

Summary of seminar one, Middlesex University, January 17th 2014

What is WLB in a time of financial crisis and austerity?

This seminar discussed ways in which WLB has been conceptualised and used in policy and practice during the recession and austerity. An overall theme is that although WLB remains on workplace and social policy agendas, economic crisis tends to shift the focus more towards employer needs with reduced emphasis on care, choice and gender equality considerations.

WLB policies, practices and discourse and public sector cuts.

Suzan Lewis, (Middlesex University) explored the ways in which WLB policies, practices and discourses are being used to help to manage austerity cuts in public sector organisations in the UK. Organizations with well-established WLB policies and practices and previous investment in an infrastructure of support for flexible working were able to benefit from this in difficult economic times. They did this partly by promoting WLB initiatives such as reduced hours working, as costs saving exercises. However they also built on traditional WLB policies to develop strategic, employer led practices, including various forms of remote working, with hot desking and job redesign in order to provide services with fewer people and save money on estates and related costs. The latter did not take account of employee requests or choices. There is a question about whether or when flexibility initiatives designed primarily to save money genuinely support WLB.

Is WLB really family-friendly?

Moving from a workplaces focus to UK government policy, Dalia Ben-Galim (IPPR) argued that UK WLB policy is not as family-friendly as it could be. Based on research carried out at IPPR she considered what flexibility agenda and work-life balance policies for employers, employees and policymakers are fit for a 21st century labour market. Recommendations included: a more progressive parental leave system that included a fathers' quota and some transferable entitlement for grandparents; a vision of universal childcare that focuses on child outcomes, boosting maternal employment and gender equality; and a family caring time policy based on the German system of Familienpflegezeit.

Stephen Williams (ACAS) the discussant for the first session, noted that there are a new set of challenges for employers and workers in the current context. He commented that the implications of workplace policy evolutions to manage financial crisis must be considered. For example the potential costs as well as benefits of remote working should be considered in both public and private sectors. Should HR officers go out to workers at home or working in coffee bars to deal with health and safety and issues of isolation? He also raised the question of whether government policy-making has moved on from 'family friendly' or a WLB focus to a more employer focused approach and, if so, what are the implications of this? In particular he discussed extensions to UK Right to Request Flexibility (RTR) . The current right covers parents and certain other carers and as this has not proved to be a problem for employers the new right will cover all eligible employees (after a 6 month qualifying period). On the one hand this is very positive as it has the potential to increasingly normalise flexible working and destigmatise flexible workers. Nevertheless he noted that paradoxically there are also some concerns about implications for those with family responsibilities. Will the changes put pressure on managers to make choices? How will they

prioritise or rank requests. It cannot be assumed that they will recognise family needs as family is no longer at the heart of UK policy-making. What effect will this have on WLB and on families? The impact of changes to RTR is not yet known.

The place of gender equality in current WLB debates

Moving on to a European perspective Olga Salido (University of Madrid) noted that gender equality was initially a central pillar of European employment strategy and that female employment has been important for economic growth in the EU. More recently the gender equality agenda has become increasingly marginalised from mainstream EU policy goals which are mainly oriented towards employability and economic growth. She drew on European wide research to argue that the economic crisis has exacerbated this trend, with an emphasis on economic goals and cost-constraints, especially for Southern European countries, where the "austerity" measures have had a negative impact on social policy areas related to WLB.

Working-time capabilities during economic austerity across Europe.

Colette Fagan (University of Manchester) looked at employment trends across Europe. A general deterioration of conditions affecting WLB was outlined, together with persistent gender and occupational inequalities. Although there are some differences in trends across EU states, the 2008 economic crisis was generally associated with job losses and increased insecurity, reduced mobility, pay cuts, and growth in involuntary part-time jobs, temporary and informal work. There has been some decline in average working hours (reduced paid overtime, short-time working schemes), but also increases in unpaid overtime and in work intensity.

Laura Addati (ILO), the discussant for the second session related the two presentations in this session to the ILO objectives in relation to WLB. Supporting the combining of work, family and personal life is part of the ILO's decent work agenda. She noted that the recession and restrictive public spending had exacerbated long standing tensions around work and family. She argued that there are many economic and societal benefits to higher public spending to support WLB as well as a business case for workplace WLB measures. However the benefits are often medium or long term whereas costs are often immediately visible, so it is important to avoid short term thinking.

