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Unequal but balanced: Highly educated mothers' perceptions of work–life balance during the COVID-19 lockdown in Finland and the Netherlands

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Abstract

One year after the European work–life balance directive, which recognises the need for work–family policy support, measures to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic began shaping parents' work–life balance in significant ways. Academically, we are challenged to explore whether existing theoretical frameworks hold in this new environment with combined old and new policy frameworks. We are also challenged to understand the nuanced ways in which the first lockdown affects the combination of paid work and care. We address both of these issues, providing a cross-sectional comparative analysis of highly educated mothers' perceptions of work–life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland and the Netherlands. Our findings show that highly educated Finnish mothers have more difficulty combining work and care during the first lockdown than Dutch mothers. The absence of state-provided care during the lockdown creates greater difficulty for full-time working Finnish mothers in a dual-earner/state-carer system than an absence of such care in the Dutch one-and-a-half earner system, where most mothers work part time. Further analyses suggest variation in

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part-time and (nearly) full-time hours mitigates the work–life balance experiences of highly educated Dutch mothers. Additional factors explaining cross-country variation or similarities include the presence of young children and the presence of a partner. We discuss these findings in light of current theoretical frameworks and highlight avenues for future research.

Keywords

work–life balance, Finland, the Netherlands, COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, work–care regimes

Introduction

Work–life balance is a key issue in European social policymaking. The 2019 European work–life balance directive (European Parliament, 2019) marks recognition of sustained gender inequality in work and family spheres and the need for adequate work–family policy. Following passage of the law, however, the circumstances for combining work and care changed drastically with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures taken to curb the effects of the pandemic, such as the closing of schools and childcare centres, shifted the boundaries between paid work and private life. Especially for parents working from home, these boundaries have nearly dissolved, leaving them – at least in popular media – unable to balance work with other life spheres (Perelman, 2020).

Pandemic lockdown measures are undoubtedly affecting parents across Europe (Eurofound, 2020), but their impact on parents' work–life balance and gender inequality is not yet clear. The emerging evidence, primarily based on single country case studies, is contradictory. Some studies suggest that mothers have been severely affected by the first lockdown, experiencing high levels of work pressure, significant adjustments to working hours and times, and an overall worsening of work–life balance (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Carlson et al., 2020; Cooper and Mosseri, 2020; Yerkes et al., 2020a). Other studies suggest that the impact on mothers has been less severe, for example, with fathers taking on greater amounts of childcare and housework in countries like the US and the Netherlands (Carlson et al., 2020; Yerkes et al., 2020a). The contradictory evidence is potentially related to the varied work–family policies of countries before and during the pandemic (Koslowski et al., 2020). Work–family

policies include a broad range of policies and services with multiple aims, such as facilitating the combination of paid work with care responsibilities, decreasing gender inequality, increasing father involvement in care, facilitating children's cognitive and social development, and decreasing poverty (Javornik and Kurowska, 2017; Nieuwenhuis and Van Lancker, 2020; Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2018; Yerkes and Den Dulk, 2015). Comparative studies that account for these work–family policy settings are needed to clarify such ambiguous findings to date. We provide a cross-country comparison of highly educated mothers' experiences of work–life balance in two defamilialised welfare states, Finland and the Netherlands (Lohmann and Zagel, 2016).

Finland and the Netherlands offer an interesting comparative perspective as women in both countries exhibited similarly positive perceptions of work–life balance prior to the pandemic (European Commission, 2018). However, as shown below, the countries exhibit subtle work–family policy differences and differences in their approach to the pandemic, which could lead to variation in women's experiences of work–life balance. We focus on highly educated mothers as they are most likely to struggle with the combination between (full-time) paid work and childcare (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008; Fagan et al., 2008). For example, highly educated mothers experience higher levels of work–family conflict compared to mothers with lower levels of education (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008) often due to the double burden of paid work and unpaid care (Hochschild and Machung, 1989). Given that highly educated mothers are not opting out of employment in the long term, as at times suggested by popular media accounts (Kuperberg and Stone, 2008), insights into how this group of women is

faring during the pandemic are needed. Cross-country evidence is needed because the first lockdown potentially worsened highly educated mothers' work–life balance, but not necessarily in similar ways across countries, underscoring the need to account for the work–family policy setting before and during the lockdown. Given the scope of our article, we focus on the provision of early childhood and care services for pre-school as well as school-aged children, also in relation to the provision of leave to care for children. We further consider the organisation of primary education, as well as working time policies that facilitate the reconciliation of paid work with childcare. Together, these policies create a work–family policy setting that can be seen to be more or less supportive of parental employment, maternal employment in particular, both prior to and during the pandemic.

