

# Gender, social class and work-life balance in the new economy

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## Citation for published version (APA):

Fagan, C., Ward, K., Perrons, D., McDowell, L., Ray, K., Crompton, R. (Ed.), Lewis, S. (Ed.), & Lyonette, C. (Ed.) (2007). Gender, social class and work-life balance in the new economy. In *Women, Men, Work and Family in Europe* (pp. 133-151). Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.

## Published in:

Women, Men, Work and Family in Europe

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# WOMEN, MEN, WORK AND FAMILY IN EUROPE

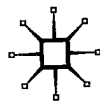
*Edited by Rosemary Crompton,  
Susan Lewis and Clare Lyonette*

WORK

LIFE

HOME





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First published in hardback 2007  
This paperback edition published 2010 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-4039-8719-8 hardback  
ISBN 978-0-230-27337-5 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Women, men, work, and family in Europe / edited by Rosemary Crompton, Suzan Lewis, and Clare Lyonette.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-8719-8 (hardback) 978-0-230-27337-5 (pbk)

1. Work and family--Europe--Cross-cultural studies. 2. Sexual division of labor--Europe--Cross-cultural studies. I. Crompton, Rosemary. II. Lewis, Suzan. III. Lyonette, Clare, 1960--

HD4904.25.W6545 2007  
306.3'6094--dc22

2006050198

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

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# 8

## Gender, Social Class and Work–Life Balance in the New Economy

*Diane Ferrons, Linda McDowell, Colette Fagan,  
Kath Ray and Kevin Ward*

### Introduction

Women in the European Union are increasingly expected to be in paid employment to meet the Lisbon Strategy targets for growth and competitiveness and to offset the rising costs of welfare, given increased ageing and declining fertility. Yet despite the passing of equalities legislation over 30 years ago, gender inequalities remain in the scale and character of paid employment and in the division of domestic labour.<sup>1</sup> The lack of any real change in the gender distribution of domestic work to match women's increased paid employment has led to debates about how to reconcile paid work and family life, now more usually expressed as work–life balance. Policy discussions revolve around the relative roles of the state and market in meeting the care deficit and how employment practices can be modified to enable both women and men to meet their caring obligations. In addition to these pragmatic issues, in some states, notably the UK, moral questions have also been raised about the desirability of mothers of young children undertaking paid work, especially on a full-time basis.

Underlying the change in social expectations regarding the role of women are a range of complex processes relating to the structure and composition of employment, associated in part with the transition to a service economy, and women's rising educational credentials, as well as changes in lifestyle preferences and aspirations regarding working, living and loving arrangements. The significance of these issues and the ways in which they are resolved varies with the different cultural and institutional contexts across Europe, as well as by social class, family and individual circumstances. Understanding outcomes is correspondingly complex. This chapter focuses on how these changes have been experienced in the materiality of everyday life in UK households with young

children. Discussion is situated within debates about work-life balance, also referred to as work-life articulation,<sup>2</sup> work-life reconciliation<sup>3</sup> and work-life conflict,<sup>4</sup> and relatedly within the debate concerning the relative significance of choice and constraint in shaping outcomes regarding women's employment.<sup>5</sup>

The chapter begins by discussing the changing composition and character of employment in the UK, making reference to increasing polarisation, work intensity and uncertainty about job and partnership security. Next, we discuss the findings of a qualitative study of mothers with dependent children in London and Manchester that was undertaken to obtain a grounded understanding of the ways that differently situated households make decisions about employment and caring strategies.<sup>6</sup> We compare our findings with large scale aggregate and attitudinal data, in particular to the works of Rosemary Crompton and Clare Lyonette (2005) and Susan Himmelweit and Maria Sigala (2004) and provide some insights into the processes shaping decisions. Our findings suggest that decisions are shaped by the way that a range of contingent and contextual circumstances intersect with more structural characteristics at particular moments rather than demonstrating any fixed or long lasting preferences or orientations towards mothering or paid work.<sup>7</sup> While decisions are individual, outcomes from our study are mirrored in the aggregate statistics that indicate the continuing significance of qualifications and the age of the youngest child on employment probabilities in the UK. Overall, we also found a close correspondence between women's actual employment behaviour and their attitude towards paid employment, consistent with studies such as those by Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) and Crompton and Lyonette (2005). This latter study found, for example, that more highly qualified households were more likely to have liberal attitudes with respect to mothers' working, although many mothers in our survey expressed some ambivalence and regret that there were not more hours in the day to enable them to fulfil all of their aspirations.

