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

**A North-South Policy Perspective**

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Work-family balance has become as an increasingly important policy issue for countries in global north and south as the majority of families today depend on adult-earners to sustain economically. This has in turn constrained the amount of time available to households to care for their members. An implication of this tension has been persistent gender inequality and an unequal gender distribution of the care burden. In many instances, gender inequalities have been intertwined with class inequalities, whereby low-income households suffer from the phenomenon of income poverty and decreasing quality of care. In many countries these tensions also have exacerbated the demographic crisis.

Many feminist economists refer to this multitude of problems associated with work-family balance as the “crisis of care” that parallels the financial, economic, and environmental crises. The care crisis has triggered national governments as well as international organizations and civil society groups to bring up the issue of work-family balance in an ever-increasing range and depth on the public agenda. This proposal is based on an international research initiative undertaken in 2009-2012 that investigates work-life balance strategies and public policy debates in five OECD countries[[1]](#footnote-1): the Netherlands (Janneke Plantenga, University of Utrecht), Spain (Lourdes Beneria, Columbia University and Maria Martinez-Iglesias, , South Korea (Ito Peng, University of Toronto), Mexico ( and Turkey (Ipek Ilkkaracan, Istanbul Technical University). The research focuses on ways in which work-family balance stands at the intersection of social and economic policies, and brings to fore tensions between the state’s economic agenda, the family’s need for care, and women’s demand for gender equality. The papers explore the extent to which the tensions of work-life balance have been addressed through policies fostering familization and/or de-familization of care; the multitude of social, economic and political factors that have shaped the policy debates, and the implications of these for gender equality. The five countries examined here share in common familistic welfare orientations and a number of common recurring features that are shaping national care regimes. These include demographic concerns, the importance of women’s paid work, social and political demand for gender equality, and crises impacted economies. They are also going through rapid policy changes and innovations. Yet, the experiences of these countries also show a significant diversity (for example, the level of economic development, welfare state institutions, and political regimes) that signify differences between as well as within the global North and South.

This set of working papers offer new insights to feminist debate on care and care regimes. First, they highlight the centrality of care as a new policy and political agenda in both the global North and global South. The papers elucidate public and policy debates about the importance of work-family balance and various ways in which care is seen as a strategic channel to achieving a wide range of social and political economic objectives. Second, by scrutinizing ways in which work-family balance policies try to address policy objectives through processes of familization and/or de-familization under different contexts, the papers show how familization/de-familization serves as a principle axis by which current work-family balance policies are configured, and underscores the disconnects between de-familization and gender equality.

**Outline of Papers**

***The Plantenga paper*** shows that part-time, flexible work combined with part-time, flexible leave over the life cycle constitutes the pillar of ***Dutch model*** of work-life balance. This model is different from the highly de-familized Scandinavian or French models that are heavily dependent on universal public child care services. As such, the paper argues that the part-time model in the Netherlands is not a simple de-familization strategy, compelling 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 to combine breadwinning and care giving. At the same time, the paper also shows that the impact of the part-time model on gender equality is less positive. While in theory the part-time participation is recommended as a universal strategy for both men and women, in reality the Dutch model pertains mainly to women’s part-time employment, and as a result, the country has one of the highest female (part-time) employment rates in Europe. The paper discusses recent policy efforts to sustain the part-time strategy without reinforcing gender inequality and argues that the model is a potential alternative to a strict de-familization policy. ***(Janneke Plantenga, Professor of Economics, Utrecht University, School of Economics, The Netherlands).***

The Dutch case, although a Northern country, has a particular significance from the perspective of the South because many policymakers in "emerging welfare states" in the global South, such as Turkey, South Korea, and Mexico, see the one-and-a-half worker family model as a more viable and realistic option than adult worker model. This is because the jump from male breadwinner to adult worker model is both structurally and ideationally too large in these countries. As well, part-time work for women serves as a good accommodation for patriarchal capitalist system that undergird these economies.