Studying mothers' work–life balance experiences during the first lockdown in comparative perspective is challenging. Existing theoretical frameworks, such as defamilialisation, cultural ideals of care, and work–care regimes, need to be re-examined to see whether they offer sufficient scope for understanding the impact of the pandemic. This article develops our theoretical and empirical understanding of the relationship between work–family policy support and mothers' experiences of work–life balance in cross-national perspective against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. We investigate the following question: *How and to what extent do existing theoretical frameworks explain variation in highly educated mothers' experiences of work–life balance in Finland and the Netherlands during the first COVID-19 lockdown?* We answer this question by combining cross-sectional survey data from Finland and the Netherlands on highly educated mothers' perceptions of work–life balance during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. This empirical contribution to the literature is combined with a theoretical and comparative contribution. Our cross-country approach allows us to move beyond single-country studies on the impact of the pandemic to consider mothers' perceptions of work–life balance in comparative perspective, accounting for policy contexts (Ciccia and Javornik, 2019). We account for the work–family policy context in place prior to the first

lockdown as well as parental supports provided during the first lockdown (Blum and Dobrotić, 2021; Koslowski et al., 2020). Moreover, we use empirical analyses to explore the continued relevance of three dominant theoretical frameworks, thereby contributing to the theoretical understanding of the impact of the pandemic on work–life balance across these varying country and policy contexts.

Policy context: life during COVID-19

The first lockdown in Finland and the Netherlands began concurrently, with a similar focus and reasonably similar parental support. In Finland, protecting at-risk groups and preventing hospitals from becoming overburdened led to stringent physical isolation measures, including the closure of most schools on 16 March 2020. An exception was the youngest pupils (classes 1–3/aged 7–10), but in practice, most children moved to online teaching. Warm school meals, traditional in the Finnish education system, remained available for pick-up in many municipalities. Childcare remained open for children who needed it, but usage during the first lockdown was low, only 22 percent of children participating in municipal early childhood education and 16 percent in municipal pre-primary education. Only 9 percent of children in grades 1–3 participated in contact teaching (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). Remote work was strongly recommended. In addition to existing leave policies, parents who remained at home to care for children without employer compensation could apply for a new, temporary benefit (€723.50/month). Primary and lower secondary schools returned to in-class teaching on 14 May. Other educational institutions were given the option to open partially from 14 April.

The Dutch approach to the COVID-19 pandemic during the first wave was a partial lockdown. Schools and childcare centres were closed, effective from 16 March 2020 and people were required to work from home. Grandparents, much-used providers of informal childcare in the Netherlands, were not able to provide childcare due to social distancing measures. In the Netherlands, schools and childcare services only remained open to children of parents working in essential occupations or sectors. One-fourth of

parents entitled to this care used it (Verhue and Bouwman, 2020). Parents using formal care were entitled to full compensation of their co-payment for the period in which childcare centres were closed. No additional income-replacement scheme was provided for parents beyond existing leave policies, which only provide two days' emergency leave (Den Dulk and Yerkes, 2020). Figures also suggest a rather limited take-up of leave and/or holidays during the first month of the lockdown (FNV, 2020). Primary schools partially reopened in early May, with a full reopening on 11 June. Secondary schools partially reopened on 2 June and did not fully reopen until after the summer holidays (16 August 2020).

Theorising work and care during COVID-19

Defamilialisation

Theoretical frameworks explaining variation in state–family–market relationships draw heavily on the concept of defamilialisation. As a concept, defamilialisation specifies the family-friendly institutional settings that support families in their caregiving duties and help family members to be independent of their families for care needs (Leitner, 2003; León, 2009; Lister, 1997; Lohmann and Zagel, 2016). Leitner (2003), for example, views defamilialising policies as unburdening the family in its caring function, for instance, by offering public or subsidised private childcare and generously paid leave provisions (Lohmann and Zagel, 2016).

Finland and the Netherlands are generally characterised as defamilialised welfare states. In Finland, defamilialised policies unburden the family from its caring function, and explicitly prioritise gender equality at work and home (Lohmann and Zagel, 2016). The position of the Netherlands is more ambivalent, however. Cho (2014) categorises Finland and the Netherlands as examples of *moderate* defamilialisation. This form is characterised by moderate support of women's economic independence and moderately frees them of care responsibilities. At the same time, this form of defamilialisation provides cash payments that support family care at home (although Saraceno, 2010

criticises cash payments for maintaining cultural expectations of female carers). Both countries are further characterised by moderate gender employment and wage gaps, given part-time work levels and low-paid jobs. Furthermore, they combine a moderate amount of father-specific leave and spending on childcare, or a low level of father-specific leave and high spending on childcare.

There are some limitations to this defamilialisation categorisation. Despite their classification as defamilialised, mothers in both countries are expected to 'do it all'. In Finland, this means a double bind of working full time and caring for children and the home (e.g. Wierda-Boer et al., 2009); in the Netherlands, mothers 'do it all' while working part time (Knijn and Da Roit, 2014; Knijn and Kremer, 1997; Yerkes and Hewitt, 2019). Moreover, Lohmann and Zagel (2016), like Cho (2014), view the Dutch welfare state as defamilialised, but as van Hooren and Becker (2012) argue, the Dutch welfare state historically maintained contrasting care regimes, with a high degree of defamilialisation for institutionalised elderly care (see Saraceno, 2010) and weak defamilialisation for publicly subsidised, highly privatised childcare. The clustering of defamilialised welfare is thus highly dependent on the policy area studied (see also Bambra, 2007). Applications of defamilialisation can similarly mask cross-country variation (Yerkes and Javornik, 2019).