### Contemporary working patterns in the UK

In the UK, the feminisation of employment has taken place within a paradoxical policy framework that advocates expanding employment to raise competitiveness and economic growth in line with the Lisbon strategy, and in order to reduce child poverty, but where childcare costs are among the highest in Europe and state-provided care is limited. The UK is unique in having a high female employment rate, limited childcare facilities and long working hours, especially for fathers. This 'circle

is squared' by many mothers working short part time hours fitted around their children's care (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004: 455). Undeniably, 'flexible' working practices facilitate work-life balance to some degree but are also integral to the UK neo-liberal market agenda, a further feature of which is rising earnings and income inequality.

Increased female employment meets the objectives of the European Employment Strategy (EC, 2005) but also reflects the Third Way politics of rights and responsibilities. UK policy is encapsulated by the slogan 'work for those who can, security for those who cannot' (Hyde, Dixon & Joyner, 1999) and enacted through labour market activation policies, tax credits intended to 'make work pay', together with some financial support for childcare costs. These policies reflect a turnaround in social expectations (Lewis, 2001) as mothers are increasingly expected to be in paid employment, and lone parents (92 per cent of whom are mothers), whose youngest child is aged five or older, are specifically encouraged by the state to seek employment.<sup>8</sup> However, the policies have done little to counter low wages and low productivity in the UK economy. Even allowing for the new tax credits, low-paid jobs are not always viable, especially in London, because of high childcare and transport costs. A lone parent living outside London, for example, with two children and childcare costs, is better off returning to work at the minimum wage, but in London the same parent would need to earn almost 1.75 times the minimum wage in order to benefit financially (Bivand, Gordon & Simmonds, 2003).<sup>9</sup> More generally, tax credits have a negative impact on the second earner in dual person households everywhere.<sup>10</sup> These policies were being implemented and strengthened at the time when the qualitative research was being carried out.

As increasing proportions of women have entered the labour market, however, they have done so in a context of widening overall inequalities and continuing patterns of vertical and horizontal segregation. Since the 1970s, employment has become more polarised in the UK, with expansion at opposite ends of the earnings distribution (Green, 2006). Maarten Goos and Alan Manning (2003) demonstrate this phenomenon by defining 'good and bad jobs' based on occupational and industry/sectoral categories. 'Good' jobs, for example, accountancy in the finance sector, have earnings in the top two deciles and 'bad' jobs such as clerical work in retail, in the lowest decile. They demonstrate growth in both of these categories between 1979 and 1999, especially in the former, but a decline in employment in jobs in the middle of the distribution. There is also a gender dimension to this polarisation, as the fastest growing occupations in the 1990s were in the caring services such as nursery

nurses, hairdressing and housekeeping, sectors in which women are over represented, as well as in sectors linked to the knowledge economy, such as professional and managerial jobs including software engineers and computer programmers, where men are more prevalent.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the disappearance of relatively well paid and comparatively secure jobs in the middle of the distribution arising from the decline in manufacturing employment has undermined the capacity of men to be breadwinners in the traditional sense.<sup>12</sup> This changing employment composition takes different forms in different regions of the UK with earnings inequalities being most pronounced in London where the most highly paid jobs are found, in addition to jobs throughout the distribution.<sup>13</sup>

While the aggregate evidence on employment insecurity is inconclusive, it is clear that work intensity has been rising in the UK (Green, 2006), as has the number of hours committed to some form of paid or unpaid work, on days where some work is done, especially among highly qualified women (Gershuny, 2005). The UK is also characterised by a high level of divorce and separation, a high proportion of lone parents, as well as new, more individualised, living arrangements. These issues, including the processes leading to and sustaining these inequalities, are discussed further elsewhere (Perrons et al., 2006). This chapter focuses on how households make decisions with respect to paid work and caring within this divided and uncertain context.

While female employment has increased overall, the extent of participation continues to vary systematically among women. The female participation rate continues to be highest among the more highly qualified and children continue to represent a constraint on mothers' working patterns. The working hours of fathers also tend to be longer than those of men in general (Harkness, 2003). Statistical data on labour market trends and attitudinal data from large scale surveys do not, however, convey the rationale underlying the different outcomes or attitudes or the differential degrees of complexity which households and individuals experience in managing their work-life balance. To explore these complexities, we now discuss some findings from our qualitative study of 'Living and labouring in London and Manchester'.

### Illustrations from London and Manchester

The qualitative research is based on 139 interviews, predominantly with mothers, the majority of whom live in households with one person in paid

employment and at least one child under 10 years old. The interviews took place between 2002 and 2003 in three residential areas in Central London and three in Manchester, characterised by different socio-economic profiles. SPSS was used to assist the analysis of numerical variables and the discursive material was analysed following a grounded theory approach using Atlas Ti. From this analysis we differentiate households into a number of categories or 'types' defined on the basis of their current employment patterns which emerge from our data. Our analysis and interpretation differs, however, from the essentialist characterisations based on preferences or orientations linked to behaviour, as found for instance in the work of Hakim (2000, 2002, 2004).<sup>14</sup> Our empirical categories (see Table 8.1) are matched with a view to identifying similarities and differences that are critical in shaping outcomes with respect to paid employment, recognising that in many cases, these decisive factors are highly contingent. In particular, we identify how the ease with which paid work and childcare can be combined varies especially by social class and employment sector, in addition to more individual circumstances such as precise geographical location and the number and age range of children.<sup>15</sup> Should these circumstances change, it would almost certainly lead to a re-negotiation of working arrangements including the decision to be in paid employment or not.

