

## **Seminar 7: The Future of Work Life Balance**

20<sup>th</sup> November 2015, The Keynes Library, Birkbeck, London

### **Overview**

The ESRC seminar series on work-life balance in economic recession, austerity and beyond has brought together researchers and practitioners to seek solutions to a 'triple agenda': how to enhance employees' work-life balance, sustain organisational effectiveness and ensure social justice.

Previous seminars have debated the meaning of WLB in the current economic context and explored issues of social justice, care and well-being, as well as employment relations and workplace innovations in relation to WLB following financial crisis. This seminar brought the series to its conclusion by revisiting the current context and considering future directions. While the context of economic crisis has framed the discussions at all sessions, this seminar began with two interrelated papers that critically examined what is meant by crisis and some ramifications of current developments at the European level as they affect gender and WLB. Since the 2008 recession, there has been a growth in various forms of self-employment and the third presentation explored some impacts of this trend on work-life balance. The fourth presentation explored workplace interventions with the potential to meet the triple agenda. Breakout groups in the afternoon discussed some implications for the future in terms of: the social and workplace policies needed to address the triple agenda; ways of ensuring that gender is kept on the agenda in difficult economic times; ways of influencing future change; and what advice might be given to future generations facing economic challenges based on what we have learnt about WLB and the triple agenda from the current context. Finally, invited discussants reflected on the day from the perspectives of vulnerable workers and in terms of the future of working time.

### ***Presentation 1: Crisis & Austerity in Europe***

The seminar opened with a presentation by Sylvia Walby (Lancaster University), drawing on her recent influential book "Crisis" to explore ways in which the 'crisis' is restructuring the gender regime in Europe and some implications for work-life balance. She discussed alternative vocabularies for theorising aspects of crisis, for example, labelling public expenditure as welfare (the basis of austerity, which disproportionately affects women) - or as social investment. Sylvia argued for a gendered conceptualisation of the crisis, not as 're-familialisation' in which women are pushed out of production back into reproduction, but rather as a critical turning point in the trajectory of the public gender regime from a more social democratic form to a more neoliberal form. She presented analyses of gendered practices of response, resilience and resistance as the crisis has cascaded from its origins in finance, to employment, to the welfare state, to democracy itself. The presentation concluded with a discussion of the implications of alternative futures of the EU for gender relations and work-life balance, including a new model of sustainable gendered economic growth and social justice to lead the way out of crisis.

## ***Presentation 2: Socio-economic challenges to work-life balance at times of crisis in Europe***

In the second presentation, Roberta Guerrina (University of Surrey) built on Sylvia Walby's discussion to expand on socio-economic challenges to work-life balance in times of crisis in Europe. Roberta reiterated the importance of the reconciliation of work and family life (also termed work-life balance) as a fundamental employment right, and as an important element for the achievement of EU policies, especially the promotion of women's activation in the labour market. For this purpose, the European Commission and the European Parliament implemented a set of policies and legislative measures between the late 1990s and 2008. Roberta argued that the financial crisis in 2008 and the associated austerity measures have posed a serious challenge to these objectives and provided an opportunity for ideologically-driven cuts. The debates at the national and European level seemingly ignored the gendered nature of this policy shift, thus reasserting the centrality of hegemonic gender norms across Europe. The presentation ended with a consideration of the extent of the impact of the recession and of the austerity measures that were introduced to address the challenges of economic crisis on work life balance policies.

## ***Discussion and Q&A following presentations 1 and 2***

A number of points were raised in the discussion following these presentations

- **The role of femocrats at the EU**

Issues of gender and the reconciliation of work and family life or work-life balance have become less prominent in EU debates since the recession. Femocrats had previously pushed the gender equality agenda. The number of femocrats has not declined but they have become much less visible. Many have left the DG Employment and moved to DG Justice, resulting in a diffusion of expertise which has been key to the shift in the focus of policies.

- **Working mothers and fathers**

The focus of EU debates on employed mothers was noted. Despite developments in paternity and parental leave policies, the application of the gender equality project as a means of encouraging men to care remains secondary to the focus on women in work. There are nevertheless cross-national differences within Europe with the Nordic countries and later Germany taking a lead on policies for working fathers.

There should be an assumption that women's paid work is very solid – women are no longer a reserve army of labour – and theories need to catch up. We need a conceptualisation that allows us to get to grips with policies that seek full employment but challenges, for example, the removal of financial state support for childcare.

