**Istanbul Technical University Women’s Studies Center (ITU-WSC)**

**Working Paper Series on**

**Work-Family Balance and Gender Equality:**

**A North-South Policy Perspective[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Reconciliation of work and family life in the Netherlands:**

**The costs and benefits of the part-time strategy**

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**1. Introduction**

One of the most striking characteristics of the Dutch labour market is the extent of part-time jobs. Whereas in 2011 in the European Union on average 18,8% of the employed persons work on a part-time basis, the rate in the Netherlands is 48,5%. Among women the differences are even more extreme with a rate of 35,2% for the European Union as a whole (EU27) and 76,5% for the Netherlands, illustrating the extremely wide spread nature of part-time work in this country.[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, to quote from Freeman’s famous article on the ‘War of the Models’, the Netherlands is “*the only part-time economy in the world (...), the Tulip Kid—the Polder Model”* (Freeman 1998, 2)*.*

Part-time employment plays a vital role not only in Dutch employment policy, but also, more specifically, in the Dutch equal opportunities program. Flexible non-fulltime working hours for both men and women are deemed indispensable to reach gender equality. Especially during the 1990’s the so-called ‘combination model’ ranked high in Dutch socio-economic policy . The point of departure of the combination model is a balanced combination of paid and unpaid work where unpaid care work is equally shared between men and women (CTHOA 1995). Depending on the lifecycle phase, both men and women should be able to choose a personal mix of paid labour in long part-time (or short full-time) jobs, part-time household production of care and part-time outsourcing of care. Over the years, the focus on unpaid work has to a large extent disappeared, but flexible, part-time working hours are still an important ingredient of the Dutch policy with regard to equal opportunities.

From a gender perspective, the part-time model may be favoured because it facilitates the combination of work and care in a reasonable acceptable manner. Part-time working hours provide space for unpaid commitments and responsibilities and for a life style in which full labour participation is not the only value in life. As such, the part-time model is not a simple de-familization strategy, forcing women to follow the same life course as men. Rather, the model takes into account the importance of unpaid work and invites women and men combine breadwinning and care giving. In the words of Pascall and Lewis (2004: 390): “the Dutch Combination Scenario offers a new vision of households in which men look after children too, discouraging men’s free-riding on care work. (…) Its ideals of gender equality go beyond other models, in their relation to time and value for unpaid work as well as paid”.

At the same time, the actual impact of the part-time model is less positive. While in theory the part-time participation rate is recommended as a universal strategy for both men and women, in reality it is primarily women who are being addressed (Plantenga 2002). In fact, the part-time model offers the possibility of uninterrupted careers for men and women, without fundamentally reconsideration the existing organization of labour and care. As a result, the part-time model has to a large extent functioned as a substitute for an actual de-familization policy; the Dutch policy package in terms of parental leave and child care services has remained rather thin (Plantenga et al. 2012).

This article provides an assessment of the Dutch part-time model as an alternative to a policy based on de- or re-familialisation (Leitner and Lessenich 2007). Our main conclusion is that although the part-time model has been perceived as an important instrument in search of gender equality, the actual impact remains ambivalent at best. Women in the Netherlands have increased their labour force participation and substantial improvements has been made in terms of female independence. Yet, the Dutch example also demonstrates that achieving gender equality based on an equal sharing of both paid and unpaid work is extremely difficult, given the traditional gender roles and given the economic benefits of men working full time.

**2. Participation: the ‘irrepressible’ rise of married women working part-time**

Since the 1980’s the Netherlands have wittnessed a strong increase in the participation rate of women, especially mothers. The increasing female participation rate is not unique, in the sense that also in other countries the participation rate of women has increased rather steadily. Yet, the scale of the developments makes the Dutch case rather exceptional. The developments are illustrated in Figure 1 which compares the female participation rate of seven selected OECD countries for the period 1985-20011. From the figure it appears that at the mid of the 1980’s the female participation rate in the Netherlands scores rather low; only 40% of women in the age bracket of 15-64 are active in the labour market. At that time, however, some changes are already visible. In 1983, the Dutch economist Joop Hartog and Jules Teeuwes published an article signalling ‘the irrepressible rise of the employed married woman’ (Hartog and Teeuwes 1983). Their figures indicated that the participation rate of married women had increased four fold between 1960 and 1979. Higher levels of education, smaller family size and an increased wage level appeared to be important explanatory variables in this trend. The changes have indeed been ‘irrepressible’. In 1994, the OECD average has been reached and the rate has kept increasing since. The latest figures indicate that the Dutch female participation rate is now above the level of Germany and France and approaching the level of Sweden.