### Household categories

Our survey covered a wide range of household working patterns displayed in Table 8.1, including two couples who had consciously chosen role reversal with respect to paid work, and four more where role reversal had arisen through redundancy or other chance happening. We also

Table 8.1: Household partnership and working patterns

Household type	Number
Dual full-time earners	39
Dual earner male full-time/female part-time	40
Dual earner both part-time	4
Male sole earner dual household	22
Female sole earner dual household	5
Female full-time earner single household	13
Female part-time earner single household	6
Female no earner single household	4

Note: In addition we had one dual mother household where both worked long part-time hours, one single father working part-time and one male breadwinner working part-time.

Table 8.2a: Broad socio-economic groups and working patterns for married and co-habiting mothers

Socio-economic group	Location	Occupational sector	LFT (>40)	FT (31-40)	PT (1-30)	NSW
Professional/managerial	London	Public	4	2	9	16
		Private	7 (Frances, Sandra, Nasrin)	2	6	(Zoe)
Non-professional	Manchester	Public	2	1 (Dawn)	6	
		Private	2	13	2	
	London	Public	—	3	1	4
		Private	2	2	3	(Melissa)
Manchester	Public	—	4	6		
	Private	—	1	7		
						(Janette, Sarah)

Note: The classification is based on mothers' broad occupational categories. There were very few managers, though professionals working in organisations sometimes had managerial responsibilities. The model pattern for partners was full time work, some working long hours, especially in the private sector. There were a minority of instances where the traditional breadwinner model was reversed, with the father working part time or not being in employment. The majority of couples were, however, in the same broad occupational group.

FT = full-time

PT = part-time

NSW = not seeking work.

interviewed a same sex female couple where roles were more equitable. In devising the categories and in discussing the interviews, we differentiate further by professional and non-professional status, working hours and location (see Tables 8.2a and 8.2b).<sup>16</sup> The names in Tables 8.2a and 8.2b are pseudonyms and include those mothers who we refer to in the discussion.

The discussion is divided into three parts. We begin by identifying some commonalities across the data, then we focus on how coordination issues vary with partnership status and social class, and finally we discuss how the outcomes are experienced. In the process, we illuminate more generally some of the contextual circumstances that influence employment outcomes and attitudes towards employment found in more aggregate patterns.

Table 8.2b: Broad socio-economic groups and working patterns for single parents

Socio-economic group	Location	Occupational sector	LFT	FT	PT	NSW
Professional	London	Public		1		
		Private	2		2	
	Manchester	Public		1	1	
		Private		1		
Non-professional	London	Public			1	4
		Private				(Diana)
	Manchester	Public	1	3		1
		Private			3	

Notes: (i) We have included the numbers in each category and placed by name (pseudonym) the respondents highlighted in the discussion.

(ii) Those currently not seeking work are categorised by their last job.

(iii) Some mothers' working hours and employment forms are variable and mixed such that they did not fit these categories. Katherine, for example, a single parent, worked 56 hours a week divided between her own small business in personal services and a part-time lecturing job.

LFT = less than full-time (less than 40 hours per week)

FT = full-time

PT = part-time

NSW = not seeking work.

## Some common trends

### Qualifications

Overall we found that our data reflected the national patterns with respect to the positive relationship between qualifications and the age of the youngest child and the likelihood of mothers' paid employment, irrespective of partnership status or geographical location. Graduates, for example, were more likely to be in full time employment and have longer hours of work than other groups. Of the four lone parent graduates, all of whom lived in London, three worked 50 hours or more each week.

### Traditional assumptions regarding the gender division of domestic labour

We found an overwhelmingly traditional division of domestic labour. Even cases where both partners were highly qualified high-earners working long hours, the mother was almost invariably the one who organised the household, although there was some sharing of the domestic tasks that were not marketised (see Chapter 7). To some extent, this division of labour was objectively or economically rational – reflecting the different gender wage profiles. Key decisions regarding the gender division



of labour seem to have been made without much, if any, thought (Bourdieu, 2001; Butler, 1993). When asked whether they had ever considered reversing their roles, mothers in couples following a one and a half earner or one earner model, in which the man was the primary earner, usually replied 'no' – 'well he couldn't' – 'his firm wouldn't understand'... often ending in 'well actually, I don't think he would'. It has to be cautioned that these findings rest predominantly on mothers' accounts.