We argue that regarding childcare, defamilialisation is stronger in Finland where children often attend childcare full time. At the same time, Finland and the Netherlands exhibit varying forms of *familialisation*, that is, the extent to which welfare states support dependency between family members, for example, through (un)paid parental and care leave (Leitner, 2003; Zagel and Lohmann, 2021). Zagel and Lohmann (2021) correctly argue for a combined application of both defamilialisation and familialisation concepts to allow for nuanced analyses. As argued here and shown by Lohmann and Zagel (2016: 61), the Netherlands is slightly more familialistic and slightly less defamilialised than Finland. In relation to childcare, these subtle differences stem from a greater reliance on unpaid parental leave and part-time use of childcare services in the Netherlands (e.g. Plantenga and Remery, 2009; Yerkes and Den Dulk, 2015).

Drawing on this literature, the closure of schools and childcare centres is a form of *refamilialisation*, whereby the welfare state – albeit temporarily – returned care responsibilities to the family. At the same time, other defamilialised policies (e.g., emphasising gender equality at work) and familialised policies (e.g., emphasising gendered care norms) remained in place. Theoretically, we expect the refamilialisation of childcare to affect countries differently. In defamilialised welfare state contexts emphasising the *public provision* of care services (i.e., the state as provider), in combination with little emphasis on familialised policies (e.g., Finland), we expect a small(er) impact of refamilialisation. In contrast, in defamilialised welfare state contexts emphasising *publicly subsidised* welfare state contexts (i.e., the market as provider), in combination with an emphasis on familialised policies (e.g., the Netherlands), refamilialisation is likely to place a greater care burden on women. We thus hypothesise that perceived work–life balance will be worse for highly educated Dutch mothers than for highly educated Finnish mothers (*H1*).

Cultural ideals of care

The defamilialisation approach, while widely applied, does not account for crucial cultural differences in care (e.g., Kremer, 2007; Pfau-Effinger, 2005). Care ideals are culturally shaped, moral images of what ‘good’ caregiving looks like and form the basis for dominant ideas of what constitutes a good mother. From this perspective, variation in women’s employment is less a reflection of defamilialising and/or familialising policies and more a reflection of normative ideas of care and citizenship in relation to mothers’ employment decisions (Kremer, 2007). Cultural care ideal arguments go beyond the state–family and/or state–family–market relationship to consider, for example, ideas about what care is, people’s motivations to care, as well as images of caregivers and receivers (Kremer, 2007). In her salient work on cultural care ideals, Kremer (2007) compellingly argued for a debate extending beyond the contrasting fairy tale notions of Cinderella versus Snow White. Nordic welfare states, including Finland, are portrayed as a Cinderella fairy tale, whereby care is a burden, and mothers need to be

‘freed’ from their caregiving burden. State-provided childcare is ‘good’ and signals a societal valuing of care. The Netherlands and other Christian democratic welfare states, in contrast, are portrayed as the fairy tale of Snow White, who is happy to care for the seven dwarfs. Here, care is seen as crucial for social cohesion and is socialised as a positive moral attitude. Too much state intervention in the family’s caregiving function would disrupt families and societies.

A focus on the cultural ideas of care and citizenship places greater emphasis on *interdependencies* (e.g., between mothers and fathers) than on mothers’ economic and care independence per se, which forms the foundation of Cho’s (2014) defamilialisation typology. From this perspective, the smaller wage gap between men and women in Finland is a sign of interdependency, while the continuing gender wage gaps and significant differences in the work hours of mothers and fathers in the Netherlands results in mothers’ continued dependence on a male breadwinner. A focus on the cultural ideas of care and citizenship also emphasises the importance of participation in multiple spheres – the state (e.g., political participation), markets (e.g., the labour market) and families, meaning care should be valued in society and people should have real opportunities to care (Hobson, 2014). Here, we see the complexity of mothers’ positions in the two welfare states. Dutch women’s political participation lags behind that of Finnish women, and while both countries have high female employment rates, Dutch mothers work primarily part time and Finnish mothers mainly full time (Eurostat, 2020; see Table 1). The Dutch pattern of female part-time employment does, however, potentially create greater opportunities to care than the Finnish context.

Hence, Finland and the Netherlands differ in their care ideals, but these care ideals are likely to differ across educational levels. Highly educated mothers mostly work full time in Finland (Eurostat, 2020). In the Netherlands, part-time work is common across all education levels, with 64 percent of highly educated women working part time (self-reported data; Eurostat, 2020). More detailed studies suggest that highly educated mothers tend to work longer hours than mothers with less education (e.g. Portegijs and Brakel, 2016). Thus, the double burden of highly

Table 1. Key figures on work–care regimes in Finland and the Netherlands, 2019.