- **The future of the EU and implications for gender equality**

If the UK withdraws from the EU (Brexit) the UK would lose its anchor for equal treatment and related policies. It was argued that this would be a critical juncture but there has been no discussion of the gender dimension. An analogy was drawn with EU enlargement – at the point of enlargement, there was no discussion of gender equality and the human rights dimension which meant that they were not part of the agenda, As a result, future policies were affected. There are long-term

implications for the EU and UK's identities in current debates and gender is being treated as a non-issue.

### ***Presentation 3: Self-Employment and work-life balance***

Moving on from the focus on context to consider the impact of post-recession trends on work–life balance, Laura Den Dulk (Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands) discussed self-employment which has grown and taken on many heterogeneous forms since the economic crisis. The economic crisis has been stressful for many self-employed workers. Orders and incomes have declined and some workers are forced into self-employment because they lack alternatives. While many workers feel that the autonomy and flexibility associated with self-employment can contribute to work-life balance, the long working hours and insecurity can also create tensions. Laura reported findings from Dutch research, exploring how the economic crisis has affected work-life balance among different types of self-employed workers and the challenges they face. To further understand how different layers of context shape the work-life balance experiences of the self-employed in times of economic crisis, data from qualitative interviews with independent professionals in Spain and the Netherlands were also discussed.

### ***Audience Q and A and discussion***

Responding to a question about whether a typology of self-employment is emerging that can take account of the variation in arrangements from zero hours to 'mumpreneurs' and how choice fits with this, Laura responded that this is very context-dependent. Even freelancers and entrepreneurs – the high-level professionals – are very diverse. It is also a class-driven issue and different legal and fiscal regimes make national differences.

### ***Presentation 4: Workplace interventions to benefit employees, organizations and society***

The final presentation by Ellen Kossek (Purdue University, USA) focused on intervention studies that can help organizations to make changes that could help to address the triple agenda in difficult economic times. Ellen began by showing a short video that illustrated how introducing some flexibility and innovation into the working hours of workers in a grocery store enabled employees to fit difficult working hours around family needs. This helped to sustain the store and also the workers' family lives. Using examples from several workplace intervention projects that she has designed and implemented as part of an interdisciplinary intervention team, Ellen discussed different approaches to implementing work-life interventions (for example, training managers to be more supportive) in a range of contexts (for example, nursing homes, IT workplaces) and some of the implementation challenges. These US intervention studies were funded by the NIH and involved interdisciplinary teams, including medical researchers. Outcomes of interventions include improved health measures as well as other indicators.

### **Discussion and Q&A following Ellen Kossek's Presentation**

- The focus of the intervention studies is workplace change, rather than the needs of specific groups of workers. However, organisations are gendered and this makes a difference. The mainly women workers who participated in interventions in nursing homes are different from male IT workers in other organizations.

- Interventions on work scheduling depend on engagement with staff – staff should be asked what they want. For example, in care homes, the goal is to strike a balance between staff, organisation and residents.
- Manager training should help to establish boundaries regarding out of hours work, for example, emails. Both employers and workers get it wrong if expectations are not managed, for example, around presenteeism. Peoples’ ideas about ‘balance’ are different – values differ – so organisations should set expectations. Individual managers can work out of hours but should make sure their emails hit workers’ inboxes at the right time (within working hours).
- The focus should be on first line supervisors. Lower level managers need help to know what to do.

### **Feedback from Breakout Groups**

Breakout groups discussed 4 questions relating to the seminars and the overall series

#### **Q. 1. The triple agenda: What suggestions do you have for social policy and/or workplace initiatives that could contribute to the triple agenda of work-life balance, organizational sustainability and social justice in difficult economic times?**

- Targeting men and women: ‘gender neutral’ normally means women. We need a conscious focus on men. The triple agenda is a big challenge – the notions of social justice (fairness, equality, well-being, etc.) is especially challenging. Encouraging enforcement of a change in behaviour of men requires wage replacement paternity leave on a use it or lose it basis, such as the Nordic fathers’ quota model.
- Role-modelling – from the top. There is a need to challenge some perceptions such as senior partners in law firms (“I did it the hard way – so can you”). It is important to challenge and counteract this resistance.
- Address lack of engagement among (some) young men. Organisations need to recognise the business risk of non-engagement common among young fathers who can’t raise WLB with employers.
- Reframe the social justice and business case with more focus on social justice which requires a shift in focus from the individual to the organisation.
- Take action to overcome current general apathy with gender issues such as equal pay which is crucial for the triple agenda.