A more equal sharing of domestic work and childcare was usually the result of rather specific circumstances: in one case (Amanda, see Table 8.2a), the mother was a high earner and her partner was self-employed, running a home-based web start-up firm, and so he could adjust his working hours around school times and his partner's physical presence. Non-professional, dual earning households would often try and offset their hours and holiday arrangements so that they could manage childcare or school holidays without incurring extra costs (for example, Janette, see Table 8.2a; also see La Valle et al., 2002). This finding is supported by Jay Gershuny's (2005) analysis of time use data which shows that in the last 20 years, when paid and unpaid work are added together, men in non-professional occupations and women professionals have experienced increases in total hours, whereas total working hours have declined for other groups. Customarily, however, it was mothers that directly faced the complex problems of scheduling.

### Spatial logistics

One major constraint reported by almost all respondents, and especially those in London, arose from the patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions embedded in the urban fabric (Booth et al., 1996), together with inaccessible or unaffordable childcare cover. The spatial organisation of cities complicates any coordination between geographically distant schools/childcare facilities, workplaces and housing.<sup>17</sup> Common concerns included the difficulties in managing journeys in different directions in order to take children to and from their various forms of care, in addition to the work journey.<sup>18</sup> A further common concern was the continuing difficulties of using public transport with young children. The following comment made by Diana (see Table 8.2b) was typical and found across all social groups:<sup>19</sup>

'I hate buses, I really do, they just, like, they've designed all these new buses with the nice little lowering ramp, but unless you're disabled he's not lowering the ramp, he's just not lowering it, you have to literally arch up the pram and ...'

While there is a gender dimension to the way that the problem of overcoming spatial logistics rests primarily with women, the extent of the difficulties posed by this barrier to employment varied critically both geographically and by social class.

Logistical difficulties were resolved in various ways reflecting individual characteristics, particularly qualifications and earnings (especially mothers' earnings), which perhaps can be summarised as social class, but also by more dynamic factors such as partnership status, the number and age range of children, employment type (public or private) and whether or not the employee had any control over their actual working time.

Ideas and expectations regarding what constituted a feasible journey and what form of childcare, school or extra-curricular activities were considered essential ranged widely between households. The extent and the manner in which the expectations were fulfilled also varied by social class in particular, as some of the cases discussed below illustrate. We should emphasise that we are not arguing that spatial logistics are determinant, but they provide one means of cutting through the complexity of our data in order to discuss the way that employment outcomes are influenced by both contingent and contextual circumstances, few of which are permanent at the individual level. We first discuss the different ways in which particular cases manage work-life balance practically, and then pay attention to more experiential issues, including ambivalence, stress and 'busyness'.

### Practicalities of daily life

Tables 8.2a and 8.2b have provided details of the households that we focus on in this particular chapter in terms of their occupational status (professional and non-professional, public or private sector) and working hours, as we found these factors to be important in influencing how work-life arrangements were decided upon and how they were experienced. The common criterion in all cases was being a parent with at least one child under 10.<sup>20</sup> The illustrations were chosen because they are indicative of broader patterns in our data. Establishing whether these factors are representative of broader trends requires further research based on large-scale quantitative analyses.

Logistical problems are particularly intense for lone parents who typically have nobody else within the household with whom they can share the physical burden, irrespective of the emotional and educative work increasingly expected of contemporary parents. Indeed, the physical presence of a relative to assist with childcare was the critical difference between the two lone parents, Diana and Jenny, discussed below, who in

terms of their age, qualifications, ethnicity (both belong to minority groups) and expressed attitudes towards childcare, were very much alike in 'care capital' (see Chapter 9).

Of the 24 lone parents in our study, the majority were in paid employment, including six who were working long full time hours (over 40 per week). Similar to national trends, educational qualifications and the age of the youngest child were positively related to the likelihood of being in paid employment. All of those whose youngest child was over three years of age and who had a university degree were in paid employment. The majority of lone parents not in paid employment were from our London population which again corresponds to London's comparatively low employment rate, compared to other regions. By comparatively analysing the transcripts, it is possible to examine more closely the processes leading to these outcomes.

Lone parent Diana is the mother of one child under two years old, currently living in inner London and working two full days a week at a gym, in addition to studying – with a view to getting a more fulfilling job in the future. Her arrangements depend critically on the proximity between her home and workplace and the willingness of her own mother to take care of her child, along with other grandchildren. Diana manages the logistics by using a private car to transport the child to her mother's house and occasionally by working through the night to complete her college work. Diana receives little financial or other support from the father of her child or his family, something she regrets. She states that money is the prime motivation for working and stays with her current job primarily for logistical reasons.<sup>21</sup>

'... 'cos it's convenient and I'm so bloody lazy! It's just convenient because it's amazing how I've got a flat round the corner from my workplace, so I don't think the chance of that happening again...'