***Beneria and Martinez***explore the historical evolution of work-family balance policies in ***Spain*** and the main economic, political and social dynamics that led their emergence in the 1990s. These policies acquired an increased momentum through Spain’s EU membership and were based on a balance of de-familization of care, as well as redistribution of caring time between men and women, with a clear policy objective of gender equality. The paper shows, however, that counteracting these positive developments, has been the economic crisis of the Euro zone combined with political regime shift to a more socially conservative government. The authors discuss the changes in the organization of care work and argue that, for some women, the crisis has implied an intensification of both childcare and elderly care, while for others – particularly among low income families – there has also been a convergence in the distribution of caretime between men and women. Hence the economic crisis has resulted in some contradictory tendencies in terms of gender equality. What the paper reveals are the complex mix of de-familization and re-familization processes, and the differential outcomes of de-familization policies amongst different economic classes. ***(Lourdes Benería, Cornell University, USA and Maria Martinez-Iglesias, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Spain)***

The paper on ***South Korea by Peng*** frames the emergence of the public policy debate on work-family balance in Korea in the context of the demographic crisis combined with the Asian economic crisis of 1997/98 and the 2008 financial crisis. The successive governments in Korea – both progressive and conservative – since 1998 have promoted social care expansion as a win-win social-economic strategy. This was put forth as a social investment which was expected to create jobs and alleviate the unemployment problem triggered by the economic crises, while at the same time improving fertility rates and meeting the demands of the increasingly strong women’s movement for gender equality. The Korean strategy for improving child and elderly care services rested on de-familization of care through public subsidies to families to enhance demand for private sector produced services. The evidence suggests little in way of gender equality achievement. The paper highlights the difficulties of achieving social policy and gender equality objectives within the neoliberal economic framework, and raises questions about implications of de-familization of care in context of marketization of care through private sector. ***(Ito Peng, University of Toronto, Canada)***

In the ***paper on Turkey, Ilkkaracan*** frames the case as one where there was no strong impetus towards feminization of labor, and where the trend has been towards increased familization of care rather than de-familization as observed in many other countries. The paper attributes the historical evolution of familization of care to the lack of sustained periods of robust growth and relatively weak labor demand combined with poor labor market conditions, which has left the male breadwinner family norm unchallenged. This has resulted in the institutionalization of a care regime that is strongly dependent on familization, such that marriage and childbearing has emerged as institutional constraints on female labor supply further strengthening traditional gender roles. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that a highly familized care regime and the parallel exclusion of women from the labor market in a developing economy context has the potential to get locked into a number of adverse path dependencies: Namely, a masculinized and highly gender segregated labor market regime and an increasing conservatism in the political discourse on gender policies. Hence although low female labor market activity may seem like the result of a strong patriarchal tradition (typical of the MENA region), this paper argues that through reverse causality low female labor market activity supports a highly familized care regime and a masculinized labor market regime, which in turn create vicious cycles through a series of adverse path dependencies including popular support for conservative gender politics. ***(İpek İlkkaracan, Istanbul Technical University, Turkey)***

***Lopez-Ortega and Matarazzo on Mexico*** note that the transformation from single- to dual earner households in Mexico partially came as a result of the inability of the male earners in lower socioeconomic households to provide for family needs. This had led to women’s increased workloads while causing a care deficit amongst low-income households. Against this backdrop, the paper analyzes how the highly familized nature of caring labor has resulted not only in gender inequalities but also inequalities amongst households by socioeconomic status. Neither have the recent CCT programs changed the highly gendered nature of care or altered the familistic care regime. Indeed, the authors see the emergence of work-family life balance as a public policy issue in Mexico primarily as an anti-poverty strategy; with care services geared at women and children of low-income households. ***(Mariana López Ortega, National Institutes of Health, Mexico; María Cecilia Matarazzo, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, Argentina)***

1. The research program was led by Women for Women’s Human Rights-New Ways, a feminist non-profit organization based in Turkey, in partnership with Istanbul Technical University, Women’s Studies Center in 2008-2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)