<i>Labour market figures</i>	Finland		Netherlands	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Employment rate ^a	74	72	82	74
Total highly educated workers	83	85	89	80
Share of working population working part time ^b	10	21	28	75
Total highly educated workers	6	14	22	64
Maternal employment rates ^{c,d}		76		80
Total (highly educated)		(83)		(90)
Full-time		66		30
Part-time		8		50
No information		3		
<i>Use of formal and other childcare^{e,f}</i>	Finland		Netherlands	
Child <3 years	Formal care (%)	Other care (%)	Formal care (%)	Other care (%)
No use of childcare	63	97	43	61
1–29 h	12	1	51	38
≥ 30 h	25	2	6	1
3 years old to minimum compulsory school age				
No use of childcare	15	98	15	67
1–29 h	21	1	69	32
≥30 h	64	1	15	0.4
Min. compulsory school age until 12 years old				
1–29 h	85	0	79	27
≥30 h	15	0	21	0.1
<i>Average weekly hours of formal childcare per age group</i>	Finland		Netherlands	
Child <3 years	31	31	16	21
Child aged 3 to compulsory education	35	24	22	15
Min. compulsory school age until 12	25	0	29	6
<i>Net childcare costs (average wage) as a % of household income^g</i>	Finland		Netherlands	
	16		14	
<i>Leave arrangements</i>	Finland		Netherlands	
Maternity leave	105 working days, paid		16 weeks, paid	
Paternity leave	A maximum of 54 working days, paid		5 working days fully paid; an additional 5 weeks at 70% as of 1 July 2020	
Parental leave	158 days, paid Will expand in 2021 to 164 days (7 months) per parent, to encourage take-up among fathers. Single parents will be eligible to take 328 days		26 times the number of working hours per week per parent per child, unpaid. The leave is flexible and can be taken up until the child is 8 years old As of mid-2022, to be paid at 50%	
Child home care allowance	Until the child is 3, minimum amount is €28.94 per working day		Not existent	

^aEurostat, 2020b,^bEurostat, 2020c,^cWomen with at least one child under 14 years of age,^dOECD, 2020a,^eother childcare refers to both childcare by a professional child-minder as well as childcare provided by grandparents, other household members (outside parents), other relatives, friends or neighbours,^fEurostat, 2020a,^gOECD, 2020b.

educated mothers in both countries might be quite similar. In Finland and the Netherlands, mothers consistently spend more hours doing housework and childcare than fathers (OECD, 2014). Moreover, mothers are more likely to simultaneously do housework or care tasks during leisure time, leading to a 'contamination' and fragmentation of leisure (Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003). Working mothers have less leisure time and are less satisfied with leisure, leading to perceived time pressure (Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla-Sanz, 2011), which can negatively affect perceived work–life balance. While labour market gaps between men and women decreased in both countries, gaps in caring are more entrenched. Time use studies show that men's hours in care work have increased in recent decades, but women still do more (e.g. Kan et al., 2011). This gendered pattern may lead women to struggle with many pressures and tensions to balance work and family life (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006). Despite their classification as defamilialised welfare states and varied cultural ideas of care, mothers in both countries are expected to take on greater caregiving tasks than fathers. Especially in Finland, where highly educated mothers work full time, refamilialisation will lead to a worsening of work–life balance. In the Netherlands, refamilialisation will also have a negative effect, but this will be partially mitigated by the lower working hours of highly educated mothers. In this line of reasoning, we expect marginal differences in the perceived work–life balance between highly educated Dutch and Finnish mothers during the first lockdown (H2).

Work–care regimes

Alongside cultural ideals of care and state–market–family explanations of women's greater role in caregiving, existing theoretical frameworks also explicitly account for the variation in employment policies and employment expectations across welfare states. Gender cultures (i.e., the values and beliefs relating to the gendered relationship of the family to both employment and childcare (Pfau-Effinger, 2005, 2012), form the theoretical foundation for salient frameworks theorising care ideals in relation to employment, that is, work–care regimes (Crompton, 1999; Rubery et al., 1999).

Crompton's (1999) conceptualisation of gender relations within welfare states as a continuum of employment and care ideals offers a useful starting point. Welfare states differ in their emphasis on traditional male breadwinner/female carer roles, modifications of these roles, or a focus on dual-earner/dual-carer roles, whereby parents have rights and obligations to work and care for children. Welfare states also differ in how parents are supported in these dual roles (Pfau-Effinger, 2005). This is evident in the variation of work–family policies, particularly in relation to leave policies, childcare services, child benefits and flexible working policies enabling a reconciliation of work and caregiving (Plantenga and Remery, 2013; Thévenon, 2011; Zagel and Lohmann, 2021). The way in which work–family policies facilitate the reconciliation of work and care differs across gender and educational level (Javornik and Kurowska, 2017; Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2018; Van Lancker and Nieuwenhuis, 2020). For example, highly educated parents are more likely to use family policies including childcare services (Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2018). Comparative analysis on parental leave policies further suggests that policies within work–care regimes can affect parents' opportunities in nuanced gendered and classed ways (Javornik and Kurowska, 2017).

Women's decisions about work and care, and how to combine these responsibilities, are shaped within these cultural and institutional settings. Despite being similarly classified as defamilialised welfare regimes, Finland and the Netherlands exhibit different work–care regimes with differing perspectives on the rights and obligations of mothers and fathers. Finland is a dual-earner/state-carer model (Pfau-Effinger, 2005) and the Netherlands a one-and-a-half-earner model, whereby fathers work full time and mothers part time (Plantenga, 2002; see Table 1).