The key difference between Diana and another lone parent Jenny, who is not in paid work, is the proximity of flexible work and the presence/absence of the grandmother, rather than any particular orientation towards paid work. Jenny could not afford childcare and her immediate family was unable to assist as they were all working. She too was studying part-time to increase her career options for the future.

For people in low paid jobs, simply managing the physical task of travelling between home, school and work on public transport is complex and may lead to withdrawal from employment, even for those in dual adult households. Melissa has three school-aged children and works part

time on a fixed term contract as a nursery nurse in a local authority playgroup centre. She had recently given up a full time job in order to work closer to home. Her problems arose from the routing of public transport and the journey time, rather than straight geographical distance, and were compounded by her husband's shift work, which made it impossible for him to provide childcare on a predictable basis.

The significance in taking local jobs for which people are over-qualified has also been noted in the EOC's (2005) report on the hidden brain drain. There are several parallel illustrations in our survey. Caitlyn, for example, was a highly qualified mother in Manchester who similarly opted out of a higher paid and more permanent job which had entailed a 12-hour day, including travel time, indicating the difficulty in obtaining jobs locally to match skills. This problem is greater in Manchester, which had a more limited range of jobs for the highly qualified.

In terms of qualifications, age and number of children, Melissa and her partner can be contrasted with Janette, living with her partner in Manchester, and working full time for a private firm. Janette's job is more permanent than that of her husband's, whose work is temporary and with varied hours. In the relatively recent past, her husband might possibly have been an unskilled manufacturing worker but had so far been unable to find regular permanent employment for someone without formal qualifications. This couple manage, however, as both their jobs are closer to home and they have access to a nearby low-cost child centre. Overall, they juggle their working hours, make use of a comparatively low-cost, local and state-provided care facility, and generally take their holiday at separate times to cover school closures.

Melissa might also be contrasted with Frances, whose three children are considerably younger, but is highly qualified and able to pay for a whole range of marketised services including childcare, transport (including taxis) and domestic help, as well as living in her own high-cost house not far from work. Frances's lifestyle indicates how high earnings facilitate and sustain paid employment, something also very clearly evident in the case of Clare, a highly qualified lone parent with one pre-school child and a very demanding, permanent full time job. She uses a private nursery five days a week but also has a live-in au pair who collects her child in the late afternoon and takes care of her until Clare arrives home, as well as doing all the child's cooking, cleaning and washing, and errands for Clare, such as fetching clothes from the dry cleaners. Live-in assistance is essential for Clare, owing to her long and unpredictable working hours and because she often works away from London. Clare also makes occasional use of a baby-sitting agency and has used

the emergency crèche at her ex-partner's workplace (also a city finance firm). Similarly, if her usual arrangements break down, she would call upon an ad hoc network created by her ex-nanny and her ex-partner's au pair, but this would all be paid support.<sup>22</sup>

Even with paid domestic support, some mothers find the complexities of childcare overwhelming, especially when they have more than one child and when the ages of children means that their care or schooling is in different locations. Zoe, for example, is currently a 'housewife' with three children (twins aged 4.5 and a toddler of almost 2 years) and a partner who works very long hours, being away from the house between 6.30 a.m. and 10 p.m. Zoe returned to work following the birth of her twins but had remained at home ever since her toddler was born. She had employed a nanny on several days a week to assist with the twins, though they also attended a private nursery school. The private school/nursery was one and a half miles from the house and considered unmanageable by public transport. Zoe explains: 'I just logistically can't do it. I would be to-ing and fro-ing and to-ing and fro-ing.' She goes on to point out all the equipment that her children require for school and after-school activities and, given her partner's work hours, why she needs additional paid help:

'What I'm looking for in fact was two days a week, but then three mornings as well, 8.30–10.00, just so I don't have to take Henry (the toddler) on the school runs really. Because it's quite a lot to have to get three children in, to school . . . and Zed and Jay both have a library book bag each. They've got to have a lunchbox because there's no kitchen in the school, so they've got to have a packed lunch each day. Then they go swimming. I think they're starting music in the new year, so they'll have a music bag, and you know . . . your hands are completely full of bags.'

Zoe and her partner also employed a cleaner and outsourced shirt ironing. At the time of the interview, however, she was also overseeing the modernisation of her house and, given the rate at which house prices were then rising in London, was probably earning as much from this as she would have done if employed as a professional in the public sector.<sup>23</sup> Another graduate mother, with two young children and currently not seeking paid work, was similarly involved in house reconstruction, but with no domestic support, likewise regarded paid employment outside of the home as simply too complicated. She was one of the few respondents to express unequivocally a desire to remain out of the labour force until her children were older.