An in-depth analysis of women’s labour force participation reveals, however, that women’s dramatic increase requires some further differentiation. During the 1980’s and 1990’s the rising participation of women was actually due to an increase in part-time work. Especially in the early 1980’s, against the background of high and rising unemployment figures, Dutch employment policy became increasingly concentrated on encouraging part-time jobs, as a means of spreading the available work among a larger number of people. Part-time employment was, however, not only favoured for its potential to redistribute work. To the extent that the need for flexibility was identified as a condition for economic expansion, part-time work became an important tool for restructuring the Dutch labour market. Part-time jobs with flexible work schedules could enable plants, stores and offices to open for longer hours and enable a decoupling of operational time (opening hours) and individual working time. This particular feature of part-time work became all the more important given the transformation towards a service economy in which relative low productivity rates emphasized the need to increase flexibility and to match supply and demand in the most efficient way. Finally, part-time work was favoured from an equal opportunities point of view. The growing service economy attracted many women into the labour market, especially married women with children. Part-time employment was presumed to support this dynamic, by offering more options for combining paid and unpaid work and, as such, to contribute to the economic independence of women. As a result, part-time employment became more and more the accepted working time pattern (Plantenga 2002).

The transition from a rather traditional breadwinner model towards a one-and-half working time model is further illustrated by Table 1, which indicates the labour time patterns of women and men after the birth of a first child. During the 1980’s 58% of the women quit jobs after having their first child; this percentage lowers to 10% in 2011. As an alternative strategy women adjust their working hours; Table 1 indicates that at the turn of the century 53% of all new mothers opted for that strategy. Since then this figure seems to decrease, with more women working the same or more hours. It has to be taken into account, though, that part-time work has become so widespread, that women may have already been employed on a part-time basis even without having children. Table 1 also provides some data about the labour market behaviour of young fathers. It appears that less than 10% quit working; more than 90% of the new fathers just continued working with the same or more number of working hours.

Table 1. Change in labour time pattern after the birth of first child, 1980-2011

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ’80-89 | ’90-97 | 2000 | 2005 | 2011 |
| Women  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Quit working  | 58 | 29 | 16 | 11 | 10 |
| Still working, less hours  | 23 | 49 | 53 | 49 | 35 |
| Still working, same or more hours  | 19 | 22 | 31 | 40 | 56 |
| Men  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Quit working  |  |  | 9 | 9 | 5 |
| Still working, same or more hours  |  |  | 91 | 91 | 95 |

Source: Keuzenkamp and Oudhof 2000 (calculations by the author of this paper); Portegijs et al. 2006; Merens et al. 2012: 92.

*2.1 Part-time work and equal opportunities*

Given the presumed positive aspects of part-time work, legislation was enacted to improve the position of part-timers. In 1993 the hour thresholds were removed from the entitlement to minimum wage and most of the social security legislation. In the same spirit, legislation in 1996 prohibited discrimination between employees based on working hours. This Act gives part-timers an explicit right to equal treatment in areas negotiated by social partners, such as wages, holiday pay and entitlement, bonuses and training (TK 1994-1995; Plantenga 2000). A final piece of legislation is the Working Hours (Adjustment) Act, which, after a long public debate, was introduced in 2001. In line with the overall favorable attitude towards flexible working hours, this act gives all employees a legal entitlement to either lengthen or shorten their working hours. Employers can only refuse request from their employees for reasons of considerable business interest. Small firms (less than 10 employees) are exempted from this regulation.

 As a result of the positive image and backed up by the legal regulations, part-time jobs in the Netherlands are not similar to marginal jobs, concentrated in the lower segment of the labour market. This is demonstrated by the fact that in 2011 approximately 55% of the employed women with a university degree have part-time working hours and 67% of women with a higher vocational training (Merens et al. 2012: 59). In fact, part-time work has become so widespread that it seems to have lost its atypical character. At the same time, the ideal world of the original combination model in which both men and women combine paid work and care is still far away from reality – even in the Netherlands. Despite all the emphasis on part-time working hours, among men the full time working hours is still very much the norm, whereas especially among women, the popularity of part-time work has resulted in a de-standardisation of working hours (Plantenga 2002; Fagan 2003).

