

## Work Life Balance - catchword or catalyst for sustainable work?

Littig, Beate

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Littig, B. (2008). *Work Life Balance - catchword or catalyst for sustainable work?* (Reihe Soziologie / Institut für Höhere Studien, Abt. Soziologie, 85). Wien: Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS), Wien. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-216148>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

85

Reihe Soziologie  
Sociological Series

# **Work Life Balance – catchword or catalyst for sustainable work?**

Beate Littig



# **Work Life Balance – catchword or catalyst for sustainable work?**

**Beate Littig**

**Juni 2008**

**Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS), Wien  
Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna**

**Contact:**

Beate Littig

☎: +43/1/599 91-215

email: littig@ihs.ac.at

---

Founded in 1963 by two prominent Austrians living in exile – the sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld and the economist Oskar Morgenstern – with the financial support from the Ford Foundation, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, and the City of Vienna, the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) is the first institution for postgraduate education and research in economics and the social sciences in Austria. The **Sociological Series** presents research done at the Department of Sociology and aims to share “work in progress” in a timely way before formal publication. As usual, authors bear full responsibility for the content of their contributions.

Das Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS) wurde im Jahr 1963 von zwei prominenten Exilösterreichern – dem Soziologen Paul F. Lazarsfeld und dem Ökonomen Oskar Morgenstern – mit Hilfe der Ford-Stiftung, des Österreichischen Bundesministeriums für Unterricht und der Stadt Wien gegründet und ist somit die erste nachuniversitäre Lehr- und Forschungsstätte für die Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften in Österreich. Die **Reihe Soziologie** bietet Einblick in die Forschungsarbeit der Abteilung für Soziologie und verfolgt das Ziel, abteilungsinterne Diskussionsbeiträge einer breiteren fachinternen Öffentlichkeit zugänglich zu machen. Die inhaltliche Verantwortung für die veröffentlichten Beiträge liegt bei den Autoren und Autorinnen.

## **Abstract**

The origin of the formula work-life balance (WLB) can be seen in at least three social contexts: the increasing labour market participation of women, demographic changes and corporate interests in flexible labour. WLB seems to be attractive for all stakeholders, despite the resulting tensions between corporate driven flexibility and the need for individual balancing and self-organisation. It reflects changes in the sphere of paid labour on the one hand and the increasing demand for individual time arrangements to achieve quality of life on the other hand. For the purpose of this paper WLB will be connected to policies of social sustainability, especially sustainable work.

## **Keywords**

Corporate social responsibility, women's employment, reconciliation of work and family, sustainable work, social sustainability

# Contents

## **Work-Life Balance – catchword or catalyst for sustainable work? 1**

- 1. Introduction ..... 1
- 2. What is Work-Life Balance? ..... 2
- 3. Why Work-Life Balance – why now? ..... 4
- 4. Résumé: Sustainable work and WLB – conceptual considerations ..... 9

## **References 14**

## **Work-Life Balance – catchword or catalyst for sustainable work?**

### **1. Introduction**

At the second United Nation World Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2002 in Johannesburg business enterprises were endorsed as key actors of sustainable development again. The calls, already presented at the first summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, were renewed, which demand an extended societal and environmental responsibility of corporations. They go far beyond the responsibility to shareholders for financial performance: Business shall become accountable to all stakeholders for its economic, environmental and social impacts. Some enterprises have already taken up this challenge under the headline of corporate social responsibility, installing new forms of corporate governance such as sustainability centres or sustainability reporting, or they renewed their corporate guidelines by integrating sustainable principles. Development towards sustainable business is fostered by the dissemination of business rankings based on corporate sustainability indices, which assess a corporation's overall sustainability performance. The sustainability indices demands sustainable products and services, ecological management, social and ecological reporting, codes of conduct, equal rights of men and women, and non-discrimination etc. Consequently, some business enterprises have started to establish sustainability groups or centres, sustainability reporting and corporate value management (Kitson and Campbel, 1996; Wieland, 2001) to cope with theses challenges.<sup>1</sup> This trend is intrinsically linked with the general idea of enterprises' societal involvement, i.e. corporate social responsibility (CSR). According to the Green Paper presented by the European Commission in July 2001 CSR can be defined as "a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with stakeholders on a voluntary basis" (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, 7). The implementation of CSR has an external – concerning the social and ecological environment of the corporation – and an internal dimension – concerning primarily the employees with regard to human resource management, issues of job safety and social change. The Green Paper included resource management, amongst others, lifelong learning, empowerment, information policies, non-discrimination at the workplace, diversity management, profit participation, social security and work-life balance. As a result the international debate on CSR has become the starting point for governmental and corporate initiatives to promote work-life balance as a promising concept for sustainable business:

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example: [www.globalreporting.org](http://www.globalreporting.org), [www.corporateregister.com](http://www.corporateregister.com), [www.sustainability-reports.com](http://www.sustainability-reports.com) (May 2008).



“Work-Life Balance is fundamental to Sustainable Business which is ultimately about improving the quality of life for everyone. It results in a win – win situation because people will be more productive if they are happy in their jobs and this is more likely if they are able to balance work commitments with family life. Companies that have introduced, for example, flexible hours or work patterns, working from home or childcare, tend to benefit from a high level of commitment and loyalty among staff and low levels of absenteeism and turnover. Finding, recruiting and training an employee is expensive. Losing that investment is a costly and often unnecessary waste.” (Lyn Mayes, Acting Operations Manager NZBCSD (New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development)).<sup>2</sup>

While this statement expresses a rather optimistic view of work-life balance presenting it as a balanced win-win strategy for corporations and employees there are also critics, who put the equilibrium of the win-win-situation into question. They suspect WLB to be a human resource instrument, which mainly serves companies’ increasing interests in flexible working-hours and total operational availability of the workforce (Pongratz and Voß, 2003). Empirical studies show the rather restricted use of working hour accounts, which often turn “saved” working hours into unpaid hours of overtime (Eberling et al., 2004).

