangements to their family life, and make use of fulltime care by a nanny or formal childcare instead.

4. Family policies in support of balancing work and family life

The institutional setting that allows for balancing work and care is given by the regulation of part-time work since the 1980s, the rather late development of paid parental leaves and childcare facilities, the right to demand for adjusting working hours, and the, comparatively speaking, rather good provisions for elderly care. More specifically, there seems to be a combination of institutional factors which influences the perception and attitude towards employment and jobs, of both employers and employees, which in turn produces effects by reducing the work-life conflict.

a. Regulated part-time work. Differently from other countries, where part-time work is widespread but also less regulated and represents a distinct and disadvantaged segment of the labour force with a polarization between female full-time and part-time workers (Gallie et al., 1998; Hakim, 2000; Walby, 1997), in the Netherlands, as well as in Sweden, 'part-time employment has been integrated into a regulated labour market environment in accordance with the principles of equal treatment in labour law and wage structures' (Fagan and Lallement, 2000: 45).

Regulation of part-time work has found its origin in the Netherlands in the 1980s. The objective of the 'Wassenaar Agreement' (1982) between social partners at that time was redistribution of work in a context of high unemployment rates. The unintended consequence, the gendered division of the labour market in a male full-time and female part-time segment, resulted from several parallel processes; women's higher educational levels and their claim to work, the need for new employees in the increasing number of jobs in the post-industrial service economy, and the scarcity of child care provision and parental leave measures (Bussemaker and Van Kersbergen, 1994; Plantenga, 2002; Hemerijck and Visser, 1997). Since then part-time work was

progressively regulated, and part time workers work under the same conditions as full time workers. Between 1993 and 1996 legislation prohibited discrimination between employees based upon the number of working hours. Entitlements to the statutory minimum wage and the minimum holiday allowance as well as social security, including health insurance were extended to all workers irrespective of the number of hours worked. Part-time employees were explicitly provided with a right to equal treatment – pro rata – in areas negotiated by social partners, such as wages, holiday pay and entitlements, bonuses and training. Since 2000, under the *Adapting Working Hours Act (Wet Aanpassing Arbeidsduur)*, any employee that has been working for the same employer for at least one year has the right to adjust his/her working hours, unless specific commercial or work-related reasons make this impossible. With the exception of Sweden, none of the other countries in our study has this kind of protection for part-time employees.

What seems crucial here is that what has been an unintended consequence of a regulation that was aimed for a timely and temporary crisis (high unemployment rates in the 1980s) has found its way into the hearts and minds of the working population as well as of companies within a period of three decades. Part-time working today is self-evidential for a majority of women – and a minority of men -, even if they have no children or older relatives to care for; today full-time childcare is available and affordable, but hardly any child visits a childcare centre full-time, and employers as well as the working culture have adapted to part-time working (female) employees, in many sectors. The devil is in the tail; both polarization and fragmentation of the labour market appears to be the result. In particular highly specialized male sectors of the economy and high positions in almost all sectors are exclusively reserved for full-time workers; hence a very limited number of women in high functions in the Netherlands. Fragmentation is another consequence; hospitals, schools, municipalities, social work, and citizens who make use of these public services have to deal with professional workers that work part-time and whose presence is rather unpredictable. Regulated part-time work has not only become the main conciliation instrument but is recognized as such by employers and employees. More in general flexible time management has become an expectation of the employees as well as an accepted feature of the employment conditions among the employers as a result of continuous policy emphasis on the issue in the last thirty years.

b. leave systems. Like in the other countries of our study, in the Netherlands most paid and unpaid leaves are specifically designed for parents. However, differently from the Nordic countries, where social policies including extensive and generous parental leave schemes and the provision of public childcare has supported working mothers since the 1970s (Bjornberg, 2002), in the Netherlands it took a long while, even to 2009, to introduce paid parental leave for employees in the

Netherlands. Several explanations can be given for the rather backward social policy in this country. First of all the regulation of part-time work and the underlying idea that mothers of young children better opt for a part-time job, reduced the urgency of paid parental leave (Knijn, 2008). Second, employers, trade unions, politicians and also the population at large envisioned the combination of work and motherhood as an individual decision of mothers. Hence it was not perceived to be a collective risk that should be covered by public or collective means. Third, public financing of parental leave had no chance of finding political advocates because of the ideological shift towards the neo-liberal individual responsibility approach, which in the 1990s was adopted also by the Social Democrats.

