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Work-life balance in times of economic crisis and austerity

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GUEST EDITORIAL (special issue)

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this editorial is to provide an overview of the wider debates concerning the evolution of work-life balance practice and policy since the onset of the “Great Recession” of 2008 and to draw out some comparisons of the issues raised by the papers in the special issue by focusing particularly on the example of the UK.

Design/methodology/approach – The editorial analyses how the direction and pace of changes in work-life balance practice and policy varies between different national contexts and welfare regimes and also asks whether, within the same national context, the changes taking place are always consistent.

Findings – The special issue draws together an international overview of work-life balance measures which focuses particularly on measures for fathers, an EU-wide analysis of the use of flexible employment and its relationship with work-family conflict and a number of specific country case studies from Southern Europe where recession has been particularly severe (Spain and Italy) and the Southern hemisphere (Australia) where the recession has been less deep. It finds that economic crisis and austerity have resulted in a variety of labour market changes and policy responses in different national settings, some but not all of which map onto existing welfare regime typologies. The articles raise a wider set of questions about what type of policy best promotes employees’ work-life balance. The editorial argues in favour of legislative support for work-life balance to help address structural inequalities.

Originality/value – This editorial and special issue is one of the first to review the small but growing literature on the effect of recession on individuals’ experience of work-life balance, organisations’ approach to work-life balance and reconciliation policy since 2008.

Keywords Work-life balance, Economic crisis, Austerity, Reconciliation policy, Gender, United Kingdom, Quality of life, National cultures, Europe, Australia

Work-life balance has become increasingly prominent in public policy since the 1990s, for a number of reasons linked to women's labour market participation and ability to "reconcile" family life and paid employment (Hennig et al., 2012). These reasons have been primarily demographic (fears around falling fertility rates and, related to this, dependency ratios in aging societies) and economic (whether explicitly linked to labour shortages or more generally concerned with raising the employment rate) (OECD, 2007).

However, the definition of work-life balance itself is problematic (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Lewis et al., 2007) due to normative assumptions about whether it is possible satisfactorily to "balance" paid employment and family responsibilities, and gendered assumptions about the nature of care which often accompany the concept. Indeed, the concept has recently been challenged by research which indicates that measures introduced under the heading of work-life balance may have a range of outcomes, not all of which help parents to juggle work and family commitments, and some of which may actually entrench gender inequalities by for example trapping women into low-paid, insecure employment or outside the labour market altogether.

Furthermore, the scope of the term is open to interpretation. Sometimes associated narrowly with a specific set of policy initiatives around leave for parents, or with employer support for childcare, the concept of work-life balance has broadened as it has developed (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011; Moen, 2011) because it is central to two major changes in advanced capitalist economies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. First, work-life balance is associated with broader changes in the world of work characterised by a growing employer demand for employee availability and flexibility (Eikhof et al., 2007; Lewis et al., 2007; Perrons et al., 2007). Second, it is closely related to a wider agenda of recasting welfare states to meet "new social risks" such as reconciling paid employment with childcare and/or elder care (Bonoli, 2005; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Taylor-Gooby, 2008) rather than "old social risks" such as unemployment. Taken together, this means that: Common issues in the second decade of this century are now moving the work-family problem to include a focus on the demands and conditions of work: time pressures, benefits, job insecurity, burnout, the overload in a 24/7 economy (Moen, 2011, p. 85).

In this special issue, we use the term "work-life balance" in its conventional definition which includes employees' "time management, inter-role conflict (role overload and interference) and care arrangements for dependents" (Gregory and Milner, 2009, p. 3). All three aspects concern household-based and employment-based characteristics, whilst the third focuses also on how employees' care arrangements are supported by public policy.

For each individual, work-life balance depends on the three-way interaction of gender and household characteristics (age, gender, care responsibilities, partner's situation), workplace characteristics and working conditions, and public policies including social and welfare policies as well as working time norms (Anxo et al., 2013,

p. 6). This definition of work-life balance implies that it is possible to measure individuals' ability to balance work and home life by self-reporting, whether this is by using a direct question such as "How easy do you find it to balance work and family/other commitments?" or by measuring imbalance, that is, work-life conflict or perceptions of stress and overload.