Some points discussed in general discussions and breakout groups

- **The relationship between government policy and workplace practices: implications for equality and social justice**

There was some discussion about whether or not the way Government communicates about and supports flexible working (e.g. Agile Future Forum) prioritises the business case above social justice. Some working practices presented as flexible do not offer the kind of flexibility that is useful, for example, for a working parent with fixed childcare arrangements. How far can moves to extend the Right to Request flexible working, and the proposals for Shared Parental Leave be characterised as moves to improve equality and social justice?

The relationship between policy and practices was discussed largely in terms of the case of Right to Request flexibility. Despite initial scepticism about the likely impact of this legislation when it was originally introduced, there was a view that it has brought about shifts in thinking and practice and demonstrates how policy can become a driver for changes in workplace practices. This was welcomed. Nevertheless there were a number of concerns and debates about changes in this policy:

- i) There was a debate about the reversibility of flexibility and whether or not it was possible to request, for example, a return from part time to full time work if employees' circumstances changed, as is the case in the Netherlands. Stephen Williams from ACAS confirmed that new RTR legislation, extended to all, can be used to request a decrease or increase in working hours but that this needs to be communicated better. On the other hand it was pointed out that other forms of "flexibility" such as enforced remote working, which are employer led and not related to RTR, lead to a disinvestment in buildings which seem very permanent.
- ii) Another debate concerned whether there are limits to the amount of flexibility that are feasible or whether flexibility, if well managed is positive for organisations and employees. On the one hand some employers fear that extending the RTR will open the floodgates with too many requests being made. It was argued that there may be a limit to line managers' capacity for negotiation and a fear that pressures will increase if there are too many requests for certain working patterns such as Monday to Thursday working only. However this is not borne out by evidence from cases where the RTR is already extended to all workers. It does provide challenges for managers but there is no evidence of huge problems or conflicts. Moreover some employers' fears about too much flexibility need to be considered alongside evidence that some organizations are building on experiences of flexible working to save money and increase efficiency by for example encouraging or even requiring employees to work flexibly or remotely. This employer-led, strategic use of flexibility shows that, if properly managed, there need not be a limit to flexibility. On the contrary, greater flexibility can benefit organizations. It is necessary to challenge assumptions that flexibility is always employee-led. Another view is that the RTR does not go far enough and the 6 month qualifying requirement should be abolished. The IPPR is currently working on the calculation of costs which can be off set against increases in the maternal employment rates.
- iii) However, it was also noted that increased flexibility is good for organisations but not always good for individuals, especially in relation to intensified workloads and nonstop emails. There are benefits of new ways of working for many workers, but initiatives such as compulsory remote working and hot desking reduce autonomy and choices for workers.
- iv) Other concerns about opening the RTR to all employees were about possible ethical dilemmas for managers/employers. It was pointed out that small businesses cannot always accommodate requests, so they already make value judgments about who to support and often worry about the legitimacy of the choices they have made.

Recommendations for practice

It was concluded that the RTR changes need to be communicated better by Government and employers. It is important to manage the scaremongering about RTR and flexibility generally among employers and to work on showing how flexibility can be managed to meet the needs of employees and employers.

Recommendation for research

We need to understand the impact of the changes to RTR and how they can be managed to support fairness as well as organisational effectiveness. Research is also needed to examine whether WLB will be viewed as a luxury or a business tool post recession. How might this view differ between larger companies, which may be able to integrate WLB practices into a strategic approach, and SMEs, which find it difficult to extrapolate from initiatives in larger organisations and also need compelling 'bottom-line' evidence to encourage them to take what they might view as a risk on introducing WLB measures?

- **Individual versus collective or team approaches to WLB**

It was noted that the discourse on WLB tends to be very individualistic in the UK and pits employees against each other. This contrasts with the more collective approaches in other EU countries.

Team building is important to make flexibility work to support organisational goals and employee WLB. However the latest Work and Employment Relations Survey (WERS) shows that employee involvement in decision-making is decreasing and increasingly communication in workplaces is via email. How do we enhance the employee voice on these issues and also involve employers in wider WLB debates? Employers do negotiate and discuss these issues with employees at workplace level but how is it possible to move beyond this?

