

# DOES AN IMPROVEMENT IN WORK-FAMILY BALANCE INCREASES LIFE SATISFACTION? EVIDENCE FROM 27 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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## Abstract

Documented findings identify a wide range of institutional, economic and ecological determinants of life satisfaction. The impact of tensions between work and family on life satisfaction has not been widely tested, however. This paper analyses whether the experience of work-family tensions lowers the satisfaction with life. Our investigation of the relationship between work-family tensions and life satisfaction illustrates that, “net” of the child status, the employed are more satisfied with life than the non-employed as long as the work-family tensions they experience are not too strong. The feeling of an excessive workload either by professional or family obligations leads to a substantial reduction in life satisfaction and women who experience work-family conflict tend to be less satisfied with life than housewives.

## BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

Better reconciliation of work and family life is increasingly recognised as stimulating employment growth and having a probable impact on demographic renewal in Europe. Moreover, lowering the conflict between the role of mother and the role of worker may contribute to an improvement in general life satisfaction and well-being (e.g., Argyle 1989). Balancing competing demands of work and family life under growing individual aspirations and expectations makes reconciliation an important component of life satisfaction and quality of life.

Labour market developments since the mid-1980s have made reconciliation between work and family more and more challenging. Increasing economic instability and exposure to international competition have led to a rise in labour productivity and flexibility and diversification of work patterns. Many of these organisational changes make work more attractive by its greater intensity, diversified working hours and increase in professional versatility and spread of atypical forms of employment. At the same time uncertainty in the labour market has grown and unemployment has become persistent (e.g. Mills et al., 2006; Kotowska et al., 2006; Mills, 2008; Kieffer et al., 2005; Pailhé and Solaz, 2006; 2008). Pressures on increasing flexibility in employment status (less long-term and full-time jobs), working hours (non-standard hours, more intense work) and mobility as well as a rising uncertainty in job and professional careers contribute to an increase in tensions between work and family life.

Documented findings identify a wide range of institutional, economic and ecological determinants of life satisfaction (Bjørnskov et al., 2005). However, while a wide variety of variables has been suggested as determinants of life satisfaction the impact of tensions

between work and family on life satisfaction has not been widely tested. The few studies in this direction were conducted by Greenhaus et al. (2003), Saraceno et al. (2005) and Wallace et al. (2007). Saraceno et al. (2005) used the 2003 EQLS data to verify whether the variables they found crucial for defining the work-family balance such as gender and household status as well as the country (or country group) of residence are related to individuals' satisfaction with family life. They found no clear relationship and concluded that although individuals with young children perceive the greatest difficulties in combining paid employment and childrearing, these difficulties do not result in any clear differences in satisfaction with one's own family life (Saraceno et al., 2005: 43). Wallace et al. (2007) went further and using the same dataset tested the impact of the perception of work-family balance on life satisfaction, finding only minor negative effects.

In this paper we extend the approaches adopted by Saraceno et al. (2005) and Wallace et al. (2007) by proposing to measure tensions between family and work with special indicators that refer to a subjective assessment of time-based and strain-based conflict. We test whether the experience of work-family tensions measured by these indicators lowers the satisfaction with life and whether structural and institutional settings (family policy, labour market structures) and gender norms mediate the relationship between life satisfaction and work-family balance.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data

The data used come from the second European quality of life Survey, carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in 27 European countries from September 2007 to February 2008. With about 35 000 interviews, this survey is unique to give simultaneous comparable data on so many countries.

### Indicators of work-life balance

Work-family life balance is considered as a multidimensional phenomenon (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). In our study we focus on two of its dimensions: time and strain. For each, we have developed a separate indicator, based on the subjective evaluation of incompatibilities between work and family, which both play a key role in our approach to analyse family-work arrangements and their impact on life satisfaction.

The first one called “**time-based conflict**” is related to the time balance between work and other social commitments (time with family members living in the household or elsewhere, time with other social contacts or time for own hobbies/interests). We distinguish 4 cases:

1. Time conflict occurs when time spent on activities in one role impedes fulfilment of activities in another role.
2. Time balance: people consider they spend the right amount of time at work, with family members, with other social contacts and for their own hobbies/interests.
3. Dissatisfaction related to time devoted to family role and social commitments while time spent at work is enough.
4. Dissatisfaction related to time spent at work while time spent in the private sphere is enough.

The second indicator, **strain-based conflict**, is related to energy and strain.

Again, we distinguish 4 cases:

1. Pressure at work and at home: individuals declare they suffer strain both at work and at home at least several times a month. They find it difficult to concentrate at work because of their family responsibilities and have come home from work too tired to do

some of the household jobs which need to be done or it has been difficult for them to fulfil their family responsibilities because of the amount of time they spend on the job.

2. Pressure at work or at home: individuals declare they suffer strain in one sphere, either at home or at work, at least several times a month.
3. Weak pressure: individuals declare they suffer strain either at home or at work more rarely (several times a year or less often).
4. No pressure: individuals declare they have no pressure at all, either at home or at work.