This paper wants to explain details of the WLB concept, the social and political backgrounds and interests ranging from demographic issues to gender mainstreaming and communitarism. Furthermore it wants to describe and discuss the different positions regarding WLB, concluding with some final considerations about the realisation of WLB as a means of sustainability policies concentrating on the European level.

## **2. What is Work-Life Balance?**

Work-life balance refers to effectively combining working life with private obligations or aspirations. Balance threatens to become destabilised when stress cannot be adjusted through recreation or time off. The formula has been promoted since the beginning of the nineties, when human resource managers, especially of big companies, became aware of an increase in the rate of burn-out syndromes of their personnel and the need and desires of (female) employees to reconcile family and work. Human resource managers follow the same line of argumentation as Lyn Mayes in promoting a win-win situation for both sides. The argument is: A balanced relationship between work life and private life reduces stress, increases the personnel’s overall satisfaction and quality of life und thus increases the efficiency of work.

But the term work-life balance is not as clearly defined as the cited statement might suggest. There is a flow of research monographs, seminars and conferences about this issue, manifesting the heterogeneous use of the term (Taylor, 2003). It ranges from a narrow

---

<sup>2</sup> Download: <http://www.dol.govt.nz/worklife/nzbcscd.asp> (May 2006). For recent developments see for example the Work-life Balance report of the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development Download: <http://www.nzbcscd.org.nz/story.asp?StoryID=688> (April 2008).

understanding of WLB primarily addressing the reconciliation of work and family life to an enlarged understanding including health care, (further) training and life long learning, as well. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety demonstrates the enlarged understanding of WLB and gives detailed information about initiatives dealing with WLB<sup>3</sup>:

“Simply put, work/life balance initiatives are any benefits, policies, or programs that help create a better balance between the demands of the job and the healthy management (and enjoyment) of life outside work. Work/life initiatives can potentially deal with a wide range of issues including:

- “on-site childcare,
- emergency childcare assistance,
- seasonal childcare programs (such as March break or Christmas),
- eldercare initiatives (may range from referral program, eldercare assessment, case management, a list of local organizations or businesses that can help with information or products, or seminars and support groups),
- referral program to care services, local organizations, etc.,
- flexible working arrangements,
- parental leave for adoptive parents,
- family leave policies,
- other leaves of absence policies such as educational leave, community service leaves, self funded leave or sabbaticals,
- employee assistance programs,
- on-site seminars and workshops (on such topics as stress, nutrition, smoking, communication etc),
- internal and/or external educational or training opportunities, or
- fitness facilities, or fitness membership assistance (financial).“

According to this list, WLB is not just a new term addressing “workers with family responsibilities”<sup>4</sup> striving for a better reconciliation of both spheres of life. Far more, it is presented as a bundle of measures, which aims at improving the overall quality of life of the workforce. The number of web pages of corporations, training programmes and calls for WLB is unmanageable, but they indicate a prevailing trend for an enlarged understanding of WLB.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Download: [http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/worklife\\_balance.html](http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/worklife_balance.html) ( May 2008)

<sup>4</sup> This is the title of the Convention 156 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) published in 1981.

<sup>5</sup>This trend can be illustrated by the WLB programme of Novartis Pharmaceutical Company. The company just recently has been honoured for its WLB programme as one of Germany’s Top-Employers 2005 chosen by the Corporate Research Foundation (CSF; funded by the W- Bertelsmann Verlag). WLB, in the understanding of Novartis, includes flexible working hours as well as (further) training, parental leave and family oriented services, fitness, cultural and shopping facilities and activities oriented towards social volunteering. Download: [http://www.novartis.ch/jobs/de/work\\_life\\_balance.shtml](http://www.novartis.ch/jobs/de/work_life_balance.shtml) (May 2008).

But it is not only companies that have started to launch work-life balance. Meanwhile several governments, prominently Great Britain, Canada and New Zealand, and recently Germany have started nationwide campaigns to foster WLB initiatives in cooperation with different stakeholders.<sup>6</sup> On the supra-national level, WLB promoted by the OECD as well as the European Commission, has come to the agenda with the new millennium. With regard to the EU work-life balance has been issued in the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (EC, 2001) as well as in several publications of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (European Foundation; 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003a/b, 2004). The European Foundation is an important player in the research-based promotion of WLB affirming that “work-life balance is high on the policy agenda of the EU and its Member States” (European Foundation 2004: 2). With its pro-WLB initiatives the officially mandated European Foundation sustains the “Lisbon Strategy” (2000) of the European Council, which has just recently been started anew<sup>7</sup>: the response to globalisation with an improvement of both quantity and quality of work and social cohesion. The OECD publishes a series of country studies on work life balance entitled “Babies and Bosses” (OECD, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007). These studies explicitly enrich the debate of the reconciliation of work and family with a new issue: the declining fertility rates in most (post-)industrial countries. Because of the accumulation of WLB activities one might raise the questions: Why WLB has become a prominent catchword now? What aims and interests are pursued with the concept?