There was a view that more attention needs to be given to team-based flexibility and decision making. Managing flexible workers requires a different approach but experience shows that it is possible. For example, Working Families has offered workshops on managing flexible workers as a team. However, since the recession, employers have less resources to invest in training and have to focus on urgent operational tasks. It was felt that there is a sense of muddling through rather than strategic management of flexible teams. Examples of managing flexibility as a team, includes self-managed teams, based in mutual reciprocity. In addition one group discussed examples of a collective approach to managing team expectations about email. Agreement about for example the non-acceptability of sending emails at night or weekends may support WLB.

Implications for practice

There need not be a limit to flexible working if WLB is regarded as an issue of collective responsibility rather than an individual issue. This requires organisational change and increased team working. Training is important for managing flexibility at team level.

Recommendations for research

Research is needed on how the business case for flexible working along with collaboration and collective responsibility can be used more effectively to meet the needs of employees, employers and social justice. Action research would be useful in increasing the employee voice and dialogue.

- **Unpaid Care: parental, grandparent and elder care and impacts on paid work**

Economic growth depends on women's employment. However, economic crisis, high costs of childcare and the increasing retirement age all raise issues relating to unpaid care. This will be discussed in more depth in seminar 5. For low income families, the key to WLB is still affordable childcare. Often parents rely on grandparents which may account for the tendency for low rates of employment for women aged 50+. However as older women have to work longer because of economic necessity and the increasing of the retirement age, this will effect grandparents' ability to provide care for grandchildren. Parental leave can help and the Nordic parental leave model of shared leaves and a fathers quota was discussed. However this includes pay adjustments whereas the UK scheme is unpaid. It needs to be paid in order to increase the take up rate for low income families. It was noted that this seminar focused a lot on childcare but we need to focus on the sandwich generation (elder care, grandparents providing care and those providing care or sick relatives).

In terms of persistent gender roles relating to caring and working the 'double-shift', it was suggested that there is a need to give a right and duty of care to all household members to change the value framework. One group reflected on what measures would establish more equality within couples. A couple of trends might prove influential: young women doing better in education and beginning to out-earn male colleagues in their 20s; and younger fathers having a greater expectation of shared parenting and accessing WLB options in the workplace. The key question was whether either of these groups can withstand and begin to change entrenched workplace cultures and wider beliefs in society about the roles that mothers and fathers are 'supposed' to take. For example, can the breadwinner belief slowly be eroded?

Implications for policy

More support is needed for unpaid care, including that provided by grandparents, for example parental leave that can be transferred to employed grandparents.

Implications for research

Currently research tends to focus on professionals. We need to know more about how others, particularly low income families have been affected by the financial crisis and how they can be supported to work and care. Monitoring of the impact of young women's

growing earning potential and young fathers' expectations of shared parenting based on fairness in terms of unpaid work will also be useful to identify levers for change in the sharing of paid work and care.

- **Variety of policies and practices across countries/workplaces/different types of workers and work and what we can learn from these.**

It was noted that there is diversity in the meanings of WLB across countries and cultures. Nevertheless responsibility is increasingly placed on employers rather than on society generally or on the government. Where should responsibility be placed? What should the balance be?

Flexibility and WLB do not necessarily look the same at different levels of work and organisations? The possibilities for and implications of collective approaches vary across occupations. For professional and higher level employees, WLB is about job redesign, choice and career. For lower level employees it's more about terms and conditions. It was suggested that some of this may be seen in the way that men in higher level jobs prefer to work flexibly informally, whilst women occupying lower paid reduced hours roles make the majority of formal requests using the Right to Request flexible working.

There was also discussion related to issues of fairness; some people have too much work, whilst others have none. In terms of professional or 'good quality' jobs, there is an active accumulation of hours and tasks which are tightly bound to notions of career success. This needs to be addressed to spread this high quality work around more equitably. Issues of fairness and social justice in relation to WLB in times of austerity will be discussed in Seminar Two.

Implications for practice and research

It is difficult to extrapolate research and turn it into practical output. More effort is needed to make these links and to learn from experiences of diverse workers in a range of workplace and national contexts