The fifth European Working Conditions survey carried out in 2010, which measured work-life balance by reported satisfaction with the relationship between working hours and commitments outside work, found a high proportion (83 per cent of men and 87 per cent of women) of respondents satisfied with their work-life balance (Anxo et al., 2013, p. 46). Generally speaking, satisfaction was negatively correlated with long working hours. Comparison with earlier working conditions surveys suggest that satisfaction may be related to greater availability of flexible and part-time work, as the most recent European company survey also indicates (Mikulic et al., 2012).

The European Quality of Life survey, carried out in 2011, found a similar proportion of respondents (78 per cent) satisfied with their ability to combine work and commitments outside work, with dissatisfaction related to longer working hours particularly amongst men in the middle of their working careers (Anderson et al., 2012) and more widespread in the private than the public sector. For both men and women, self-reported perception of being "too tired to fulfil family responsibilities" rose markedly over 40 h of paid employment a week.

These European surveys (also backed up by the OECD (2011)) suggest that employment trends over the last two decades or so have resulted in an improvement of individuals' perceptions of their own ability to balance work and other aspects of life, thanks partly to decreased hours overall and increased flexibility of working time arrangements. European countries contrast with the USA in this respect, as due to longer working hours and very weak legislative support for working parents, reported levels of work-family conflict are higher (Ray et al., 2010; Williams and Boushey, 2010).

Overall, then, longer-term economic trends appear to be encouraging improved work-life balance, but the impact of the post-2008 crisis deserves further attention as several contradictory trends are evident on the basis of data so far available, as we discuss below. Moreover, working time (its volume and arrangement) is only one aspect of work-life balance. It seems more likely that a combination of various employment-related factors affect individuals' (self-perceived) ability to manage work and home life: work intensification, feelings of job security or insecurity, the extent to which flexible hours are "unsocial" or fit life outside paid work, the availability demands of new technologies, and (societal and/or organizational) cultures of long hours or presenteeism (Roberts, 2007). In the UK, for example, data shows that reported levels of satisfaction with working hours were highest during the recessions of 1990 and 2009, suggesting that with higher levels of job insecurity, workers' priority is to maintain their job rather than to improve working conditions (Leighton and Gregory, 2011). Nevertheless, economic downturn is likely to lead to

rising job insecurity and work intensification (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010), a potential counter-trend to this (which would apply mainly to employees in high demand due to scarce skills) being businesses' willingness to trade other aspects of job security and quality for benefits such as support for family responsibilities (Kossek et al., 2010).

Public policy has also been affected by the post-2008 "Great Recession": public sector employment, associated with higher work-life satisfaction, has been drastically cut back in many countries with further cuts on the way; welfare benefits such as those supporting parents in as well as out of work are being cut; and in many countries planned extensions of care arrangements have been postponed or abandoned.

Meanwhile, the costs of childcare for parents are rising even as family incomes stagnate or fall. A discourse of deregulation has led to the questioning of even existing support for working parents in some countries, such as the UK, as well as at European Union level (Smith and Villa, 2013). Is business and policy support for work-life balance therefore a "fair-weather" policy that can be introduced in good times but risks being swept away in hard economic times?

This special issue focuses on the situation since 2008 and seeks to evaluate the impact of economic crisis. In so doing, it recognizes that the impact will vary substantially according to the economic and policy environment in each country. If some countries are supporting employees better than others through hard economic times, can lessons be learnt? Consideration of trends in work-life balance also needs to recognize differences between the experience of different sectors, company size, occupational groups (Leighton and Gregory, 2011; Roberts, 2007) and the extent to which these are gendered.

The impact of crisis and austerity

The European Commission's (2010) Equality between women and men report suggested that the recession may jeopardize achievements in gender equality and that the effects of the recession would put greater pressure on women. In practice a number of trends in employment and in policy have been identified since 2008, not all of which are mutually consistent. In key areas such as employment, pay and activity levels, gender gaps have been reduced in the current recession, although against a context of overall decline (Bettio et al., 2013). However, Smith and Villa (2013) show that women's employment in the EU has not benefited from the protection previously afforded women through occupational segregation, with the consequence of women's unemployment levels now equalising men's and rising in many countries, with further public sector cuts likely to disproportionately affect women both as employees and service users.