Comparatively, the Finnish welfare state is more family friendly (van Gerven and Nygård, 2017) than the Dutch welfare state. Both women and men work before and after becoming parents and publicly provided family policies enable parents to work full time. Parents receive extensive support around childbirth in Finland, allowing for almost a full year of paid leave, which can be extended to up to 3 years using a 'home care allowance'. In contrast, in the

Dutch one-and-a-half earner model, mothers reduce working hours after birth and fathers often increase working hours. Family leave arrangements are limited, and parental leave remains largely unpaid. Until the passage of the European work–life balance directive, little political pressure for generous and/or extended leave arrangements existed given the highly flexible Dutch working time regime (Plantenga and Remery, 2009; van Gerven and Nygård, 2017). Consequently, paid leave arrangements are only recently being extended, with moderate extensions becoming effective in 2022 (Den Dulk and Yerkes, 2020).

Childcare in Finland is high quality, heavily subsidised, and a child’s right. While childcare services are readily available in Finland, many families make use of the home care allowance (Mahon et al., 2012). This results in relatively low enrolment rates for children under the age of 3, lower than in other Nordic countries (Thévenon, 2011). For parents with primary school-aged children who work full-time, there is a gap between school and work hours. For this reason, Finnish municipalities provide guaranteed before- and after-school care for all first and second graders, which means that children remain on school premises from 8a.m. to 5p.m. under qualified adult supervision. In the Netherlands, childcare is publicly-subsidized but market-based, relatively expensive, particularly for higher income groups, and historically problematic in relation to availability, accessibility and quality (Plantenga and Remery, 2015; Yerkes and Javornik, 2019). There have been recent improvements in both childcare and before and after-school care (Den Dulk and Yerkes, 2020), which in the long term might challenge deeply embedded cultural ideals of maternal care (Kremer, 2007) that are closely intertwined with the part-time work culture in the Netherlands. For now, the part-time work culture is well suited to existing childcare and school systems. Both young (0–4 years old) and school-aged children (up to age 12) generally attend childcare services part time, with parents taking on care tasks as well as relying on alternative care forms (e.g., grandparents; see ‘other childcare’ in Table 1). School opening times vary, but most primary schools close between 2p.m. and 3p.m., offer only

half days on Wednesdays, and some close early on Fridays as well. While elementary schools traditionally closed for lunch, most schools now remain open, providing a short lunch break at school.

Although offering comparatively extensive work–care policy supports, the Finnish work–care regime is less flexible than the Dutch one. Flexible work arrangements are limited to part-time working parents (up to 30 hours a week) with small children (under the age of 3) and for parents with children starting primary school (aged 7–8). Consequently, Finnish mothers work full time, or not at all. In sum, despite their common classification as defamilialised countries, Finland and the Netherlands exhibit different work–care regimes.

In the Finnish dual-earner/state-carer regime, the combined emphasis of full-time employment and caregiving norms is likely to place greater pressure on highly educated mothers than in the Dutch one-and-a-half-earner model where part-time employment (often combined with grandparental childcare) may provide mothers more space to combine work and care. The shock of shifting to working, caring and schooling from home during the lockdown is therefore expected to be larger in Finland than in the Netherlands. In this line of reasoning, we suggest work–life balance during the first lockdown will be worse among highly educated mothers in Finland than in the Netherlands (H3).

Data and methods

Our study relies on pooled, cross-sectional datasets collected separately in Finland and the Netherlands.

Finnish data

The Finnish data were collected through an online survey concerning Finnish families’ experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. The survey included questions on work–family reconciliation, marital and parental conflicts, as well as questions concerning everyday life during the first lockdown. Data collection took place four weeks following the start of lockdown measures (23 April–17 May). Data were gathered using a nonprobability sampling technique (convenience sampling; e.g. Etikan, 2016).

Hence, the data are not representative of the population and subjective methods were used to gather the sample. To minimise problems related to convenience sampling, invitations to participate were disseminated widely through various channels. The survey was advertised through the university communication service, including a press release shared with more than 400 media representatives in Finland. It was also distributed through the university and the team's own social media accounts. The final sample included 653 respondents, all parents with at least one child under 18 at home. For the purposes of this article, the sample was restricted to highly educated working mothers (applied university or university degree), resulting in a final analytic sample of 256 highly educated working mothers.

Dutch data

The Dutch data were collected using an online survey module administered to members of the Dutch Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel. The LISS panel is a representative, random probability-based sample based on registry data (Statistics Netherlands). Data collection took place 1 month following the start of lockdown measures (13–28 April). All respondents lived in households with at least one child under 18 at home, with at least one working parent; 1234 panel members were selected, and a response rate of 71 percent resulted in a sample of 868 parents. Restricting this sample to highly educated working mothers (applied university or university degree) resulted in a final analytic sample of 222 highly educated working mothers. After pooling the datasets, we had a combined analytic sample of 478 respondents.