The difference in male and female working hours plays an important role in the persistent inequality between men and women in terms of (vertical) labour market segregation and hourly wages. Despite the sharp increase in the participation rate, the share of women in senior and decision making positions is still below the EU average. This applies, for example, to the share of women in the upper house of Parliament, the proportion of women in local counties and the proportion of female mayors. In the private sector the situation does not look very positive either. In 2011, the senior management of the hundred biggest companies in the Netherlands contained only 10% women (Merens et al. 2012: 128). This is despite the fact that there seems quite some support for equal opportunities among managers. Recent research indicated that the views of managers about combining management duties with part-time work have become more positive. The majority think that part-time employment is feasible, including in senior management functions. Also, no more that a fifth think a management position cannot be combined with care tasks at home. These positive views have not yet translated, however, in a lower score on vertical segreation (Merens et al. 2012: 140). The extent of horizontal and vertical segregation translates into a rather high gender pay gap. When the gender pay gap is calculated as the difference between men’s and women’s average gross hourly wage as a percentage of men’s average gross hourly wage, the Netherlands has a score of 18% in 2011. This implies that the Netherlands ranks 18th within the 27 countries of the EU (data from Eurostat, based on SES).

**3. Care regime**

The specific history of female labour force participation in the Netherlands is embedded in and contributes to the particularities of the Dutch care regime. Traditionally, within the context of the strong breadwinner model, there is a heavy reliance on publicly sponsored, private organised care. The family is actively encouraged to take care of their children by themselves, but the State is willing to share part of the financial burden, especially by designing a breadwinner friendly fiscal regime (Bettio and Plantenga 2004). Even if breadwinner norms have lost most of their importance and prescriptive power over the last couple of decades, there is still a fairly strong cultural tradition in which women are presumed to undertake care of children themselves. Within this context, leave facilities have for a long time been limited to a short period of maternity leave, just covering the period around the birth of a child; it took until 1991 before parental leave was introduced. With regard to child care services also the responsibility of the private family was underlined; a full outsourcing (by public services) and/or commercialisation of care (by the market) has never been a serious policy option. In effect, the Dutch policy on equal opportunities package never had a strong focus on de-familialisation. Rather the point of departure is that private care responsibilities should be made compatible with part-time working hours. The actual policy package therefor focusses on adjustments in the working time regime that would facilitate and make accessible the combination of work and care. In this respect, the argument could be made that the Dutch part-time strategy partly compensated the lack of an explicit public care policy; it is only since the late 1980’s that government has invested in extending leave facilities and child care services. Even today the remains of the breadwinner model are visible in the particularities of the educational system in which primary schools hours only cover approximately 25 hours a week and are therefore not compatible with fulltime working hours of parents.

*3.1 Parental leave*

Within the early Dutch policy debates, leave policies have very rarely been discussed as part of the care system with young children as the primary beneficiaries; rather the argument can be made that the design of parental leave was mainly inspired by the practical feasibility and the desire to limit negative labour market effects (Plantenga & Remery 2009). Given the presumption that part-time working hours are important to increase the female participation rate, the parental leave policy should enable young parents to work part-time during a period of heavy care responsibilities. A second important consideration in the early debates is that the leave arrangement should favour the equal division of paid and unpaid work between men and women. Hence the focus is on the familization of care in a gender egalitarian way.

The first steps with regard to a statutory right were taken in 1985 when the Government decided in favour of a legal regulation, especially because social partners did not show much initiative to include regulations on parental leave in (for example) collective labour agreements. The government emphasised that the act should be a minimum-arrangement, resulting in as few problems for firms as possible (TK 1985-1986: 23). In fact, the government proposed an unpaid leave for a maximum of six months for employees who are engaged with the current employer for at least one year (TK 1985-1986: 30). In line with the emphasis on part-time working hours, the proposed leave was on a part-time basis: the employee should remain active in the labour market for at least 20 hours per week. In addition, parental leave was defined as an individual, non-transferable right and not as a family right. It took two years before the bill was brought into Parliament (TK 1987-1988) and another two years to get the bill adopted. So, finally, in 1991 the Act on Parental Leave came into force.