Till 2009, only a small minority of employed parents had obtained 13 weeks of paid parental leave (in addition to the fully compensated maternity leave of 16 weeks), to be used on a flexible basis until the child turns eight. Individualization of entitlement together with flexibility in usage, in combination with the lack of universal compensation, may explain both why mainly women avail of it and why the Netherlands has one of the highest percentages of men taking parental leave. In 2007, the take-up rates were 42% and 18% for eligible female and male workers, respectively (Merens and Hermans, 2008). Gender differences in the amount of leave taken are, however, minimal in the Netherlands. Mothers take leave for an average of ten hours per week during eight months, while fathers take eight hours per week during ten months (Merens and Hermans, 2008).. Nevertheless, the need to increase the labour force because of the greying population, and therefore to develop support for mothers in combining paid work and care, pushed political parties to find a solution to compensate parental leave. After some failed experiments, a new coalition of Social and Christian Democrats finally extended the leave period from 13 to 26 weeks half-time (or the equivalent if an employee takes it more or less than half-time) for employees who have worked (part-time or full-time) at least one year with the same employer, and introduced tax deductions to compensate for it. From January 2009, employees who take unpaid parental leave can reduce their taxable income by 50% of the minimum wage per hour of leave, with a maximum ceiling of 690 Euro per month. This mechanism is said to fulfill three goals: gender equality (each parent can take the leave on an individual basis), shared public and private responsibility, and helping parents with care responsibilities to stay in employment.

In addition some provisions are extended to employees who need to take time off due to care responsibilities. All employees are entitled to an *emergency leave* when suddenly and unexpectedly in need to take time off, for personal or family matters. In case of illness of a member of the family, emergency leave may be taken only for the first day off. Thereafter different arrangements may

apply. During emergency leave the employer continues to pay for the employee's salary. The employer may ask to compensate the emergency leave with holidays, with the employee's agreement. It is also possible that collective agreements state compensation between holidays and emergency leaves. In any case, this compensation may only concern holidays that exceed a minimum (four times the number of work days per week per year). Moreover, each employee is entitled to a *short-term-leave* if for caring for an ill child, partner or parent living at home. The leave may be taken for a maximum of ten days per year. During short-term leave the employee receives at least 70% of the salary, unless a collective agreement provides for a higher compensation. Finally, each employee is entitled to *long term-leave* when in need of caring for a seriously ill child, partner or parent who is life-threateningly ill, or at a serious life risk. The leave may be taken for a maximum period of six times the weekly working hours. Normally this type of leave would be of 12 weeks, during which the employee is allowed to work no more than half of the number of hours he/she normally work. In consultation with the employer the leave may be spread differently. The employer can refuse long-term leave on the motivated grounds of problems of commercial or organisational problems. The specific need for care, nor the care offered may not be judged by the employer. Moreover, once the leave has been agreed upon, it cannot be retrieved by the employer

c. Labour shortages and a divided labour market. Both social policies (regulation of part-time work and paid leaves) have their effects in the context of a dualised post-industrial labour market (Palier, 2010). The dualised labour market is characterized three related aspects; a) gender segregation of sectors, b) gender segregation of working times, and c) growth of the female dominated public services. To start with the latter, overall the growth in the public sector contributed to 13% of the rise of employment, in contrast to the private sector that only contributed to 1% of the employment growth. In particular, the growth of public services in the sector care, cure and welfare amounted to 28% in the period 2000-2008, in the educational sector to 10% (Pommer and Eggink, 2010).

Hence, and because of the gender segregation of the labour market 'female' employment opportunities in jobs like teaching, nursing and care work increased. A labour market characterised by labour shortages in those gendered sectors (at least until before the recent financial crisis) (OECD 2008) has clear effects. On the one hand, it provides (potential) employees with a broader range of possibilities and room for negotiation with their employers with respect to working times and other arrangements that favour the workers' conciliation strategies. On the other hand, it makes employers, who are keen on retaining their employees and filling job vacancies, more sensitive to conciliation issues.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The starting point of this paper was an observation emerged when comparatively analysing the results of a European research project: in the Netherlands working caregivers, both mothers of young children and daughters (in-law) of older dependant people, display an ambivalent attitude towards work: they are attached to being in employment, but rather ‘detached’ from their particular job. In other words they value the idea of participating in paid work, but they start and keep a specific job as long as it allows them to combine care and work. We have shown that this attitude towards work consists of the perception that being in employment represents a choice, the conviction that jobs *should* be flexible and if not, that they *can* be changed.

These findings are consistent with and provide a possible explanation for previous research results showing that in the Netherlands the perceived work-life conflict is relatively low. While existing explanations tend to indicate institutional features (namely social policies) as responsible for this low level of conflict, we introduce the hypothesis that the particular attitude towards work of the Dutch employees could mediate the tension between employment and caring responsibilities. In turn, this attitude is likely to be influenced by institutional features, namely the general acceptance of part-time and flexible working schedules resulting from policies in the field, the structural presence of shortages in the Dutch labour market and the persistence of a (modified) male breadwinner model.

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