The crisis has hit some countries more than others: in Spain, more than a quarter of the workforce is now unemployed and unemployment affects half of all those aged under 30 (Grau-Grau in this issue). Unemployment is reaching similar levels in Greece. According to OECD harmonised unemployment rate data (OECD, 2013)

several EU countries also find themselves in a mid-band of countries with Ireland (14.7 per cent unemployment in 2012), Portugal (15.9 per cent) and the Slovak Republic (14 per cent) among them. In those countries most badly affected by unemployment, working hours have tended to rise for those remaining in paid work, whilst in several other countries which have managed to contain the rise in unemployment, such as Germany (5.5 per cent in 2012) or Austria (4.4 per cent), working hours have fallen (Hurley et al., 2012). In the latter countries, measures such as working time accounts and a culture of negotiated flexibility are thought to have contributed to businesses' ability to manage change, whilst public policy support for short-time working also reduced hours overall. Over the EU27 as a whole, working time fell by around 1 per cent between 2008 and 2012.

Over a third (37 per cent) of European employees reported that restructuring had taken place within their workplace within the period 2008-2012 (Hurley et al., 2012, p. 5), with those in higher occupational groups and working in larger organizations and the public sector most likely to report such change. The effect of organizational change was reported to be both positive and negative from an employee viewpoint: on the positive side, employee autonomy and responsibility tend to be increased, that is, jobs are enriched and may give greater personal satisfaction, but on the negative side employees experience work intensification and tend therefore to have higher levels of stress, particularly those in blue-collar occupations. In this respect, the "Great Recession" appears to have exacerbated the earlier gendered and sectoral pattern of work-life conflict.

Similarities and differences between countries

Although as noted above self-reported individual satisfaction with work-life balance has been rising in European surveys (at least, up to the last available dataset dating from 2010), significant differences remain between European countries. France is one of the few countries where satisfaction declined in the period 2000-2007 despite the increased availability of flexible working arrangements, and this is true across all occupational groups. Although it is not clear why this should be the case it has been argued that it may reflect dissatisfaction with "imposed" working hours or arrangements, and/or feelings of greater employment insecurity (Sanse'au and Smith, 2012). More recently, in the Third European Quality of Life Survey, on the question about being "too tired to fulfil family responsibilities", country averages ranged from 17 per cent of respondents in Denmark and Finland, through the EU average of 30-52 per cent in Cyprus and 56 per cent in Latvia (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 61).

Differences in reported levels of work-life satisfaction between countries have been found to cluster around conventional welfare state typologies (Anxo et al., 2010), with Nordic countries at the higher end, followed closely by the liberal economies of the UK, Ireland and Estonia, with the continental and southern European cluster and the central and eastern European clusters almost a decile lower than the Nordic level.

The British case is instructive in this respect, both because of the extent of recession and austerity, and because of its status as an ideal-typical “liberal market economy” in the European context. Economic output fell and negative growth was recorded in 2008, 2011 and 2012. Given this severe contraction of business activity, the fall in employment was relatively small, although substantial job losses hit the private sector in 2008-2009 and the public sector after 2010. However, most surviving workplaces were affected in some way by the economic downturn. The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS) found only a minority of organizations (27 per cent) reporting that the recession had affected them only a little or not at all, whilst 45 per cent of managers stated that the recession had affected their workplace “quite a lot” or a great deal (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). 76 per cent of companies had undertaken some kind of action in response to recession which directly affected the workforce: most commonly wage freezes or cuts, freezes on vacant posts, and changed work organization. Male employees were more likely than women to have experienced changes to their employment as a result of recession; full-time employees were more likely to have experienced wage freezes or reductions and increases in their workload, whilst part-time employees were more likely to state that their hours had been reduced (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013, p. 8).

In the UK, self-reported work-life balance has declined most recently as a result of recession and economic downturn: the proportion of employees agreeing or strongly agreeing that they achieve the right work-life balance fell from 61 per cent at the end of 2012 to 56 per cent in the first quarter of 2013 (57 per cent for private-sector employees) (CIPD, 2013). Dissatisfaction with work-life balance is related to gender and occupational status, which shows the impact of working time patterns: although working time has fallen overall, the exceptions are for women in clerical and service work, and men in operator and elementary occupations (Sanse´au and Smith, 2012).