Clearly, interpretations of these circumstances may vary and it could be argued that the two cases referred to above are less work-centred than many others, whose anxieties stem from juggling different jobs and childcare locations, rather than lunch boxes and swimming kit. However, preference theory (Hakim, 2002) and research using this perspective implies some degree of permanence in orientations and behaviour and tends to neglect the way that people make adjustments relating to a whole range of factors, only some of which are under their control.<sup>24</sup>

### **Busyness, stress and happiness**

Having looked at some of the impacts of spatial and temporal logistics, we now consider how people expressed satisfaction or anxiety about their current work-life arrangements. Consistent with aggregate attitudinal data (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005, 2006b), working mothers reported a sense of well-being, though with very busy lives, combining a range of activities throughout the day and with little time for independent thought or leisure. Almost without exception they reported that their paid work was important to maintaining a sense of themselves, as well as offering opportunities for socialisation. There was a tendency for mothers to mention money as their major reason for working, as in the case of Diana above, but without much probing they would generally go on to discuss other advantages in terms of self-esteem. This finding raises a possible limitation about the use of attitudinal data when it is based on the response to a limited number of questions. Hakim, for example, defines work-centred women as being focused on competitive activities, planning their careers and work for intrinsic satisfaction as well as money (Hakim, 2000, 2002, 2004). Without probing, this last factor would have included the majority of working mothers in our survey, and yet it is clear that they considered that employment provided a range of other benefits.

Paralleling the findings of Crompton and Lyonette (2005), some of the most troubled were those who were not currently seeking work. Zoe, for example, points out how she feels isolated and something of a social misfit:

'I've felt very, very isolated, it's very difficult, so when I go to toddler groups and stuff . . . it's very difficult, because I'm instantly on a different level because of the way I speak. You know where my children go to school or whatever. So I can't kind of share what a lot of the non-working mums in the local area are like. And then in other places it's all nannies, and nannies aren't particularly keen to get chatty and friendly with mums so it is, it feels like a double whammy

in a way, like great, Peter (partner) does earn a lot of money in a way, and maybe it's not absolutely essential that I work. But then it's isolating that I don't work . . . and if we didn't have a choice, and I just had to do it, then there wouldn't, sometimes choices aren't always helpful, I suppose!

She also expressed reservations about her current division of labour with her partner.

'Well, it feels like I'm doing all the home stuff, and Peter's doing all the work stuff, which is not my preferred way of doing it. It's quite difficult to alter that much. But we'll have to see whether we can try and address that a bit. Um, certainly, when I did work, it did feel as if, rather than me working and things changing in terms of the demands on me, the demands on me remained the same and I worked.'

Clearly, there was inequality in the domestic division of labour when she was in paid work and, although the reason she withdrew was not discussed at length, being the lower earner was considered obvious or 'natural'. In her husband Peter's work in private sector finance, flexible working or even standard full time hours are not currently practised, something that the highly qualified mothers also commented on. While formal equal opportunities and leave arrangements existed in practice, they were more limited and were reported as being 'for the secretaries, not us'. Two women working in finance, Sandra and Nasrin, commented that they were the first mothers their firms had ever employed at their level and some allowances were made for their new status, such as being able to complete work at home.

While the glass ceiling has been cracking a bit, sticky floors remain firmly in place, owing to a mixture of continuing discriminatory practices, but also to some degree because of self-selection by women. It is this area of self-selection where the debate between choices and constraints re-emerges. Some women do make decisions which take them away from the most highly paid jobs, not because they do not like the work, nor because they lack the capabilities, but because that they are aware that time demands associated with current work practices means that full-time demanding employment is not a viable option if they want to have any kind of life away from their place of work. Time demands are particularly strong for younger workers in their twenties and thirties, where the demands of career and family formation coincide.

'All the girls leave corporate' is a common expression among city lawyers where work practices are notoriously long and unpredictable.<sup>25</sup>

Professional employees in the public sector were more likely to experience regular working hours, have access to flexible working arrangements which they felt able to take as a right, rather than as a favour, even though it would have a detrimental impact on their career at a future date. Brenda and Dawn work long part time and standard full time hours in London and Manchester respectively as professional workers in the public sector and manage by juggling their working times around school events and by using a range of after school and school holiday clubs, together with help from grandparents, especially during school holidays. Thus both are able to work professionally and still have time to spend with their children in the evenings and weekends.