#### **Q. 2. Keeping gender on the agenda. What can employers and policy-makers do to ensure that the gender equality agenda is not adversely affected by challenging economic times?**

- Focus on the importance of role models: CEO, managers, colleagues, plus the use of blogs, intranets. Role models need to be someone close enough to emulate (same ‘working space’).

- Management appraisals and staff appraisals are important (e.g., managers asking about WLB, talking to staff). Ellen Kossek's notion of training managers in 'emotional support' could be used but this is difficult to measure. Performance measures that focus on equality and diversity are important, e.g., how many dads within the organisation take paternity leave? Small changes can make a big difference (e.g., email culture, not 'always-on' culture).
- Sectoral challenges – variation means different business cases in different sectors (business case does not always work, e.g., cleaning companies, supermarkets?). Need to go over and above the business model, keep gender in mind and re-focus on social justice.
- Some organisations are using WLB to focus on home working and dis-invest in physical space – no way back post-recession (consider implications for gender – do women use home-working differently to men? Are they affected differently?)

**Q. 3. How to influence? What strategies are needed to influence policy on work-life balance and gender equality at workplace, national and international (e.g. EU) levels?**

- Need joined-up thinking – disparate forces need to come together (e.g. academic, workplace, policy-makers).
- Stress democracy within WLB through processes that structure it at all levels.
- The health agenda should be stressed – there are benefits for all, including in relation to the gendered nature of organisations. Focus should be on issues for men and women.
- Cost neutral changes for businesses – cut the financial impediments so that, for example, it costs the same to employ 2 part-time workers as 1 full-time worker.
- The implications of power dynamics should be considered.
- Unions are very important but WLB not high on the agenda (concern with keeping jobs). Government is not listening to unions and is much more likely to listen to organisations.
- Use of targets, e.g., women on boards (but are these women just following the male model and not achievable for all women?); however, targets are still good for progress.

**Q. 4. Learning from future scenarios? If facing another economic crisis what advice might we give to future generations about meeting the WLB needs of individual employees, sustaining organisations and ensuring social justice?**

- The traditional response, laying off staff, results in loss of skills and slower recovery.
- It is important to ensure that policy-makers and businesses accept the triple agenda as being good for all. When business is faced by crisis or challenge – flexibility becomes more important, supported by multi-skilling. So we have to convince business leaders that employee motivation is key to surviving austerity. What motivates employees? Control and autonomy – enable staff to co-own the goals of the business. Because this is so integral to productivity, it cannot be positioned or understood as a nice to have.
- But be aware that flexibility can be associated with work intensity and long hours, especially when people feel insecure about their employment. So, culture change is needed-challenging assumptions about effective ways of working.
- Flexibility is done TO people who are undervalued – find ways of demonstrating productivity even in low skilled roles. Note the value of stories as well as data.
- Use of social media in getting the WLB message out.

- Make more connections with me, e.g., younger generations' expectations are different – find a 'new language'.
- Social justice should be embedded whether in times of austerity or not. We need to change the social conversation and terms of debate to include social justice. This will take time (e.g. The EU's acceptance that women are in the labour market to stay has taken 30 years). If 'social justice' is not palatable to employers, or seen as something nice to have in better economic times, we need to change/manage the language. Cannot just rely on Employment Tribunals to clear up the mess.
- WLB needs to get out of HR, but managers do need training. Academic debates should be embedded in this. What about the role of the state? Perhaps to create an information or training resource for managers, and to bang home the message that this is an issue for business leaders, not HR. Treating your people fairly is good for business. WLB and D&I should be included as core in MBA courses, not an elective element.
- Whether there is a recession or not, the focus should be on motivation and cost-neutral benefits of flexibility associated with WLB. Need to seek bottom-up solutions.
- In terms of social policy – the right to request should be a work group, not individual, right, i.e., a collective request – the whole team to have the right to request a joint change to working patterns. Move away from flexibility being positioned as solely an individual thing.
- The example of the new Right to Request Flexible Working in the Netherlands is an interesting example of positioning this in wider social context – it is harder edged than in the UK – to say no, the business has to be able to prove the cost. The driver was environment and transport – in a small country, they needed to embed additional flexibility to reduce congestion. Tax breaks offered to employers who enable employees to work from home.
- Governments should think about ways of reinventing the economy rather than reacting to 'crisis'.
- State help for the self-employed and micro businesses to better manage WLB issues – e.g. improved childcare. Also discourage employers from laying off and rehiring employees as consultants, thereby adding to the numbers of the self employed
- The message that WLB matters might be more effective if indirect – for example, if couched in terms of corporate social responsibility, savings in terms of health costs, effects of family breakdown, transport and environmental costs of not adopting WLB policies.
- Examples of BAE and US Postal Service – focus on objectives and outputs enabled staff to reduce working hours and also reduced overtime costs for the employer.
- Academic and third sectors have an important role in taking the evidence of health costs, societal costs – and couching this is in terms which policy makers can accept and which can translate to business leaders.