The Working Families charity also found that parents’ satisfaction with work-life balance had fallen due to a combination of work intensification and a mismatch between the reportedly wide availability of working hours and the reality for working parents (less than half reported being able to access flexible hours, whereas companies now report workplace availability to be over 95 per cent: Working Families, 2012). It highlighted the need for lower-income families in particular to chase after available employment at the expense of worsening “time poverty”. The WERS 2011 survey confirms the arguments of Working Families because it shows no general increase in the use of flexible working arrangements since 2004, despite the extension of the right to request flexible working during this period.

Maternity and paternity leave provision appears to have increased, with 27 per cent of workplaces offering maternity pay in excess of statutory provision and 21 per cent offering paternity pay in excess of the statutory minimum. But overall, more generous maternity and paternity support and the take-up of flexible working remain limited to a minority of workplaces (even though 81 per cent of managers reported availability of reduced or flexible working hours). The most commonly used flexible working arrangements were flexitime (reported by 30 per cent of employees), working from home (17 per cent) and taking paid leave to care for a

dependant in an emergency (12 per cent), with slightly lower rates (9 per cent) for reduced hours and compressed hours. Take-up was higher among employees with care responsibilities (33, 20, 18, 12 and 9 per cent, respectively) but carers still reported higher levels of work-life conflict. 27 per cent of employees agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I often find it difficult to fulfil my commitments outside of work because of the time I spend on my job”, with 48 per cent disagreeing (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013, p. 33).

These British data suggest that economic crisis has exacerbated polarization of jobs and increased work intensification for lower income groups in particular and for white-collar female employees and manual and lower-paid male employees. Despite strengthened statutory support for working parents and more widely for those employees wishing to reduce their hours or make them more flexible, the crisis has made it more difficult for them to balance work and other activities.

Work-family reconciliation policy and austerity

It has been widely acknowledged that from the 1990s until 2008, work-family reconciliation policies were becoming an integral part of employment-led social policy in Europe, both at EU and national level (Milner, 2011). This evolution was accompanied by a shift in policy assumptions away from a male breadwinner/female carer model family toward the promotion of an adult worker model (Lewis et al., 2008). Policies encouraging both parents to be active in the labour market by offering flexible work for men and women and assisting with childcare have been promoted to address a number of the challenges facing Western welfare states: population ageing, falling fertility rates, child poverty and children’s development and managing an increasingly diverse and pluralist workforce. These overarching social and economic trends have placed the family at the centre of new “activating” labour market policies whilst family policies now aim to improve women’s economic situation and thereby relieve the risk of poverty encountered by families and enhance children’s well-being (Maatzke and Ostner, 2010).

The European Employment Strategy (EES), launched in 1997 was based on the idea that: first, the overall employment rate had to increase to respond to new social and economic challenges; second, women were the largest component of the potential labour supply to be activated; and third, in order to draw women into the labour market, it was necessary to promote equal opportunities, gender equality and work-family reconciliation (Smith and Villa, 2013). For example, in 2002 the Barcelona Council set targets for the provision of childcare services to reach 33 per cent of under 3s and 90 per cent of over 3s (Lewis et al., 2008). Nonetheless, at national level, there was, and indeed continues to be, wide variation in work-family reconciliation policy according broadly to welfare-regime type. As Lewis et al. (2008, p. 262) note: ‘A role for the state in reconciling family responsibilities and employment has long been admitted in some countries, such as France, but only very recently, for example in the UK’. Yet in all Western EU Member States during the 2000s policies designed to permit the combination of paid and unpaid work in the form of services for children, care leaves and reduced and/or flexible working hours have assumed a greater prominence and been subject to varying degrees of

reform. Indeed, as Smith and Villa (2013, p. 229) note, the period running up to the “Great Recession” was one of: ‘[. . .] a strong and permanent mobilisation of female labour into the labour market, resulting in a significant increase in the employment rate of mothers and an increasing dependence of families on women’s earnings. However, it is less clear how the post-2008 “Great Recession” has affected this trajectory of work-family reconciliation in terms of both the direction and/or pace of change in particular welfare regimes and institutional settings. On the one hand, with public sector employment, associated with higher work-life satisfaction, being drastically cut back in many countries and with further cuts on the way, welfare benefits such as those supporting parents in as well as out of work being cut and in many countries planned extensions of care arrangements having been postponed or abandoned and the costs of childcare for parents rising even as family incomes stagnate or fall, it could be argued that policy support for work-family reconciliation has indeed been a “fair-weather” policy and runs the risk of being thrown into reverse. However, if work-family reconciliation policy has been based on an assumption that activation of all members of a family is a necessary condition for the alleviation of poverty, and therefore an aid to reducing state expenditure on welfare and indeed a source of revenue through women’s tax contributions, it could be assumed that governments might continue to support work-family reconciliation, but possibly in ways which do not give priority to gender equality considerations.