Although the parental leave legislation was welcomed as a first important step towards a more gender equal society, there were several problems with the actual design of the leave policy. The stipulations of the Act, especially the 20 hours threshold, excluded quite a number of (part-time) working mothers from taking leave. Another problem referred to the fact that the actual design of the leave policy did not favour an equal sharing of paid and unpaid work. In the debates the argument was made that a more flexible approach, especially the possibility to spread the leave hours over a longer period of time, would increase the take–up of men. A final argument against the rather rigid part-time orientation of the parental leave legislation was that this approach was not in line with the draft directive on parental leave of the European Union, which (either implicitly or explicitly) favoured a full-time leave (Spaans and Van der Werf 1994).

The remedy to solve these problems was to take a different orientation with regard to parental leave. While in the act of 1991 parental leave could be interpreted as introducing a statutory right to reduce working hours against the background of a rather standard working time regime, the new proposal brought parental leave in line with the growing reality of rather diverse and individualized working hours. In the new draft (TK 1995-1996), the total number of leave hours was set at 13 times the number of the contractual weekly working hours. The statutory right is still part-time: parents have the legal right to lower their working hours by 50% over a period of 26 weeks. However, employees may request the employer to spread the leave hours over a longer period than six months or to take more hours per week. Employers may only refuse in case of severe business interest. As a result of this proposal, the flexibility of the leave policy was increased quite considerably, while it also became accessible for part-timers. Despite these major changes, the leave remained unpaid. The proposal to introduce a certain level of payment, as suggested for example by the Women’s Lobby Group Arachne and the Equal Opportunities Board, was not adopted. The government persisted in its original point of view that income support during leave is an issue to be settled by the social partners by collective labour agreements. The changed Act on Parental leave came into force in 1997.

*2001: The Work and Care Act*

At the turn of the century, in a period of increasing interest in raising the female participation rate, it became obvious that a situation in which the combination of work and family life was mainly the private responsibility of employees was no longer feasible (TK 1998-1999: 6). Rather facilities to combine work and private life should be the shared responsibility of employees, employers and the government. Against this slightly changed political background, the Work and Care Act is announced, which takes this shared responsibility as an explicit point of departure. The goal of this act is to streamline the different leave facilities, while also introducing some new leave facilities (OECD 2002, 135). With regard to parental leave a further flexibilisation in the take-up is proposed: it should be possible to split the leave in several periods. In order to prevent too much fragmentation (with the risk that the leave is used for other than care purposes), a maximum of three parts is adopted (TK 1998-1999: 29).

Although the introduction of the Work and Care Act in 2001 was considered as a final piece of legislation the debate around this dossier never completely stopped. The latest developments took place in 2009, when the statutory right to parental leave was lengthened from 13 to 26 times the number of working hours per employee. As a result, if both parents make use of their right, the first year after the birth of a child can be covered by parental leave. In addition, all parents who take up parental leave have access to an extra fiscal facility of 50% of the minimum wage for the statutory period of parental leave. This can be interpreted as an first step to come to a more broadly accepted, paid parental leave scheme. At the same time especially the fiscal facility is constantly contested; adherents claim that income support during leave should not be part of public policy, but should rather be settled by social partners by collective labour agreements. Consistent with this view, the current government is planning to abolish the fiscal refund as of 2015 (Coalition Agreement 2012).

*Parental leave: take-up rates.*

The fact that young parents in the Netherlands are not entitled to a paid parental leave, presumably explains why the take up is still far from a 100%; see Table 2 for further details. In 2011, the take up among entitled women amounted to 49% while 27% of the entitled men took up parental leave. Though the take-up rate of men is considerably lower, it is fairly high compared to other European countries (Plantenga and Remery 2005). Table 2 indicates that there are also slight differences in the average length of the leave taken up by men or women. Men on average take up 8 hours of leave and spread the number of leave hours over 10 to (after the revision of 2009) 18 months. Women take up more hours of leave as a result of which the duration of the leave period is somewhat shorter. The data seem to indicate that, in a typical case, both parents use the possibility to spread the leave hours over a longer period of time. *Part-time* parental leave is thus still the usual option despite the possibility to organise leave on a full time basis. This is in line with the overall emphasis on part-time working hours within Dutch society. Whereas in some of the other European countries leave is scheduled before the use of childcare facilities, in the Netherlands a much more parallel approach is advocated. Parents use part-time working hours, partly facilitated by parental leave legislation, in combination with a part-time use of childcare facilities, to balance work and family life. By implication, childcare facilities are open for very young children, starting directly after the 16 weeks of (full time and fully paid) maternity leave.