### 3. Why Work-Life Balance – why now?

The term work-life balance indicates new trends in the relationship between these two spheres, which demand a special activity: balancing. The term *Work-Life Balance* has been criticised as being misleading, since it is an evaluative term suggesting that harmony can be achieved between the conflicting spheres of work and life (e.g. Crompton 2006: 78). This criticism can be supported by empirical research on WLB, which has shown that the achieved balance very often is precarious demanding enormous efforts of handling their different obligations by the affected individuals, mainly working mothers (see contributions in Hildebrandt and Littig 2006, Eberling et al. 2004, Kodz et al., 2002, Crompton 2006). What at the first glance seems to be an individual act of balancing has to be framed with its social

---

<sup>6</sup> The British WLB campaign started in March 2000 prominently initiated by The Prime Minister, David Blunkett and Margaret Hodge (Taylor, 2003). Partners in the campaign to establish more flexible working practices are business, the voluntary sector and employee organisations (<http://www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/people/flexible-working.htm>, May 2008). The Canadian initiative on WLB started in 2000 (<http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/lp/spila/wlb/pdf/wlbc-ctvpc-en.pdf>, May 2008). In New Zealand the Government (Ministry of Labour) campaigns on WLB since 2003 (<http://www.dol.govt.nz/worklife>, May 2008). The German engagement in WLB policies has been initiated in 2004 by Renate Schmidt, the former minister for family policies (<http://www.bmfsfj.de>, May 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See the homepage of the European Commission: Download: [http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/index_en.htm) (May 2008).

context, i.e. the complex system of employment relations. From a social science perspective the new demand for “balancing” can be interpreted in the framework of three major social developments:

First: the necessary reorganisation of the reconciliation of work and family resulting from the feminisation of employment and the erosion of the male breadwinner system.

Second: Women’s increasing employment participation, falling fertility rates, and the future labour supply.

Third: Human resource management strategies responding to the need for flexibility in the context of economic globalisation.

These developments will be further explained and discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.1. Feminisation of employment is one of the most impressive developments of modernisation in the last decades (Beck, 1986, Rubery et al., 1999). Women caught up to men in both education and training and employment. This holds true for all European countries, despite the fact that there are differences between European countries regarding the extent (Rubery et al., 1999: 287 ff). This trend has been accompanied by changes in attitudes toward the dominant gender roles, i.e. the male breadwinner accompanied by a female carer (Crompton, 1999 and 2006): “The male breadwinner-model is a an ideal-type description of the gender division of labour that emerged alongside the process of industrialization in many countries. Caring work and market work were gender coded, and only the latter was regarded as ‘work’.” (Crompton, 1999: 202; Crompton, 2006) The gendered division of care and market work has been incorporated into many central institutions of the modern societies (such as the welfare state, the system of education and the labour market and occupational regulations etc.). According to the traditional breadwinner model, work-life balance has been regulated through the gendered division of labour. The increasing participation of women in the labour market made the traditional gender arrangement practically and ideologically precarious. It has led to the erosion of the traditional bread-winner/female carer model in favour of “modernised” care arrangements (Pfau-Effinger, 2005): dual-earner models with different solutions for caring through state, market or in partnership cooperation. Complementary to this are different degrees of women’s participation in the labour market, which can be part-time, full-time (Crompton, 1999, 205).<sup>8</sup> Political commitments to gender equality, equal opportunities and non-discrimination have finally led to practical measures, which facilitated women’s participation in the labour market. On the European level gender mainstreaming has been included as the

---

<sup>8</sup> G. Esping-Andersen has investigated the relationship between welfare policies and (female) employment in Europe (1990). According to his research, the quality of social rights depends very much on the extent to which the labour force is “de-commodified”, which in turn largely affects the conditions under which labour is sold on the market (e.g. wage levels, collective organization, welfare, security). Furthermore, Esping-Andersen concludes, that governments use these framework conditions to influence female employment. This thesis, however, was deemed to be insufficient by women’s studies and was therefore expanded to include other aspects as well, e.g. gender policy in the welfare states (Lewis 1992), or different cultural traditions with regard to gender roles (Pfau-Effinger, 2000)

fourth pillar along with employability, entrepreneurship and adaptability into the framework of European employment policies (Behning and Amparo, 2001). The improvement of the reconciliation of work and family life for both sexes is a part of the European Union's Gender Equality Strategy.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless it can be stated that it is primarily women, who are concerned with care and household work: "Women are far more than men confronted with the problem of reconciling the pursuit of a working career with caring responsibilities, (...) In practice, although a significant number of men spend time looking after children, this does not seem to interfere in a perceptible way with the jobs that they do. For women, it can mean that they are not employed at all or part-time rather than full-time." (Eurostat/European Commission, 2002) Despite the fact that patriarchy is undermined by liberalism (McInnes, 1998) and faces a legitimating crisis (Connell, 1995) on a discursive level, this hardly manifests in every day life and the care responsibilities of men and women.<sup>10</sup> Thus WLB – as far as the reconciliation of work and family life is concerned – addresses mainly women (and the small number of men, who have recently started to claim equal parental rights).

3.2. Demographic change has become one of the major concerns for European policy makers, especially in the course of retirement and pension policy reforms. Fertility rates have dropped dramatically in most European countries over the past twenty years (Eurostat/EC, 2002, 17). This development might have fostered the official promotion of WLB (European Foundation, 2003a, 2003b). The link between WLB and the interest of states' in birth-rates, especially with regard to the future labour supply, has been directly addressed by the OECD: "If parents cannot achieve their desired work/family life balance, economic development is curtailed through reduced labour supply by parents. Meanwhile, a reduction in birth rates has obvious implications for future labour supply and the financial sustainability of social protection systems. As parenting is also crucial to child development, and thus the shape of future societies, policy makers have many reasons to help parents find a better work/family balance."<sup>11</sup> Thus, alongside with the boosted feminisation of the workforce, WLB shall solve two problems at once: It shall support women's continued and increased participation in the labour market after they become a parent and at the same time it shall support fertility.<sup>12</sup> The

---

<sup>9</sup> Download: [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/gender\\_equality/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/gender_equality/index_en.html) (May 2008). Gender mainstreaming has been included in the Amsterdam Treaty following the recommendations of the 1995 Beijing Fourth UN World Conference on Women. The history of the concept of gender mainstreaming traces back at least to the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, Kenya, where feminists criticised mainstream capitalist development policies for their gender blindness and developed the first principle elements of gender impact analysis (Braidotti et al., 1994).