To take the case of the UK, we can see that from the late 1990s onwards, in a major break from the past, New Labour governments undertook major reforms of employment policies and social benefits with a particular focus on assisting families with children in terms of their incomes and their incentives to work which have benefitted mothers with longer entitlement to maternity leave and greater subsidies for childcare (Harkness and Evans, 2011): maternity leave was extended and paid paternity leave, unpaid parental leave and an employee “right to request” reduced or flexible hours to accommodate childcare and other responsibilities were introduced; a National Childcare Strategy increased public expenditure on childcare, assisting low-income families and creating over 920,000 childcare places including free part-time pre-school nursery education for children aged three plus. Financial assistance with childcare costs for low-income families took the form of tax credits, whilst for others the tax efficient childcare voucher system was introduced in 2005. Alongside this the new labour government spearheaded company-led initiatives to promote work-life balance (Gregory and Milner, 2008). Whilst representing a significant improvement, two significant gaps remained within UK reconciliation policy: first, a shortfall and high cost of provision for the under threes; and second, the part-time nature of pre-school nursery education (Fagan and Norman, 2012).

Nonetheless, the impact of such reforms may be seen in the fact that ‘[. . .] since the 1980s the employment rate for mothers has increased faster than that for other women in the UK. The rise was particularly rapid for mothers with pre-school age children, for example, the employment rate for mothers with a child aged under five rose from 31 per cent in 1980 to 58 per cent in 2008 (Fagan and Norman, 2012, p.544). These changes reflected wider objectives of achieving greater equality within the family along socio-democratic models resulting in the growing focus on

supporting fathers to have more involvement with their children (Gregory and Milner, 2011).

Post-recession, Rubery and Rafferty (2013, p. 14) note that the approach of the UK Coalition government since 2010 has been to withdraw state support for mothers in work, through proposed or implemented reductions in child benefits, child tax credits and failure to ring-fence expenditure on nurseries, after-school or holiday clubs. Fertility, childcare and work choices have been presented increasingly as a private matter. Furthermore, the plan to convert tax credits into a universal credit currently involves treating the household as one unit for assessment and payment, which can be expected to transfer resources from purse to wallet and increase negative incentives for second-income earners. As Annesley and Scheele (2011, p. 341) suggest: 'Motivated by its priority to bring down public debt, the coalition government [. . .] announced a series of cuts to welfare spending and public service provision which, independent analysis has shown, have disproportionately impacted on women rather than men'.

The effect of recent changes may therefore be to weaken the positive impact of earlier measures which according to some studies have helped many families to weather the economic storm. Harkness and Evans (2011, p. 689) show how new labour's policy of tax credits for low earners made it '[. . .] feasible for women to remain in low-paid and part-time employment even if their partner loses their job as the incentives of in-work support has substantially improved the financial incentives for work'.

Changes to the tax and benefits system may help to explain why women have remained in the labour market to a greater extent than in earlier recessions (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013, p. 10), although as this trend appears across most developed economies it also reflects wider changes in the world of work. However, announcements in relation to parental leave and tax relief on childcare suggest that the picture is not straightforwardly bleak, and support for work-family reconciliation continues but within the context of a policy objective of "making work pay" and reducing childcare costs which are higher than in all OECD countries other than Switzerland (Truss, 2012). The OECD suggests that the UK labour force could expand by 16 per cent if the gap in working hours and labour force participation between men and women improved (OECD, 2012). The Coalition has, for example, sought to stimulate father involvement through its parental leave policy enabling fathers and mothers to share some of the mother's 52 weeks' maternity leave. It also aims to extend the right to request flexible working to all employees. While moving slightly closer to Nordic models of parental leave, the lack of a non-transferable "daddy quota" and continued low rates of replacement pay are likely to mean that the model for work-family reconciliation nevertheless does not shift significantly towards fathers as a result of this new policy.