Table 2. Take up of parental leave among employees entitled to leave, 2000-2011

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Take up of parental leave | Average length of leave, in hours per week | Average length of leave,in months |
|  | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male |
| 2001 | 35 | 10 | 13 | 8 |  |  |
| 2003 | 42 | 15 | 12 | 8 | 8 | 10 |
| 2005 | 43 | 18 | 11 | 8 |  |  |
| 2007 | 42 | 18 | 10 | 8 | 9 | 11 |
| 2009 | 41 | 19 | 11 | 7 | 10 | 13 |
| 2011 | 49 | 27 | 10 | 8 | 12 | 18 |

*Source*: Merens et al 2010; Merens et al 2012

*3.2 Child care facilities*

As already indicated, institutionalised childcare developed rather late in the Netherlands. At the end of the eighties, the Netherlands had (together with Ireland and the UK) the lowest level of institutionalised childcare facilities in the European Union (Moss 1990). It was only during the 1990’s that the number of places started to increase. An important (financial) measure in this respect was the Stimulative Measure on Child Care, which was introduced by the government in 1990 (Plantinga 2006; Verschuur et al. 2005). At that time there was a heavy emphasis on the importance on strong market structures and deregulation. For the child care sector this implied that policy was targeted towards a public-private partnership; together with the central government also employers were supposed to pay part of the child care bill. The main argument in that respect referred to the positive impact of child care facilities on (female) labour supply; by investing in child care, employers could lower the costs of recruiting, absenteism and the training of new personel. The focus on the economic benefits also implied that child care policy became part of labour market policy; just as leave policies were seldom discussed as part of the care system with children as the primary beneficiaries, also child care policy was discussed basically in terms of labour market effects.

Although successful, the Stimulatory Measures also had its difficulties. At the turn of the century the formal childcare sector consisted of a subsidised part, an employer financed part and a private part, each with its own financing structure. As a result, the price paid by parents differed considerably. In addition, there was quite some local variation regarding the availability and affordability of childcare services. Indeed the OECD referred to the Dutch situation as containing a ‘most complicated set of public funding arrangements (...) bound to involve administrative waste’ (OECD 2002, 93/94). In addition, according to the OECD, ‘the Dutch situation is further complicated by its reliance on employer provided support for childcare’ (ibidem). In order to solve these (and other) problems, the Childcare Act was introduced in 2005.

*2005: The Child Care Act*

With the introduction of the new Child Care Act, the financial organisation of the childcare sector changed from a system of supply-financing to one of demand-financing. Working parents pay in principle the full price for the childcare facility and are compensated directly by their employers and the tax authorities. The financing is thus on a tripartite basis. However, in 2005 the contribution by employers was not yet mandatory; employers were supposed but not obliged to pay 1/3 of the actual childcare bill. As this resulted in quite some white spots (Van der Linden and Van der Werf 2006), the contribution by employers became mandatory by 2007. The change towards a demand driven financing system implies that there is no longer a public provision of childcare services in the Netherlands. Instead only private for-profit (60% of all Dutch childcare organisations) or not-for-profit providers (the remaining 40%) operate and compete in the Dutch child-care market (Noailly and Visser 2009; Plantenga 2012).

The Child Care Act is also applicable to out-of-school-hours care. Although the demand for services for school going children used to be rather limited, the demand increased rather rapidly after the introduction of a motion of the socio-democratic and liberal party (motion ‘Van Aartsen-Bos’). This motion obliged primary schools since the school year 2007-2008 to offer pre- and after-school care in case the parents request this. How and where the out-of-school care is organised is a matter of agreement between the school and the parents. Modalities may differ from a simple referral service to a full-blown co-operation between school and day care. It seems that approximately 90% of the schools have chosen the ‘referral model’. Although this may not be seen as a major achievement, the motion did increase the co-operation between schools and childcare services and made the use of child care services more feasible for many parents. In addition, the motion increased the awareness of the complicated schedules of children and their parents.