<sup>10</sup> The lack of childcare services and caring services for the elderly resulted in private solutions of care for those who can afford it: the usage of female immigrant care workers, very often illegally (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Crompton, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Download: [http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_37419\\_31588543\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_37419,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,2340,en_2649_37419_31588543_1_1_1_37419,00.html) (May 2008)

<sup>12</sup> Summarising a report about work-time preferences and WLB in Europe the European Foundation states: "Firstly women's employment rates although rising are still notably lower than those for men in a number of Member States. Secondly, long working hours are still prevalent in Europe – for example more than one in five employed man and nearly one in ten employed women usually work 48 hours or more hours a week. Thirdly, part-time work has spread,

explanations of potential links between the two trends, falling fertility rates and higher female employment rates, vary to a large degree, but many economic schools link them together (Lesthaeghe and Willems, 1999). There are many economic theories to explain the correlation between women's employment and decreasing fertility rates. For example, it could be increased opportunity costs for childbearing or high consumption aspirations, which keep women childless in paid full-time employment. It could also be unstable partnerships which make women fear to become a multi-burdened single parent or it might be desires for more individual autonomy, which influence (female) behaviour of child-bearing. However, the Scandinavian countries show that women's full-time participation in the labour market is compatible with relatively high fertility rates (OECD, 2001: 131). This has been explained by their early introduction of work/family reconciliation (especially the availability of sufficient childcare services) as well as by cultural reasons (Pfau-Effinger, 2000). Considering these findings, part-time employment might appear only as a relative solution for reconciliation demands and does not necessarily meet mothers' preferences. Based on a recent European wide analysis of work-time preferences the European Foundation states, "that while many mothers prefer part-time work as a work-family reconciliation measure this assessment is shaped by the social context - the availability of childcare services and other work-life balance measures, as well as financial considerations and social norms concerning gender roles." (European Foundation, 2003a: 48) These findings point to differences in mothers' employment depending on cultural backgrounds, welfare state provisions, level of education and income. Data show that mothers with medium or higher education are closer to the employment rates of fathers, whereas lower educated mothers are lagging behind. This can be explained by their lower income prospects from the labour market. But as the OECD Employment Outlook 2001 concludes: "However, in addition, while they will be treated on an equal basis by public systems for child-care and family leave, they are less likely to be accorded family friendly benefits (such as career-breaks, extra family leave and flexible working arrangements) by firms, and may be less well-placed to combine work and family life. There is a danger that lower-educated mothers may become detached from the labour market and be unable to make a successful entry, or re-entry, later in life. They may, thus, be unable to provide themselves adequately in the case of family breakdown and may also suffer social isolation." (OECD, 2001: 154) This conclusion shall lead us to the role of firms in the debate of WLB.

3.3. "Why should managers get involved in helping employees balance their work and personal lives? Because the business value can be enormous." – this is the leading sentence with which Friedman et al. (2000) present the best practice models and strategies for WLB at the firm level in the Harvard Business Review. They plea for the recognition, that

---

mainly among women. Both, the incidences of long hours working and of part-time work vary quite a lot between countries. Fourthly, there is also quite a variety in the pattern of working schedules for both full-time and part-time workers." (European Foundation, 2003: 47)

employees have and shall have private interests and commitments outside work. These should be valued as complementary priorities to work and as such they can be systematically used to the company's profit. If employees can carry out their personal fulfilments or obligations in a less stressful way, they become more committed to the firm and respond with greater effort and loyalty. Social scientists have detected flexibility as the underlying trend of these management concepts referring to Richard Sennett. He criticised the growing economic demands for flexibility of work and warned insistently that total flexibility erodes the boundaries between work and life geographically, temporally, socially and textual (Sennett, 1998). New information and communication technologies follow this trend. They allow for unlimited long-distance work without any time restrictions. Flexibility is mainly driven by economic interests and by now dominates work-time negotiations and regulations. Since the mid-1970s, the emphasis has shifted from collective work-time reductions (which still remain on the trade unions' agendas and have been partially successful) to flexible work-time arrangements (for example more variable hours, new schedules, flexible work-time options etc.) (Bosch, 1999). At the same time, regulations have become more and more decentralised on the company or plant level (European Foundation, 2003a). As a consequence new standards of normal work-time are developing as a result of increasing rates of part-time work (mainly for women) and measures for the equal treatment of part-time work, atypical work and full-time work. The top-down promotion of "family-friendly arrangements" and "work-life balance" by governments, corporations and supra-national institutions can be seen as the latest developments in this context (OECD 2001: 147). Core issues of reconciliation are working time patterns and the length, position and disposability of work-time.