In summary, we can see a mixed picture in terms of the link between austerity and work-life reconciliation policy in the EU and for which the UK provides a useful exemplar: this policy area finds itself at the intersection of government and company

policies to confront austerity, national family policies and traditions and wider social trends regarding women's employment, as well as over-arching EU policy frameworks.

Findings on the impact of the post-2008 economic crisis

The papers within this special edition were selected through open call alongside special requests for commissions. The final selection has the benefit of providing both an international overview of work-life balance measures and specific country case studies focusing in particular on Southern Europe where recession has been particularly severe (Spain and Italy) and the Southern hemisphere (Australia) where, by contrast, the recession has been less deep.

In her article "Fitting fathers into work-family policies: international challenges in turbulent times", Margaret O'Brien provides an international perspective on work-family policies since the start of global economic turbulence and focuses in particular on the place of and rationale for work-family policies for fathers. Her review of parental working hours and parental leave practices draws on OECD data on international working time and parental leave. O'Brien's data shows that for the specific case of parental leave more countries had improved provision than reduced it over the period between January 2010 and April 2011. The article shows that Europe is characterized by more generous and better compensated leave than other regions, which she attributes in part to "the important role of European and Nordic inter-governmental bodies in promoting activation and work-family reconciliation measures". For O'Brien the International Labour Organization and other bodies ensuring compliance with work-family and social protection provision can play a key "signalling" role in the informal and unregulated labour markets found in other parts of the world. However, the article also shows evidence of withdrawal or weakening of supportive measures in some countries, although they are not necessarily those where recession has been deepest.

In his article "Workplace work-family interventions: Italy in times of welfare state retrenchment and recession", Egidio Riva discusses work-family interventions in work organizations within the context of the Italian national welfare regime, based on case studies carried out in eight leading companies. One reason for this focus on organization-level responses to the need for work-life balance is that due to a complex combination of institutional, political and cultural factors, public provision in this area is very low in Italy with women still being expected to provide care in the family. There is little or no legislation relating to work-family issues in the country. Within this institutional framework, one impact of the recession may be the setting aside of workplace work-family intervention especially in small and medium-sized organizations with limited resources. However, evidence collected from the case studies in this study suggests that this has not happened in larger companies where employers have adopted a strategic approach to work-family issues. In such larger firms, work-family policies have been assessed and refocused as a result of an increasing concern for workplace performance and efficiency. In this regard, resilience of workplace arrangements is related to the adoption of an evidence-based approach which makes economic sense and contributes to obtaining the long-

term support for work-life balance measures needed from important stakeholders. Spain is one of the countries hardest hit by recession and austerity, with the highest unemployment rate in Europe. In his paper “Clouds over Spain: work and family in an age of austerity”, Marc Grau-Grau assesses the impact of the financial crisis on Spanish employees’ perceived level of work flexibility, autonomy, stress and monotony by analysing data from two national surveys, one dating from before the crisis (2005/2006) and one from after (2010). The article finds evidence of a negative impact of the crisis on all four aspects of self-reported work-life balance. It also indicates that different patterns of work-based factors in work-life balance (as measured in levels of flexibility, autonomy, stress and monotony) operate across Spanish regions. Although the analysis does not lead to conclusive findings in this respect, it suggests that these patterns are related to outcomes of the financial crisis, not just in terms of levels of income and employment, but also as regards the relative size of the public and small business sectors as employers. The article therefore indicates that research on the impact of “The Great Recession” must be contextualized in local labour market structures.

Australia, on the other hand, has seen a relatively shallow recession. In their article “Work-family and work-life pressures in Australia: advancing gender equality in ‘good times’?” Barbara Pocock, Sara Charlesworth and Janine Chapman discuss recent changes in Australia’s work-family policies and programs and their implications for gender (in)equality. The authors argue that due to the existence of a tight labour market and growing dependency ratio, political interest began to develop in work-life balance in the country from 2002 onwards. Initially under the stewardship of the right-wing coalition government, policy change consisted of increasing childcare provision within the context of the market and providing direct subsidies for parents. Critically assessing the impact of these policy shifts on gender equality, the authors conclude that although the changes have coincided with an upward shift in women’s employment rates (often in the form of part-time work), there has been little or no impact on the gender pay gap, responsibility for unpaid work in the home or levels of satisfaction with work-life balance. They identify a lack of coherence and integration between various work/family related policies and suggest the need for a wider range of reforms, particularly in relation to domestic work and care. Flexibility rights may even entrench gender inequality in the face of strong gendered workplace and societal norms around care and work.