Variables

Our dependent variable, work–life balance, was measured in the Finnish survey as ‘Drawing the line between work and caring for children is easy during the corona lockdown’. Respondents answered on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The work–life balance measure in the Dutch data was based on the European Working Conditions Survey, modified to the first lockdown. ‘How easy or difficult is it for you to combine your paid work with your caregiving

responsibilities since the general closure of schools and childcare centres (including home schooling/homework support)?’ Respondents answered on a 5-point scale ranging from very easy to very difficult. For analytic purposes, the scale was reversed, so that low values indicated (very) difficult and high values indicated (very) easy to balance work and caregiving responsibilities during the first lockdown.

The Dutch and Finnish data were collected independently, with cross-national comparison not being a primary purpose during data collection. Hence, the Dutch and Finnish dependent variables are not identical in their wording which should be taken into account when interpreting the results. We used the Dutch answer categories of (very) easy–(very) difficult (see [Table 2](#)).

We accounted for several covariates which are well-known to influence work–life balance, including age (centred around the grand mean), work location of the respondent (working from home, partly working from home or working at the normal work location), work location of the partner (partner working from home, partner partly working from home, partner working at the normal work location, partner is not working, and no partner (referring to single mothers)), number of children in the household (top-coded at 3) and the organisation of childcare during the lockdown (children are (partly) at school or childcare versus children are fully at home). We also included age of the youngest child, differentiating between 0–2, 3–6, 7–12 and 13–17 years old. Including the age of the youngest child is important because what is expected from mothers differs dependent upon the age of children. Young children need more direct nurturing and care, while older children require less care and more help with schoolwork. The older the child, the less demanding home-schooling has been for parents ([Bol, 2020](#)). We also included an ‘age youngest child missing’ category to account for a high number of missing cases on this variable in the Dutch data, which only included data on the ages of school children. The overview of descriptive statistics is also included in [Table 2](#). We note two differences: more Dutch mothers worked at the workplace during the lockdown, and Finnish mothers have slightly younger children than Dutch mothers, likely in relation to the absence of Dutch data on the ages of children not attending school.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and frequencies of work–life balance.

Work–life balance	Combined sample		Finland		Netherlands			
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Very difficult	105	22.0	75	29.3	30	13.5		
Difficult	166	34.7	101	39.5	65	29.3		
Neither easy nor difficult	70	14.6	14	5.5	56	25.2		
Easy	103	21.5	49	19.1	54	24.3		
Very easy	34	7.1	17	6.6	17	7.7		
Total	478	100	256	100	222	100		
χ^2 (p-value)	50.372 (<0.001)							

	Finnish sample (N = 256)				Dutch sample (N = 222)			
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Work–life balance (1=very easy, 5=very difficult)	1	5	3.66	1.26	1	5	3.17	1.17
Age (centred)	28	54	39.26	5.33	25	60	41.49	7.24
Work location respondent								
Works at home	0	1	0.79		0	1	0.61	
Works partly at home	0	1	0.19		0	1	0.12	
Works at the workplace	0	1	0.02		0	1	0.27	
Work location partner								
Works at home	0	1	0.41		0	1	0.45	
Works partly at home	0	1	0.13		0	1	0.14	
Works at the workplace	0	1	0.22		0	1	0.22	
Partner not working	0	1	0.15		0	1	0.08	
No partner (single mother)	0	1	0.09		0	1	0.11	
Number of children (top-coded at 3)	1	3	1.90	0.65	1	3	2.00	0.74
Organisation of childcare								
Children are at home	0	1	0.90		0	1	0.91	
Children are (partly) at school/daycare	0	1	0.10		0	1	0.09	
Age of the children								
Youngest child between 0 and 2 years old	0	1	0.22		0	1	0.14	
Youngest child between 3 and 6 years old	0	1	0.45		0	1	0.21	
Youngest child between 7 and 12 years old	0	1	0.26		0	1	0.21	
Youngest child between 13 and 17 years old	0	1	0.07		0	1	0.17	
Age youngest child missing	0	1	0.00		0	1	0.28	

Method

We used multivariate linear regression to analyse the factors related to highly educated mothers' perceived work–life balance in Finland and the Netherlands using the 5-point scale discussed above. As a robustness check, we also assessed a three-point scale with ordered logit

regression as well as a logistic regression (easy/difficult). We present the linear results as this approach retains the variation in the sample. The additional analyses are available upon request. The first model in Table 3 shows the analysis for the combined sample, the second model only for the Finnish data and the third model only for the Dutch data. We report effects of the covariates on work–

Table 3. Linear regression of ease/difficulty of combining work and care¹.

	Model 1	Model 2 Finland	Model 3 Netherlands
Constant	2.189***	1.991***	2.689***
Country			
Finland	Reference		
Netherlands	0.276**		
Age (centred)	0.007	0.001	0.015
Work location respondent			
Works at home	Reference	Reference	Reference
Works partly at home	0.105	0.356	-0.383
Works at the workplace	0.317	0.959	0.245
Work location partner			
Works at home	Reference	Reference	Reference
Works partly at home	0.176	0.213	0.103
Works at the workplace	0.152	0.285	0.023
Partner not working	0.435*	0.352	0.662*
No partner (single mother)	-0.184	-0.584*	0.227
Number of children (top-coded at 3)	0.006	0.082	-0.030
Organisation of childcare			
Children are at home	Reference	Reference	Reference
Children are (partly) at school/daycare	-0.062	0.095	-0.244
Age of the children			
Youngest child between 0 and 2 years old	Reference	Reference	Reference
Youngest child between 3 and 6 years old	-0.191	-0.215	-0.201
Youngest child between 7 and 12 years old	0.184	0.233	0.036
Youngest child between 13 and 17 years old	0.945***	0.922*	0.819*
Age youngest child missing	0.112	n/a	0.014
R ²	0.119	0.061	0.142