But case studies in Great Britain (Kodz et al., 2002) and Germany (Eberling et al., 2004) about the implementation of WLB at the firm level present various problems regarding the take-up of work-life balance and the reality of flexible working options. Despite the supposed high demand on flexible working practices, employees seem to be rather hesitant to make use of them after they have been introduced. Kodz et al. characterised this as the WLB take-up gap (2002). In interviews employees expressed several obstacles and difficulties with taking up flexibilities, which might ease their WLB: Concerns about career prospects, the heavy workload, ambivalent support by the senior managers, insufficient information, inadequate technical equipment to work at home and negative financial impacts (reduced earnings) have been voiced in both empirical studies. Many of these obstacles are also known from investigations on part-time work (European Foundation 2000, 2003a). Nevertheless, part-time work ranks high for many European employees, even though there are national differences: "23% of employed women and 19% of employed men currently work full-time and would prefer part-time work, most part-timers want to remain part-time, and many job seekers would prefer part-time rather than full-time work. The preferred are either substantial part-time hours (20-34) or short full-time hours (25-39) and the proportion of the workforce who would like to work these hours far exceeds the proportion that currently do so. On average across the 16 European countries men would prefer to work a 36.5-hour week and women a 30-hour week. ... More opportunities to take time off in compensation for

over-time work, and to take sabbaticals would also be welcomed. The type of schedule that men and women consider the most compatible with their family and social lives is the “standard working week” of regular, daytime schedule without long days or long working hours introduced to provide companies with more flexibility to cover variable or extended operating requirements.” (European Foundation, 2003: 48). According to the cited studies employees are mainly interested in short-term flexibility arrangements to meet current needs (illness of children or others whom they have to care for or other unscheduled obligations). Their need or desire for flexibility might also differ over the life-course (European Foundation, 2001, 2003b; Anxo and Boulin, 2006). But this does not interfere with the first choice of standardised and limited working-time patterns, which allow for a better planning and coordination of their private life.<sup>13</sup> Taking these findings serious, the introduction of flexible working arrangements as a measure of WLB asks for a number of accompanying actions, if this shall result in the aspired win-win situation: First off all sufficient and easy accessible information must be available about the offers of new work-time practises. The disposability over the flexible working-time patterns has to be coordinated between employees and management (contrary to dominant one-sided practices). In addition to that changes of organisational culture might be essential to equalise the new way of working to the prevailing cultures of work (e.g. the culture of “presenteeism”<sup>14</sup> as an indication of a high working ethos). Support for both, managers and employees to cope with the management of reduced or flexible work-time, or work from home and the suitable workload might be instrumental as well (Kodz et al., 2002). Last but not least job security and fair payment has to be reliably assured.

#### **4. Résumé: Sustainable work and WLB – conceptual considerations**

In this article Work-Life Balance has been described as a matter of flexible work-time arrangements regarding reconciliation needs as well as related health care issues. WLB concerns people’s entire lifetime and quality of life. Thus the division of life and work as two clearly separated spheres has to be questioned. On the one side life always happened at work, mainly as alienated life. On the other side family and household always have been (hard) und (often involuntary) work, even though this has been ignored for a long time. If at all the contradiction of work and life might have been appropriate for a rather short period of work-time reductions in the 1970ies and 80ies in many industrialised countries, which permitted “free-time” at least for the male part of the workforce. Interestingly the buzzword WLB enters the political and academic arena and the consultant and training market as

---

<sup>13</sup> Contrary to that A. Hochschild concludes a trend to the re-evaluation of work and family on the basis of a case study in (one!) American corporation. She predicates a growing orientation towards work to the disadvantage of family life because the latter has become to stressful (Hochschild, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> The term coined the organisational psychologist C. Cooper (Lewis and Copper, 1996). “Presenteeism” refers to the feeling that one must be present at the workplace even if one is too sick, stressed, or distracted to be productive, or the feeling that one has to work extra time even if there is no extra work to do.



"work" and "life" become increasingly "delimited" by flexibility, i.e. increasing economic interests in the total availability of workforce, physically and mentally (Pongratz and Voß, 2003). But: work still seems to be in the centre of people's lives, at least under conditions of mass unemployment. The WLB formula does not prevent the dominance of work over the time patterns of life. It seems to demand a life dominated by work and it allows for life as long as it is compatible within the predominant constraints of work." (Hildebrandt and Littig, 2006: 217 ) Keeping this in mind the separation or association of "life" and "work" becomes a major conceptual challenge.

The separation of work and life includes another conceptual problem: the underlying narrow concept of work. The dominant perception of work as paid work has been criticised by feminists for many years (Littig, 2001; Crompton 2006). They called for an enlarged understanding of work, including paid work as well as (female) reproductive work. It has been stressed that the functioning of paid labour depends on caring work, mainly carried out unpaid by women.<sup>15</sup> In the context of sustainability this claim has been included into the concept of "sustainable work", which has been conceptualised as essentially for social sustainability (Grießler and Littig, 2005). Sustainable work is not only an analytical but also a normative concept, since the idea of sustainability contains three essential normative principles, which were initially mentioned in the documents agreed upon at the UN Conference for Environment and Development (UNCED) 1992 in Rio: everyone has the right to lead a decent life, social justice (inter-generational, intra-generational and international), participation of all relevant stakeholders. The concept of sustainable work starts from the notion that modern societies are working societies, whose exchanges with nature, i.e. the measurable material flows, are many times more and/or higher than they were in earlier forms of society (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl, 1993). However, work in modern working societies is not just a means to use nature and to ensure people's livelihood and the satisfaction of their needs, but rather – especially in the case of gainful employment – the primary means to stratify and structure society and organize individual lives (Littig, 2002). Working society is a product of the modern era, and it stands out for the fact that paid work is ranked higher than reproductive work and other unpaid activities of people's lives (Littig, 2001: 68ff). The gender-based division of labour, with the resulting gender arrangement in families as well as the form of welfare provided by governments, is one of the main characteristics of modern working societies and their position and interactions at a global level (Braidotti et al., 1994).