The gendered use of workplace flexibility is explored further in the article by Dirk Hofaecker and Stefanie Koenig: “Flexibility and work-life conflict in times of crisis: a gender perspective”. Using the European Social Survey 2010 (which includes a specific module exploring the effect of recession from 2008), the authors examine the use of flexible employment and its relationship with work-family conflict. The article confirms that unpredictability and irregularity of working conditions are more important in driving work-life conflict than the length of working hours. However, this finding is significantly gendered. Men find that more freedom and flexibility in work organization increases their work-life conflict while the opposite is true of women. The authors explain this finding in terms of men using their greater work discretion to increase their commitment to work, thus leading to more work-life

conflict. Women, by contrast, seem to use greater flexibility in working hours to reduce the conflict they experience. Following this logic, the article also suggests gender-specific differences in the effects of the recent economic crisis: for example the use of short-time work schemes may cause increased work-life conflict for men as they undermine their male breadwinner role, while they have no such effect on women.

The articles in this special issue raise a number of questions for future research and for policy. First, research on work-life balance has highlighted problems of definition and measurement. We still need to develop reliable indicators of individuals' ability to balance work and family life, which can be compared over time and across national contexts. As we note above, aggregate indicators in EU surveys provide useful benchmarking data but focus solely on working time arrangements, to which individuals (particularly women with care responsibilities, and increasingly both women and men in times of job scarcity) have to adapt. In line with existing research looking at factors contributing to work-family conflict, Grau Grau's article suggests that it would be useful to examine further how employees' perceptions of flexibility, autonomy, stress and monotony at work are changing in hard economic times. We suggest that cross-national comparative tracking of trends should be combined with contextualized, gender-sensitive case study research which shows how organizational change is affecting the content of paid work and the spill over from work to home.

Second, economic crisis and austerity are resulting in a variety of labour market changes and policy responses in different national settings, as our review of work-life reconciliation policy above also shows. So far, there has been relatively little research on the gendered impact of crisis, although we expect to see rich data emerging soon. Research focusing on gender differences in employment levels during the "Great Recession" (Bettio et al., 2013) has indicated that women's labour market participation is no longer "contingent" but a lasting feature of contemporary capitalism. At the same time, new patterns of working time and temporal flexibility which appear to facilitate work-life balance can be accompanied by greater intensification of work, and a consequence of organizational adaptation to market recession may be diminished employee control over working time arrangements. The articles in our special issue highlight a high degree of variation in labour market changes which broadly appear to confirm existing regime typologies.

However, as O'Brien points out here, not all policy changes map neatly onto these typologies. This is not altogether surprising, as we know that change rarely occurs evenly but rather responds to a complex mix of factors (Maetzke and Ostner, 2010; Pfau-Effinger, 2012) and economic crisis is likely to increase rather than decrease volatility of policy. Two of the articles here highlight the partisan nature of policy change: both Riva's and Pocock, Charlesworth and Chapman's papers, as well as our brief focus on the British case above, show that significant initiatives on work-life balance are usually introduced by centre-left governments. Interestingly, government change does not always result in policy change although, even in the Australian case of relative policy consensus in favourable economic circumstances,

the right is less likely to drive forward policy initiatives and more likely to rely on markets to provide employees' work-life balance through flexibility. In the British case, the political choice in favour of austerity and welfare recommodification has refocused policy debates towards the gendered impact of reform of tax and benefits in ways which may result in a reversal of previous gains in female labour market participation and will particularly disadvantage low-income families.

Third, the articles in this special issue raise a wider set of questions about what type of policy best promotes employees' work-life balance. Reliance on working time flexibility may work best in some institutional contexts, as Hofaecker and Koenig suggest, in particular in liberal market economies. However, as Riva shows, in the absence of supportive legislation it is likely to leave large gaps outside the relatively regulated world of larger companies, and it fails to challenge deeply entrenched gendered cultures of care. As Pocock, Charlesworth and Chapman suggest, policies may have a "mitigating" effects on the worst aspects of work-life conflict, but may even so fail to address structural inequality or give effective leverage to individual employees: "Mitigation is a long way from equality".

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