### Country classification

In order to analyse how the context mediates the relationship between work-family balance and life satisfaction we classified the EU member states using the classification of reconciliation regimes developed by Matysiak (2008). It groups countries according to conditions to balance work and family. The point of departure in the classification is the magnitude of two effects that are crucial for determining people's fertility and employment decisions: the income effect, evoked by the need to satisfy material aspirations, and the substitution effect, reflecting the conflict between childrearing and market work. Regimes are classified according to four dimensions that determine the magnitude of both effects:

- institutional (family policies);
- structural (labour market structures);
- cultural (gender norms);
- economic (living standards).

### Modelling

Ordered logistic regressions of life satisfaction against our main explanatory variables as well as a set of demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondent are performed separately for women and for men. This approach allows us to assess the relationship between life satisfaction and indicators of family status and work-family balance, "net" of any compounding factors. In addition to the two indicators of work-family balance, we also explore the relationship between life satisfaction and other factors that have been found crucial for work-family balance such as institutional, structural, cultural and economic settings in which family and employment decisions are made (captured by the country reconciliation regime) as well as work uncertainty.

## **RESULTS**

### Work-family arrangements in the EU

Strain-based conflict is much lower in the Nordic countries, Benelux and France and German-speaking countries while it is very large in Central and Eastern European countries, Bulgaria and Romania and the candidate countries (Figure 1). Discrepancies between the EU country clusters indicate stronger difficulties in the new Member States to reconcile work and family. Strain-based conflict is slightly higher for women except in the new Member States where 32% of men and 29% of women experience pressure at work and at home against 52% and 54% in the EU as a whole. Because women are more overloaded and stressed than their partners, they have a tendency to believe that their work hinders them from performing their parental role.

Work-family life balance depends greatly on the number and age of children in the household. Time balance decreases with the number of children (Figure 2); it is particularly low for

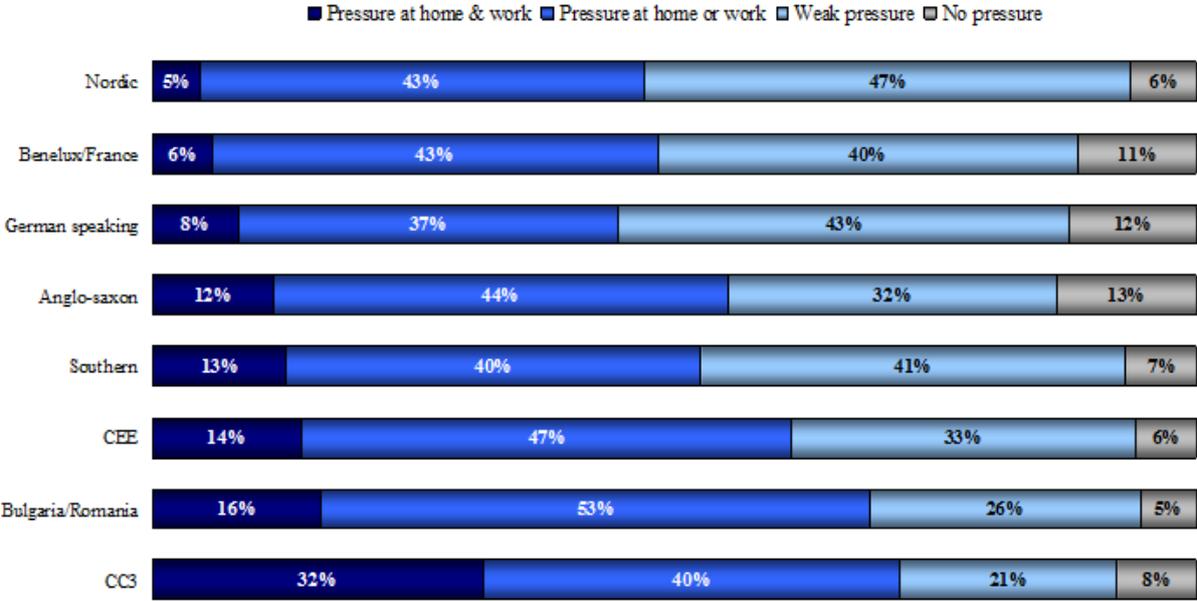
working women with 3 children and more. Strain-based conflict also rises with the number of children. However, working women with 3 children and more declare conflict less often than mothers of one or two children. These women are probably a highly selective group: since a significant share of mothers of large families gives up working all-together these women probably work in jobs that allow them to combine work and family, with less bad working conditions, stress and work intensity

#### The impact of work-family balance on life satisfaction in the EU

Our analysis further corroborates previous finding: family obligations do not only result in lower life satisfaction but, on the contrary, couples with children who can rely on family support are happier than the childless (Figure 3), non-partnered or those who cannot count on any financial, moral or health aid from their family nor friends. The only exception is the single parents who are even less satisfied with life than the non-partnered persons, living alone or with parents.