Source: ¹ Higher values indicate better WLB.
[^] <0.10, * <0.05, ** <0.01, *** <0.001.

life balance, where a positive effect means that mothers find it easier to combine work and care. Because of the small sample sizes, we include significant effects at the $\alpha = 0.10$ as well as $\alpha = 0.05$, $\alpha = 0.01$ and $\alpha = 0.001$ levels. To analyse possible cross-national differences, interaction models between country and other independent variables were tested separately; results are presented in the supplementary material.

Results

Table 2 shows the perceived work–life balance of highly educated working mothers in Finland and the

Netherlands during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The results reveal a highly significant difference between Finland and the Netherlands. It seems that Finnish mothers find it much more difficult to balance work and care during the first lockdown than Dutch mothers. While just over 40 percent of Dutch mothers perceive the balancing of work and care to be difficult or very difficult, the share of Finnish mothers is as high as 68 percent. While our measures only include perceived work–life balance measures during the lockdown, women in Finland and the Netherlands had similarly high levels of work–life balance prior to the pandemic as noted above (European Commission, 2018), suggesting

the cross-country difference found here is related to the pandemic and not pre-pandemic differences. Another cross-country difference is found in the share of mothers who consider achieving work–life balance during the lockdown to be neither difficult nor easy. In Finland, the share of mothers is only around 5 percent, whereas in the Netherlands, about every fourth mother looks at the balancing of work and care in this neutral manner. Interestingly, we find only a small difference between Finnish and Dutch mothers who say balancing work and care is very easy or easy during the first lockdown.

The linear regression models are presented in Table 3. Overall, the multivariate results confirm the descriptive results. Highly educated Dutch mothers find it easier to combine work and care during the first lockdown than Finnish mothers ($b = 0.276$). In the COVID-19 lockdown context, the dual-earner/state-carer model emphasising full-time work in Finland seems to place greater pressure on highly educated mothers than the Dutch one-and-a-half-earner model, where part-time work may enable mothers to combine work and care more easily.

While we lack data on working hours in the Finnish dataset (where 86 percent of highly educated mothers works full time, see Table 1; Eurostat, 2020), we tested the importance of working time by controlling for this potential confounding factor in an additional model for the Netherlands (see Supplemental material/Table S1). In a parsimonious model grouping mothers working long hours part time with full-time workers (i.e. 31+ hours/week) compared to mothers working less than 30 hours/week, we find that mothers who work longer hours have more difficulty combining work and care during the lockdown than mothers who work fewer hours.

Furthermore, results for partner's work location are interesting as this varies across countries. In Finland, single mothers find it more difficult to combine work and care than mothers with a partner (Table 3; $b = -0.584$), while we do not find this effect in the Netherlands. Potentially, for Finnish mothers, being able to share the extra responsibility of childcare and home-schooling that was normally outsourced to childcare centres and schools with their partner makes work–care reconciliation easier.

When we look at the work location of the respondent and her partner, we find a borderline significant effect of working at the workplace. Mothers who can work at the workplace find it easier to combine work and care than mothers who work at home ($b = 0.317$). Furthermore, we find that if the partner is not employed, combining work and care is also easier for highly educated mothers ($b = 0.435$).

The most important factor in highly educated mothers' perceived work–life balance during the first lockdown is the presence or absence of young children. Having young children between the ages of 0 and 6 is most negative for mothers' work–life balance, as children of this age-group need the most nurturing and care. Work–life balance is slightly better for mothers with children aged 7 to 12 (significantly better compared to the 3–6-year category), whereas work–life balance is much better for mothers with secondary school-aged children between 13 and 17 years old ($b = 0.945$). This result suggests that mothers with young children (aged 3–6, even more than between 0 and 2 years) struggled the most with their work–life balance during the first lockdown.

Finally, we tested for interaction effects between the two countries and each independent variable. In most cases, interaction effects were not statistically significant (see Supplemental material, Table S2), with the exception of combined partner status/work location. The interaction model confirms the results of Models 2 and 3 in Table 3: not having a partner has a clear negative effect on mothers' work–life balance in Finland ($b = -0.585$, $p < 0.05$) but not in the Netherlands ($b = 0.227$, n.s.). Moreover, the cross-country difference in work–life balance for partnered mothers is significantly smaller (see Supplemental material, Figure S1). This result might also be related to the different work–care regimes in these countries, with single, full-time working mothers (in Finland) being harder hit by lockdown measures than single, part-time working mothers (in the Netherlands).