A further difference, which again is job and class specific, is the way that higher earners are more likely to have task- rather than time-specific jobs which allow them to manage their own time. In other words, even though they may work long hours, there is nonetheless some porosity or space in the working day, during which they are able to check that household arrangements are working smoothly. Typically, they are more able to arrive late or leave early to attend school events from time to time, conditions which would not be possible with the stricter time-based regimes experienced lower down the employment hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> This informal form of flexibility has been reported to be more widely practised than more formal arrangements for flexible working on a regular basis, made possible by the law passed in 2003, giving parents of young children in the UK the right to request flexible work arrangements (CIPD, 2005).

In lower paid occupations, employees generally have less discretion in their use of time, are more likely to have closely monitored hours, and pay is closely related to hours worked. Some mothers organised their own flexibility by selecting certain work patterns to fit around their caring commitments, but worked intensely during these hours, as employment patterns are determined around the flow of work. Typically, there is little porosity in their working days. Sarah, a cleaner in Manchester, is paid for three hours a day for the time spent actually cleaning houses, but not for the time spent travelling between them, indicating some differences by social class in the way flexibility is experienced. Similarly, Cara in London had a contract to work 16 hours a week at a 'Supermarket Local'. While pointing out that the firm benefited from this arrangement as she often worked more hours than this, even though her holiday and sick

pay would be calculated on the contracted minimum, she none the less appreciated having some control over her working hours.

What was also apparent from our interviews was that while many mothers were clearly very stretched in terms of time (and some also for money) and constantly holding together what was sometimes a very fragile balancing act in combining the dual life of work and caring – having an income, socialising and utilising their training, as well as playing a direct role in their children's lives, was clearly their preferred way of being. Optimistically, they were perhaps carving out a trajectory that in the future may be shared by fathers with benefits all round, as portrayed, for example, in Nancy Fraser's (1996) universal carer model.<sup>27</sup>

Crompton and Lyonette (2005) find that congruent liberals (those mothers who had liberal attitudes about mothers of young children being in paid employment and a 'less traditional' division of domestic labour in the home) were found to have the highest degrees of personal and family happiness, as measured by life in general, satisfaction with family life and lower stress at home. By contrast, women defined as congruent traditionalists (those with the opposite characteristics to those above, with respect to mothers' attitudes towards paid employment and the domestic division of labour) were less happy on all three counts. As a result of their analysis, Crompton and Lyonette (2005: 615) conclude by stating that 'the evidence we do have suggests that for women (but not for men), gender traditionalism in attitudes or practice (as indicated by gender role attitudes and the domestic division of labour) is not associated with greater general or family happiness, but indeed the opposite'. In general we concur with their findings. While people may report work-life 'stress', this term is often used, not in its medical sense to reflect anxiety, but rather to portray a sense of time pressure, work-life conflict and the way that people in this situation have to manage a whole range of issues simultaneously. However, it could also be that busyness is almost a status symbol – the new badge of honour of the middle classes (Gershuny, 2005). One finding, especially among those working very long hours, was a strong sense of ambivalence and sometimes guilt, arising from a sense of incapacity to do paid and unpaid work as effectively as they would like to. These women expressed a desire for there to be more hours in the day so that they could contribute more to both work and home life.

## Conclusions

On the basis of our analysis, we suggest that exploring the specific circumstances within which mothers make their 'choices' with respect to

labour market participation, shows that in the UK, where there is a lack of universally available, affordable and accessible childcare, particular influences, especially incomes and logistical complexity, intersect and generate recurring patterns that make some choices more likely or more rational than others. Our data therefore indicate the continuing role of structural factors in shaping outcomes, although in highly complex and differentiated ways.

Our findings are largely consistent with the trends from aggregate data in relation to working patterns and the attitudinal data relating to the desirability for mothers of young children to be in paid employment (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004). What our findings add to existing studies is a greater understanding of the class-specific, differential conditions of employment which in some ways make it easier for high earning women to manage competing pressures in ways that are more likely to secure their economic well-being as individuals. They suggest that social class and gender, together with geographical context and individual preferences, each play a role in shaping individual decisions and in accounting for aggregate, social outcomes. People in different geographical and social locations, formed by the way different structural factors intersect with each other and with individual characteristics, including age, qualifications and number of children, are confronted in practice with systematically different 'choice sets' or constraints within which they make their decisions. These choice sets and constraints are in turn the intended or unintended outcomes of existing policies and as a consequence, potentially may form the basis for future, more gender-equitable policies.

We also find that these decisions, taken in the context of widening inequalities in the labour market and the continuation of inadequate childcare, tend to reinforce the emerging inequalities based on social class divisions. Overall, we find that the impact of the feminisation of employment on gender equality has been less than might have been expected. Class divisions remain significant and are likely to be reinforced, as there is clearly a lower incentive for people with the prospect of low earnings to enter paid employment. Providing both incentives and penalties is one reason why the British Government introduced policies to 'make work pay' – policies that have expanded since the research was carried out. However, while such policies make the monetary returns from employment more attractive, they do not include the questions of time and space. What the research has shown is that low earners find it more difficult to overcome the complex and time-consuming journeys to work which severely constrain the range of employment options open to them.