All this leads to the following conclusions concerning the conception of socially sustainable development and sustainable work as its central concept (Grießler and Littig, 2005): One important starting point in this context must clearly be the re-organization of work and,

---

<sup>15</sup> To grasp the interrelatedness of family work and paid work in the labour market Glucksmann has introduced the concept of the "total social organisation of labour" (TSOL) (Gluckman, 1995). This is: "The manner by which all the labour in a particular society is divided up between and allocated to different structures, institutions, and activities ... the social division of all the labour undertaken in a given society between institutional spheres" (Gluckmann, 1995: 67).

connected to that, of all forms of social welfare. The strong emphasis on work in the existing working societies still needs to be taken into account; not just with regard to securing people's incomes, but also with regard to the psycho-social functions of gainful employment (time structure, identity, etc.), citizens' integration (due to the high social status of paid work), and the significance of paid labour for social cohesion (Senghaas-Knobloch, 1998). It is furthermore absolutely necessary to pay special attention to the situation of women, not least because gender mainstreaming – with its clear and extensive demand for the equal treatment of both genders in social, economic and legal matters – is listed as one of the key goals in official sustainability documents (Chapter 24 of Agenda 21, cf. United Nations, 1992). The greening of existing employment should be given top priority in the re-structuring process. If feminist analyses of the gender-based division of labour are to be taken seriously, securing (part-time) employment and creating new (environmentally compatible) jobs, especially in the caring segment, will surely be conducive to the further integration of women into the labour market (cf. contributions in Crompton, 1999; Rubery et al., 1999; Crompton 2006). Considering both the demand for socio-ecological sustainability as well as the feminist demand for a gender-sensible (re-)distribution of labour, a sustainable working society will basically require:

- the greening of existing employment and the creation of new, environmentally sound jobs, so as to ensure the environmentally, socially, and health-friendly provision of goods and services,
- the gender-sensible re-distribution of all the work that needs to be carried out in society, so that everyone can have a sufficient income from useful and publicly accepted work (e.g. by means of shorter working hours, childcare facilities, work-life balance for men and women, economizing care work, etc.)
- the freedom to choose at any stage in life between different forms of work (work arrangements, field of work) or lifestyles, while being at all times entitled to individual social security.<sup>16</sup>

The proposed focus on (paid) work in a gender-sensible conception of social sustainability provides various starting points, yet it also represents a great challenge with regard to the widespread crisis of national social policies and the changes necessary to overcome it. The

---

<sup>16</sup> This proposed conception of sustainable work is similar to the concept of "mixed work" developed in the German interdisciplinary research project "Work and Environment" ("Arbeit und Ökologie", see HBS, 2001; Hildebrandt, 2003). But sustainable work puts an emphasis on gender issues. Mixed work, which is introduced by this project as a new, ideal type of full-time employment, is taken to be essential for social sustainability; it is expected to open up new opportunities and provide additional ways to ensure social welfare. Besides gainful employment, mixed work should also include unpaid work, care work, and community work, and it should replace the existing – and already rather "eroded" – standard employment relationships (cf. HBS 2001, pp. 30ff). Even now, mixed work is already carried out by a large and continuously growing number of people, although the quality of life it entails is subject to variation and depends on how this type of work is treated at a political level. Mixed work, as it was proposed by the aforesaid project, results in mixed incomes (from different fields of work) and requires mixed skills (which are necessary to meet the requirements of different working areas).

main focus in (European) social sustainability policy should be placed on devising and implementing effective and coordinated measures to promote and ensure employment for all citizens (i.e. for men and women). In this connection, an increase of public investment – e.g. in social infrastructure, health and care, environmentally sound urban re-development and traffic planning, environmentally friendly energy sources, etc. – seems to be a lot more conducive than a reduction thereof or a privatization of public property.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, a successful and socially sustainable European employment strategy needs to provide for a sensible reduction of working hours – and adequate social security to make up for it – which will allow a fairer distribution of (paid and unpaid) work among the genders. Moreover, best practice models and national efforts to set up working time accounts, sabbaticals, childcare leave or part-time work for parents, etc. ought to be supported and implemented in all areas and at all levels.

The proposed goals of a socially sustainable policy are, however, contradictory to the prevailing neo-liberal trends in European politics/policies and the tendency to (re-)commodify the labour force (Offe, 1984; Esping-Andersen, 1990). While such measures lead to a reduction of social funding and public intervention the creation of public or publicly funded jobs wherever they are needed in the social, cultural, and ecological sectors, would be absolutely necessary. These areas often have been neglected by private investors in the past, as they were deemed to be unprofitable and will most likely continue to be so in the near future. The governments and/or welfare states, on the other hand, clearly have the means to take measures to improve the quality of life and revise the prevailing, ecologically incompatible ideas about prosperity and wealth (cf. Nussbaum and Sen, 2002), not least because it is exactly those ideas that are most detrimental to sustainable development.

How does work-life balance fit into the considerations of sustainable labour? There are at least two answers: In the public political arenas WLB opened up a discourse about human enrichment and personal development. It is possible, that WLB is just a buzzword, which will disappear after a short time. But if this discourse helps to enhance the overall quality of life, i.e. the self-determined disposability of one's lifetime, it will be very useful to support sustainability policies. Up to a certain degree sustainability policies are time policies. They are about the possibility for a citizen to shape his/her life and of democratic participation. Thus WLB has to be embedded into the more general approach of sustainable work as outlined earlier.

The second advantage of linking the WLB discourse to sustainability is the potential for gender mainstreaming sustainability policies (Littig, 2002). Gender issues are still marginalized in the field of sustainability, despite the official documents. As shown above WLB refers to various long-standing requests of gender policies. May be the formula eases the realisation of these demands, since it could be attractive for men, as well. WLB does not

---

<sup>17</sup> The European commitment to growth, employment and sustainable development has just been recently renewed with the "new start of the Lisbon strategy". Download: [http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/index_en.htm) (May 2008).

smell of kitchen, babies' diapers and crying children but of self-determination, creativity and freedom.