*The use of child care services*

The lower prices, the increased availability and the more positive public opinion all implied a significant increase in the utilisation of services. Table 3 illustrates the growth rates for the period 1990-2008, differentiating between the age category 0-3 and 4-12 as most children start primary school at the age of 4 (although compulsory school starts at the age of 5). The figures indicate that the number of centre based child care places increased over this period from 26.000 to more than 300.000 places. As most children make use of child care facilities on a part-time basis, more children make use of the same child care place, with one child for example covering the Monday and the Thursday, while another child making use of the remaining days. The number of children enrolled therefore increased from approximately 48.000 in 1990 towards more than 585.000 in 2008. This implied that the enrolment rate for child care in the youngest age category increased from 5.7% in 1990 to 34% in 2008. The growth rates for the after school care (covering the hours before and after a regular school day), are even more impressive although the share of enrolled children in 2008 is still rather limited with 12,3%.

Table 3. The child care sector in the Netherlands, 1990 – 2008

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1990 | 1996 | 2000 | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 |
| **Population in the Netherlands (x 1000)**  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Children aged 0-3 | 756 | 767 | 790 | 818 | 784 | 746 |
| Children aged 4-12 | 1238 | 1317 | 1776 | 1796 | 1795 | 1792 |
| Children aged 0-12 | 1994 | 2083 | 2566 | 2613 | 2579 | 2538 |
| **Number of childcare places (x 1000)** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Child care for children aged 0-3 | 22,7 | 49,9 | 74,7 | 117,6 | 129.6 | 160,4 |
| Child care for children aged 4-12  | 3,0 | 12,7 | 36,1 | 71,1 | 93,2 | 146,0 |
| **Capacity per 100 children**  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Child care for children aged 0-3 | 3,0 | 6,5 | 9,5 | 14,4 | 16,5 | 21,5 |
| Child care for children aged 4-12  | 0,2 | 1,0 | 2,0 | 4,0 | 5,2 | 8,1 |
| **Enrolled children (x 1000)** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Child care for children aged 0-3 | 43,4 | 100,1 | 159,8 | 203,6 | 203,0 | 253,3 |
| Child care for children aged 4-12  | 4,6 | 23,0 | 61,1 | 103,3 | 135,1 | 220,4 |
| Home based paid child care for children aged 0-12 | 2,1 | 13,6 | 23,5 | 23,9 | 36,1 | 112,2 |
| **Enrolled children (%)** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Child care for children aged 0-3 | 5,7 | 13,1 | 20,2 | 24,9 | 25,9 | 34,0 |
| Child care for children aged 4-12  | 0,4 | 1,7 | 3,4 | 5,8 | 7,5 | 12,3 |
| Home based (paid) child care for children aged 0-12 | 0,1 | 0,7 | 0,9 | 0,9 | 1,4 | 4,4 |

Source: Merens and Hermans 2009; Merens et al 2011: 122

Form a policy perspective, the increased demand came rather unexpected. Whereas in the years before the Child Care Act it was presumed that parental demand for formal child care services would be rather limited because of the particular Dutch cultural tradition, the dramatic increase led to unexpectedly high public costs. The eagerness to publicly invest in childcare services was further decreased by the information that the growth in the female participation rate fell behind the growth in the use of formal child care services, because part of the new demand was in fact a substitution away from unpaid informal arrangements. In order to solve part of the financial problems, the fiscal refund was lowered from 1 January 2009. In addition, the government decided to control the use of more informal forms of childcare, such as host families, by introducing quality standards and by lowering the maximum price per hour.

The higher prices and the rising levels of unemployment due to the economic crises lowered the demand for childcare services since 2009 quite substantially, especially among lower and medium income families. By contrast, childminding by families or friends increased (Merens et al. 2012: 94). The high demand and supply of informal child care is in part the effect of (but also contributes to) the Dutch part-time working culture, which makes it possible for a part-time working grand parent to take care of the grandchild for one or two days a week, while families living in the same neighbourhood might also share child care responsibilities during the week and during holidays.

## *3.3 Summary*

Summarising this particular section, it seems fair to state that the Dutch care regime is in the throes of transition. Whereas in the 1980’s the care regime was structured along the lines of a strong breadwinner society, with a heavy reliance on informal family care, the current care regime tries to comply with the new reality of dual worker families. Yet, the transition is still incomplete, in the sense that everything is structured around the part-time working hours of – in particular – women. And although attitudes are changing, the perceived and actual substitutability between women’s own time and external services is still limited, creating a disincentive with regard to (full time) participation. In a typical case, young parents with an orientation on paid work would opt for parental leave for one or two days a week. If they both worked full time before the birth of the child, she would probably lower her working hours to three days a week whereas he lowers his full time working week by one day. Childcare facilities will also be used on a part-time basis in order to cover the 2 to 3 simultaneous working days. After the leave period she most probably continues to work on a part-time basis, whereas he increases his working time again to full time. The result is not “a new vision of households in which men look after children too”, but rather a one and a half earner model with women in the role of secondary earner.