Overall, we conclude that women do indeed make history or shape their own futures, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. Social expectations concerning the roles of mothers have clearly changed, almost becoming the antithesis of those established from the late 19th century, based on the ideal of the bourgeois housewife that gradually percolated through all social classes as an ideology if not a practice, and never reached the poorest groups at all. What is apparent, however, is that the infrastructure necessary to meet these revised expectations for women is inadequate. Furthermore, men have not adjusted their behaviour in significant ways to meet the new expectations placed on parents. Mothers, consequently, are left to negotiate these changes in ad hoc ways, according to their precise circumstances – including qualifications, occupations, the number and age range of children, partnership status and so on. In many cases, they do so in extremely resourceful ways, holding together the complex logistics of scheduling arrangements in space and time. These arrangements are shaped strongly by social class, which is contributing to widening inequalities between women, while only affecting gender equality in more moderate ways.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. The Equal Opportunities Commission has published a series of reports which demonstrate continuing gender inequalities in the labour market, (see EOC (2005) and their website: [www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk)).
2. (see Gambles et al. (2006) and Crompton & Lyonette, 2006b).
3. Lewis, J. (2003).
4. Crompton and Lyonette (2006b).
5. This latter debate has been addressed extensively elsewhere so is not rehearsed in detail here.
6. The research material comes from an ESRC funded study on 'Living and Labouring in London and Manchester' (grant number R000239470). In this chapter, emphasis is placed on the London part of the study.
7. See for example the study by Bell et al. (2005) on lone parents.
8. The participation rate of lone parents has increased (by 11 per cent to 55.8 per cent since the introduction of the tax credit policies, DWP 2005).
9. In recognition of the high costs of living and working in London new in-work credits are to be introduced in 2005 but for a limited period (DWP 2005).
10. The scale of in-work benefits boosts entry into paid employment but this form of support is means tested on the basis of family income – thus couples are assessed jointly and the current system means that the financial return from having a second earner is now lower on average than it was in 1997 when the Government first came into power. Consequently there is a disincentive for the lower earner in any household, generally the female partner, to enter the labour

market, even though in the longer term labour market inactivity will have a negative impact on their lifetime incomes (see Brewer and Shephard 2004). See Nolan and Salter (2002) who identify this trend but do not fully explore the gender dimensions.

12. See Charles and James (2005).
13. In financial services for example the gender pay gap in London is 60 per cent compared to 40 per cent in Manchester.
14. See Charles and James (2005) for a critique and Bell et al. (2005) where the concept of orientation is used to define household types in an otherwise rich discussion of the constraints faced and decisions made by lone parents.
15. This is one of a number of papers arising from this research project.
16. Overall, we interviewed a high proportion of professional and managerial households which in part reflects the changing composition of the population especially in central London (Hamnett, 2003), but also reflects the way that the interviewees were contacted via playgroups, nurseries, local libraries, etc. which are more likely to be attended by the middle classes, or increasingly by their nannies.
17. See Skinner (2003) and Jarvis (2005).
18. See Jarvis (2005) and McDowell et al. (2006).
19. Problems cannot always be eased in London with private transport as parking can be extremely expensive or not even possible. In addition the congestion charge has increased the relative cost of private transport.
20. Otherwise the sample is rather unstructured but as Catherine Hakim argues (Hakim, 2003), this does not hinder our discussion of preference theory.
21. On Hakim's typology this would mean that she was not work centred. On the other hand studying to improve her career in the future would suggest that she might be.
22. See Blair-Loy and Jacobs (2003).
23. Clearly these 'earnings' would only be realised when the house was sold but this also indicates how staying at home does not mean that work is not being done.
24. Defenders of preference theory might argue that such illustrations correspond to the adaptive category. It may however be more helpful to identify the circumstances that influence the choices actually made.
25. See Baker (2003) for a US comparison.
26. See Perrons (2005) and Rubery et al. (2005) for further exposition of the role of porosity in the working day.
27. In Gillian Rose's (1993) terms this model might enable women to cease to be simultaneously prisoners of but exiles in a physical and social world that continues to embody the priorities of a male breadwinner model.
28. Gender equality has increased marginally between women and men at both ends of the earnings distribution as more qualified women are able to enter but not reach the top levels of high paid professional and especially managerial occupations. At the lower echelons the decline of manufacturing has removed many of the better-paid opportunities for relatively low skilled men, so their incomes have declined and become more similar to those found in occupations where women are over-represented.