And last but not least, there have been hardly any efforts to link the debate on (social) sustainability with the debate on a gender-sensible labour and welfare policy. This synergetic field of research has neither been covered by feminist welfare and labour theorists (like Lewis, 1992; Pfau-Effinger, 2000, 2005, Crompton, 2006) nor by feminist sustainability theorists (like Biesecker, 1997). Yet these two areas combined represent a complex, challenging, and – most of all – a highly important research area (Littig 2002; Littig and Grießler, 2005).

Finally, an integrated approach to sustainability has to consider the effects of WLB in connection with the economic and the ecological dimension of sustainability. Little research is available on these questions. Potentially positive, sustainable effects of work-time reduction on consumption behavior have been discussed by Juliet Schor (2005). She argues that sustainable consumption patterns cannot only achieved by technical means only. They should to be supported through trading income for time.

The possible win-win effects for enterprises and employees via flexible working hours, more time autonomy and thus less stress has already been mentioned in the previous chapters. These positive effects have been put into numbers by a study of the Prognos Institute (2005) on the level of the national economy of Germany. According to the study a slight reduction of public health costs, a slight increase of employment (especially for women), a better chance to realize the desire for having children and a general increase of employees' satisfaction, health und thus efficiency can be expected from the intensivation of WLB policies (Prognos, 2005: 22). Regarding the ecological issues of WLB policies just some preliminary considerations shall outline some (research) problems, since research on hat topic is rare (compare Linne et al., 2002). Looking at the ecological dimension the interrelatedness of local time patterns and local infrastructures have to be taken into account. Flexible working hours might make the use of the individual car more attractive since rush-hours can be avoided. If the working hours last until late night or start at early morning the usual schedule of the public traffic system might be insufficient. If flexible working conditions allow for the blocking of working hours or for work from home living at a longer distance from work might become more attractive. This could foster urban sprawl and individual long-distance commuting, and so affect ecology negatively. This again would stress the necessity of embedding WLB policies into an integrated sustainable policy mix.

## References

Anxo, Dominique and Boulin, Jean-Yves (2006) 'The Organisation of Time Over the Life Course: European Trends', in *European Societies, Special Issues: Work-Life Balance* ed. by Eckart Hildebrandt and Beate Littig, Vol. 8(2), pp. 319-341.

Beck, Ulrich (1986) *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

Behning, Ute and Pascual, Amparo, S. (Eds.) (2001) *Gender Mainstreaming in the European Employment Strategy*, Brussels, ETUI (European Trade Union Institute).

Biesecker, Adelheid (1997) 'Für eine vorsorgende Wirtschaftsweise notwendige (neue?) Institutionen' in Diskussionskreis "Frau und Wissenschaft" (Editors) *Ökonomie weiterdenken! Beiträge von Frauen zu einer Erweiterung von Gegenstand und Methode*, Frankfurt am Main and New York, Campus pp. 53-77

Bosch, Gerhard (1999) 'Working Time: Tendencies and Emerging Issues' *International Labour Review* 138 (2), pp. 131-149.

Braidotti, Rosi, Charkiewicz, Eva, Häusler, S., Wieringa, S. (1994) *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development. Towards a Theoretical Synthesis*, London and New Jersey: Zed Books.

Brandl, Sebastian and Hildebrandt, Eckart (2002) *Zukunft der Arbeit und soziale Nachhaltigkeit. Zur Transformation der Arbeitsgesellschaft vor dem Hintergrund der Nachhaltigkeitsdebatte* Leske und Budrich, Opladen.

Commission of the European Communities (2001): *Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility*, Green Paper, com (2001) 366 final, Brussels.

Connell, Robert W. (1995) *Masculinities*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Crompton, Rosemary (1999): 'Discussion and Conclusions', in Crompton, Rosemary (Ed.) *Restructuring Gender Relations and Employment. The Decline of the Male Breadwinner*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 201-214.

Crompton, Rosemary (2006) *Employment and the Family. The Reconfiguration of Work and Family Life in Contemporary Societies*, Cambridge University Press.

Esping-Andersen, Gunnar (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2000) *Combining Family and Work: The Working Arrangements of Women and Men*, Dublin.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2001) *Work Time Preferences at Different Phases of Life*, Dublin.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2002) *Working Time Preferences in Sixteen European Countries*, Dublin.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2003a) *Working-time Preferences and Work-Life Balance in the EU: Some Policy Considerations for Enhancing the Quality of Life*, Dublin.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2003b) *A New Organisation of Time Over Working*, Dublin.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2004) *Living to Work – Working to Live: Tomorrow's Work-Life Balance*. Background Paper, European Foundation Forum 2004, Dublin.

Eurostat/EC (2002) *Life of Women and Men in Europe. A Statistical Portrait. Data 1980-2000*, Luxembourg.

Eberling, Matthias, Hielscher, Volker, Hildebrandt, Eckart, Jürgens, Kerstin (2004): *Prekäre Balancen. Flexible Arbeitszeiten zwischen betrieblicher Regulierung und individuellen Ansprüchen*, Edition Sigma, Berlin.

Ehrenreich, Barbara and Hochschild. Arlie (Eds.) (2002) *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, Granta Books, London.

Fraser, Nancy (1994) 'After the Family Wage', in *Political Theory* 22, pp. 591-618

Fischer-Kowalski, Marina and Haberl, Helmut (1993) 'Metabolism and Colonisation: Modes of Production and the Physical Exchange between Societies and Nature', in *Innovation in Social Science Research*, Vol. 6(3), pp. 415-42.

Friedman, Steward D., Christensen, Perry, DeGroot, Jessica (2000): 'Work and Life: The End of the Zero-Sum Game' in *Harvard Business Review on Work and Life Balance*, Vol. 76 (6), pp. 119-129.