### **Discussant roundtable**

In the final session, discussant Cathy Rogan from the Working Families helpline and Charlotte Gascoigne from Timewise reflected on the seminar from the perspectives of vulnerable workers and the future of working time. Cathy reported that the Working Families helpline receives many calls from vulnerable parents about employment issues and these have increased since the recession. There is a need for more research and focus on the needs of vulnerable workers, including low skilled workers. Charlotte noted that there is now much more acceptance of flexplace- working from

home or elsewhere, but there remains much resistance among employers/managers to the idea of working less in many contexts. Employers need to be more creative in the ways in which work roles are divided up – which would benefit all.

### **Discussion following Roundtable**

- The role of trade unions should not be overlooked. The Working Families helpline experience is that unions are good at negotiating organisation-wide policies, for example, concerning patterns of work but when individuals are unable to comply with these, perhaps for reasons to do with childcare, they are less helpful but are improving.
- The partnership approach is gaining traction in some places. BAE has redesigned its operations to focus on product delivery rather than measured time. Academics and the third sector need to make pro-union arguments.
- Ellen Kossek's study of 8 unions in the USA demonstrated that if they are seen as supporting flexibility, members often view them as more effective.
- The discussion ended with a helpful comment from an employer: 'I am from a 60 person business with individualised hours – all negotiated with each worker. Facilitating requests to work flexibly can be quite easy – employers need to be open-minded. Job design is important but so is employer attitude'.

### ***Summary and conclusions: The future of WLB***

#### **Positives**

- It is now more taken for granted that women and men have WLB needs
- Some employers are recognising the importance of flexibility, job design, autonomy and manager support for work life balance
- There is emerging evidence from multidisciplinary organizational research that small interventions can bring about changes to meet the dual agenda of employee work life balance and workplace effectiveness and possibly the triple agenda, including social justice. These interventions can have positive impacts on public health
- Some union interventions also having positive outcomes but the role of unions needs to be enhanced.

#### **Barriers**

- Gender equality and the reconciliation of work and family life or work life balance are a declining focus in the EU since 2008
- Brexit poses the danger of further marginalising the gender equality agenda
- There is a view that employers do not want to consider social justice/fairness - its seen as anti-business – this should be challenged

## Recommendations for policy

- Recognise that austerity (cuts in welfare spending) disproportionately affect women. Reconceptualising welfare as social investment suggests alternative ways out of crisis.
- Work to change the language of the debate so that social justice as part of the triple agenda is taken for granted by all. Encourage problem solving about how to support employee work life balance and sustain organizations and social justice (fairness, equality, well-being, freedom from poverty).
- The right to request flexibility should be a collective/ work group not just an individual right. The whole team should have the right to request a joint change to working patterns. This would help to move away from flexibility being positioned as solely an individual matter.
- Ensure cost neutral changes for businesses – cut the financial impediments so that, for example, it costs the same to employ 2 part-time workers as 1 full-time worker.
- Supports for self-employed workers should take account of the diversity of self-employment and focus particularly on the most vulnerable.
- Recognise that organizational interventions to support the triple agenda result in positive health outcomes and can therefore be considered as a public health issue.
- Train managers, especially first line supervisors to support work life balance of teams of workers. Create an information or training resource for managers, and emphasize the message that this is an issue for business leaders, not HR. Treating your people fairly is good for business.
- Work Life Balance and Diversity & Inclusion should be included as core in MBA courses, not an elective element.
- Within organizations engagement with staff is key to developing ways of working that support the triple agenda.
- Unions can play an important role in designing working practices to meet the triple agenda in unionised workplaces
- Academic and third sectors have an important role in taking the evidence of health costs and societal costs of a reduced focus on work life balance and gender equity in difficult economic times – and couching this is in terms which policy makers can accept and which can translate to business leaders.