**4. Future prospects**

So far we have illustrated that the combined effect of both gender roles and the specific working time policy has created a new fairly dominant model in the Netherlands. The strict division of paid and unpaid work between breadwinners and care-providers has been transformed in the space of a few decades into a one and a half earner model, with still some debate on whether this 1,5 should (or could) be divided (more) equally. In fact, the Dutch case illustrates the difficulties of achieving gender equality on the basis of a flexible working time regime given the path dependency of traditional gender roles. The Dutch case also illustrated a rather constant search for the most proper design. On the whole this search seemed rather ‘incremental’ and problem-oriented; there was no particular, goal-oriented plan. Especially the particularities of the care regime seem to be more the result of a complex interplay between established interests (f.e. of social partners, local communities, parents organisations and schools) and party political compromises (with different roles for social democrats, liberals and Christian-democratic parties) instead of explicit and well focused considerations. As such the specific details of the labour-and-care policies seemed to illustrate the typical Dutch problem-solving style of decision-making (e.g. Hemerijck and Visser 1999). This particular style and the heavy reliance on party-political compromises may not always translate into extremely transparent regulations, nor is there a strong emphasis on principles.

The pragmatic Dutch approach also makes the issue of causality difficult to answer; presumably the care regime is as much an input in the growth of the female labour force participation as the female labour force participation is an input for the care regime. It is important to note however, that the working time regime played a primary ‘leading’ role in the current state of affairs. The positive climate with regard to part-time working hours in the 1980’s and 1990’s seemed to match with the working time preferences of especially women as a result of which the **‘**irrepressible’ rise of married women working part-time could be ascertained. Partly because of the specific working time regime,the pressure for extended leave policies has never been strong. Rather the parental leave policy should facilitate the attachment to the labour market in a period in which care responsibilities were rather heavy. As such the parental leave legislation entitles parents to work part-time. Consistent with this view, there is a heavy emphasis on flexibility of the leave system, whereas the payment issue is of only secondary importance. Also the child care policy seems to feed into the specifics of the working time regime in the sense that child care facilities are used on a part-time basis. This allows for a child care policy in which labour market effects are central. Whereas in other countries child care is also framed in terms of child wellbeing and social integration, this perspective has never been central in the Netherlands. By implication, there is not much emphasis on the quality of child care services.

The typical Dutch one-and-a-half-earner model is questioned to a certain extent from a gender equality point of view. Every now and then, feminist writers, sometimes with the help of trade unions and/or political parties, question the desirability and sustainability of the model. Solutions waver between trying to introduce short full time working hours of men or to increase the part-time working hours of women. At the same time, the willingness to change the specifics of the Dutch part-time model from an equal opportunities point of view do not seem to be particularly large, nor the perceived need. In fact, current policy is mainly about cost containment, with little emphasis on improving the care infrastructure and increasing the average working hours of female employees. Instead the demographic changes are likely to put much more pressure on the specifics of the Dutch working time regime; increasing the female participation rate would ease the financing of pensions, for example, in an ageing world. Increasing the average working hours of female employees might also be necessary given the expected labour shortage in the care sector.

Whether these developments would result in more gender equality is still an open question. The heavy reliance on part-time work, also from the point of view of women, suggests that part-time employment has become connected with a certain lifestyle in which the focus is not on full-time labour force participation. It remains to be seen whether the implicit emphasis on quality of life can be maintained also within the context of a working time and care regime which is more focussed on full time participation of women and/or a more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work between men and women.

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Figure 1. Growth in female participation rate in selected countries, 1985- 2011



Source: OECD Online employment database

1. This paper is belongs to a series of five working papers that focus on work-family balance and gender equality in Spain, the Netherlands, South Korea, Turkey and Mexico. These papers emerged from country case studies originally undertaken in 2009-2010 under the auspices of a research program by Women for Women’s Human Rights – New Ways, an autonomous women’s NGO in Istanbul Turkey in collaboration with Istanbul Technical University Women’s Studies Center. The country case studies also included France and Sweden (see [www.wwhr.org](http://www.wwhr.org)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The corresponding figures for men are 8,1% for the EU27 and 24,3% for the Netherlands. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)