Glucksmann, M. (1995) 'Why "work"? Gender and the "total social organisation of labour" ', in *Gender, Work and Organisation*, Vol. 2(2), pp. 63-75

Grießler, Erich and Littig, Beate (2005) 'Social Sustainability. A Catchword between Political Pragmatism and Social Theory', in Spangenberg, J. and Giljum, S. (Eds.): *Special Issue Governance for Sustainable Development*, *International Journal for Sustainable Development*, Vol. 8 (1/2), pp. 65-79

HBS (Hans Böckler Stiftung) (Ed.) (2001) *Pathways to a Sustainable Future. Results from the Work and Environment Interdisciplinary Project*, Düsseldorf.

Hildebrandt, Eckart (2003) 'Arbeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Wie geht das zusammen?', in Gugrun. Linne and M. Schwarz (Eds.) *Handbuch nachhaltige Entwicklung. Wie ist nachhaltiges Wirtschaften machbar?* Leske und Budrich, Opladen, pp. 381-393.

Hildebrandt, Eckart and Littig, Beate (2006) Work-life Balance. Editorial to the Special Edition on WLB, in *European Societies, Special Issues: Work-Life Balance* ed. by Eckart Hildebrandt and Beate Littig, Vol8 (2), pp. 215-222.

Hochschild, Arlie (1997) *The Time Bind: When Work becomes Home and Home becomes Work*. Henry Hold and Co, New York.

Kitson, Alan and Campbell, Robert (1996) *The Ethical Organisation: Ethical Theory and Corporate Behaviour*, London.

Kodz, J.; Harper, H.; Dench, S. (2002) *Work-Life Balance: Beyond the Rhetoric*. The Institute of Employment Studies, Report 384, Brighton.

Lesthaeghe Ron and Willems, Paul (1999) 'Is Low Fertility a Temporary Phenomenon in the European Union?' in *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 25, (2), pp. 211-228.

Lewis, Jane (1992) 'Gender and the Development of Welfare Regimes', in *Journal of European Social Policy*, Vol. 2, (3), pp. 159-173.

Lewis, Suzan and Cooper, Cary, L. (1996) 'Balancing the Work and Family Interface. A European Perspective', in *Human resource Management Review*, 5, pp. 289-305.

Linne, Gudrun (2002) (Ed.) *Flexibel arbeiten – flexibel leben? Die Auswirkungen flexibler Arbeitszeiten auf Erwerbschancen, Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen*, Schriftenreihe der Hans-Böckler Stiftung, Düsseldorf

Littig, Beate (2001): *Feminist Perspectives on Environment and Society*, Pearson Education, London Harlow et al.

Littig, Beate (2002) 'The case for gender-sensitive socio-ecological research', *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 16(1), pp. 111-132.

McInnes, John (1998) 'Analysing Patriarchy Capitalism and Women's Employment in Europe', in *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences. Special Issue The Spatiality of Gender*, Duncan, S. (Eds.), pp. 227-248.

OECD (2001): *Starting strong. Early Child Education and Care*, Paris.

OECD (2002) *Babies and Bosses. Reconciling Work and Family*, Volume 1. Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands, Paris.

OECD (2003) *Babies and Bosses. Reconciling Work and Family, Volume 2: Austria, Ireland and Japan*, Paris.

OECD (2004) *Babies and Bosses. Reconciling Work and Family, Volume 3: New Zealand, Portugal, Switzerland*, Paris.

OECD (2005) *Babies and Bosses. Reconciling Work and Family, Volume 4: Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom*, Paris.

OECD (2007) *Babies and Bosses Reconciling Work and Family Life, A Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries*. Paris.

Pfau-Effinger, Birgit (2000) *Kultur und Erwerbstätigkeit in Europa. Theorie und Empirie im internationalen Vergleich*, Leske und Budrich, Opladen.

Pfau-Effinger, Birgit (2005) Welfare State Policies, cultural differences and care arrangements, in *European Societies*, 7(2), pp. 321-347

Pongratz, Hans J. and Voß, Günter G. (2003): *Arbeitskraftunternehmer. Erwerbsorientierungen in entgrenzten Arbeitsformen*, Edition Sigma, Berlin.



Prognos (2005) *Work-Life Balance als Motor für wirtschaftliche Stabilität und gesellschaftliche Stabilität*, Berlin (Study for the German Ministry of the Family, the Aged, Women and Youth, download: <http://www.bmfsfj.de>)

Rubery, Jill, Smith, Marc, Fagan, Colette (1999) *Women's Employment in Europe*, Routledge, London and New York.

Senghaas-Knobloch, Eva (1998) 'Von der Arbeits- zur Tätigkeitsgesellschaft? Politikoptionen und Kriterien zur ihrer Abschätzung' in *Feministische Studien*, Vol. 16 (2), pp. 9-30.

Sennett, Richard (1998) *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York.

Schor, Juliet, B. (2005) 'Sustainable Consumption and Worktime Reduction' in *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, Vol. 9 (1-2), pp. 37-50.

Taylor, Robert (2003) *The Future of Work Life Balance*, Economic and Social Research Council (ESCR), Swindon Download: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/DownloadDocs/The%20Future%20of%20Work-Life%20Balance.pdf> (May 2005).

United Nations (1992) *Agenda 21*. New York

Wieland, Josef (2001) 'The Ethics of Governance' in *Business Ethics Quarterly*, Special Double Issue: Loyalty and Corporate Governance, Vol. 11 (1), pp. 73-88.

---

Author: Beate Littig

Work-Life Balance – catchword or catalyst for sustainable work?

Reihe Soziologie / Sociological Series 85

Editor: Beate Littig

Associate Editor: Iris Stroschein

ISSN: 1605-8011

© 2008 by the Department of Sociology, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS),

Stumpergasse 56, A-1060 Vienna • ☎ +43 1 59991-0 • Fax +43 1 59991-555 • <http://www.ihs.ac.at>

---