Conclusion

Increased attention for work–life balance policy support at the European level had little chance to gain traction at the national level before measures to slow

the spread of COVID-19 created significant barriers for parents in combining work and care. The refamilialisation of care to the family through the closure of schools and childcare centres during the first lockdown was unprecedented. We are just beginning to understand the impact of such a refamilialisation process on parents' work–life balance empirically and theoretically. We contribute empirically to this literature by examining highly educated mothers' work–life balance experiences in Finland and the Netherlands during the first COVID-19 lockdown. We contribute theoretically by investigating the efficacy of existing theoretical frameworks for understanding pandemic outcomes in a comparative context of subtle work–family and lockdown policy differences.

Our results demonstrate that Finnish mothers experience more difficulty combining work and care during the first lockdown than Dutch mothers and support the use and further development of the work–care regime framework for explaining cross-country differences in work–family outcomes during the pandemic (Crompton, 1999; Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Plantenga, 2002). Given similar pre-pandemic levels of work–life balance among Finnish and Dutch women, this effect appears to be related to the pandemic. Against the refamilialised backdrop of COVID-19, the dual-earner/state-carer model supported in Finland leaves less room for highly educated mothers to combine extra care responsibilities with work than the one-and-a-half-earner model supported in the Netherlands, affirming *H3*. Our results are not in line with the defamilialisation framework. Despite the common classification of Finland and the Netherlands as moderately defamilialised countries (Cho, 2014), the work–life balance experiences of highly educated Finnish and Dutch mothers differs, leading us to reject *H1*. For the same reason, we reject *H2*, although the conclusions in relation to this hypothesis are less clear. On the one hand, we find more than moderate differences between Finnish and Dutch mothers, suggesting cultural ideas of care do not offer a sufficient explanation for understanding work–life balance experiences during the lockdown. On the other hand, the additional analyses with the Dutch data including working hours suggest that indeed, the negative

effect of refamilialisation is mitigated by working part time in the Netherlands. However, this explanation alone is insufficient to understand the experiences of Finnish mothers. In the dual-earner/state-carer model, and in contrast to the Dutch model, Finnish mothers are used to the existence of well-functioning, full-time childcare. Consequently, Finnish mothers may be more critical of their work–life balance during a lockdown when this well-functioning childcare is absent, especially when the vast majority of these mothers work full time. This interwoven effect of working time and the family policy framework reflected in the work–care regime is further amplified by the presence or absence of a partner. Not having a partner has a negative effect on mothers' work–life balance in Finland, but not in the Netherlands. In Finland, single mothers usually work full time and lockdown made it especially hard for them to manage the triple burden (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado, 2018) of paid work, childcare and helping children with remote school (see also Hertz et al., 2021). The most important effect is the presence or absence of young children. Mothers with children aged 3–6 years old struggled significantly more than mothers with very young children (0–2 years old) or children older than 7 years of age. In many countries, although not all, mothers have taken on greater caregiving burdens than fathers (e.g., Hipp and Bünning, 2020), suggesting additional work–family policy support is needed to address potential negative effects on mothers, particularly those with young children.

We note some limitations of our study. First, this study combines two cross-sectional datasets that were not designed to be comparable, which creates some differences in both the wording and answer categories of the dependent variable. Whereas the Finnish dependent variable asked respondents to state whether they agree or disagree that drawing the line between work and care has been easy, the Dutch dependent variable asked respondents to state how difficult or easy it has been to combine paid work and care. Respondents might have found it easier to disagree with the Finnish statement that combining work and care is easy, rather than reporting difficulty in combining work and care as in the Dutch case. Nevertheless, both variables measure respondents'

perceived work–life balance as a measure of relative ease or difficulty during the first lockdown, which allows for a comparison of experiences across countries. Second, while we were able to conduct additional analyses with the Dutch data controlling for differences in work hours, these data are not available in the Finnish sample. Given the prevalence of full-time work in Finland, however, variation in working hours would likely be low and can thus be expected to have limited impact on the results. Third, because we focus on highly educated mothers in paid work, the sample sizes are quite small, which might affect our results. While we know that the Dutch sample remains representative on key characteristics for the population of working mothers with children in the household, a larger sample would help us to test this relationship further.

This study also opened interesting avenues for future research. To better understand the ability of pre-COVID-19 theoretical frameworks to explain mothers' experiences of work–life balance during COVID-19, a broader comparative perspective with more countries representing greater diversity in relation to defamilialisation, cultural ideals of care, gender, educational levels and work–care regimes should be employed. Such comparative work is needed to unpack overlapping, and at times contradictory, employment and family policies embedded in diverse cultures of care (Mahon et al., 2012; Pfau-Effinger, 2005). In particular, further comparative work can help to investigate variation in potentially path dependent and/or divergent work–family responses implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Koslowski et al., 2020), and their impact on parents. A further avenue for research relates to the role of employers. The organisational context, in particular work–family support, is crucial for employees' reconciliation of work and care (Den Dulk et al., 2017). Initial evidence from the Netherlands suggests there is no significant effect of employer support on perceived work pressure (Yerkes et al., 2020b), which can play a crucial role in work–life balance. The role of employers and the organisational context in other country contexts requires further attention. Moreover, as Europe looks forward to a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is under control, scholarly attention is needed for the

potential long-lasting effects on work–life balance and the policies needed to mitigate these effects.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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