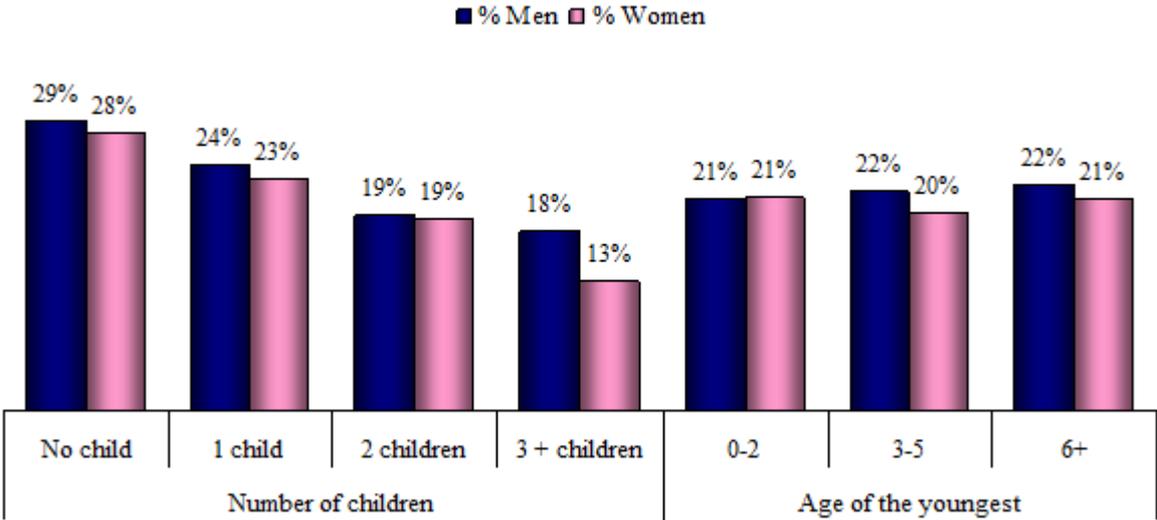
In addition we show that employed Europeans enjoy higher life satisfaction than the non-employed Europeans and particularly more so than the unemployed. A deeper investigation of the relationship between work-family tensions and life satisfaction illustrates that, “net” of the child status, the employed are more satisfied with life than the non-employed as long as the work-family tensions they experience are not too strong. The feeling of an excessive workload either by professional or family obligations leads to a substantial reduction in life satisfaction and women who experience work-family conflict tend to be less satisfied with life than housewives (Figures 4-5). This conclusion holds for all country reconciliation regimes in Europe apart from the German-speaking countries. Its implications are straightforward. Policies targeted at creating appropriate conditions for parents to combine family with work may not only bring an increase in fertility or women’s employment –both of which are pivotal factors in fighting the profound ageing of the EU population – but should also have a beneficial influence on the general life satisfaction of individuals in contemporary societies.

**Figure 1: Strain-based conflict between work and family life (in % by country reconciliation regime).**

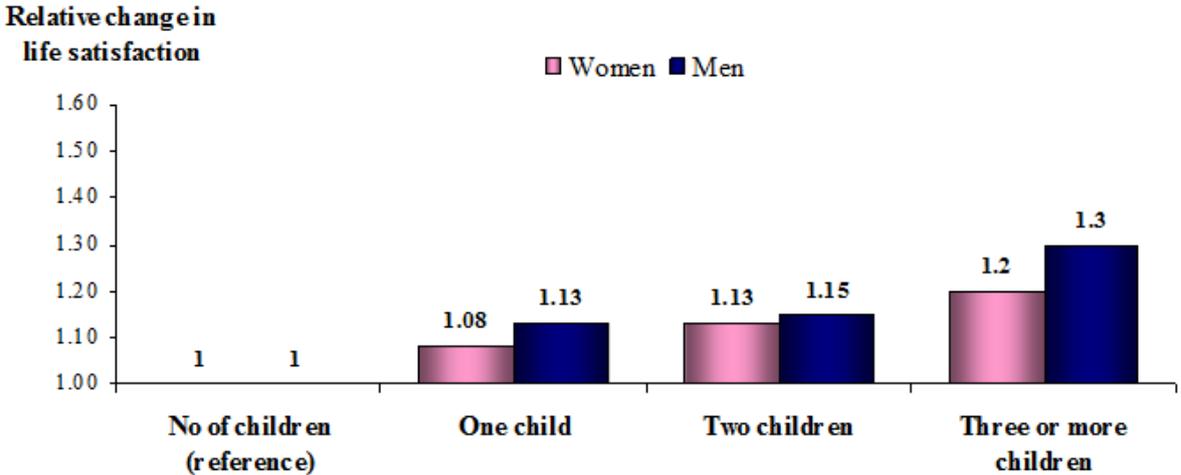


Source: EQLS 2007

**Figure 2: Time balance according to the number of children in the household and the age of the youngest.**

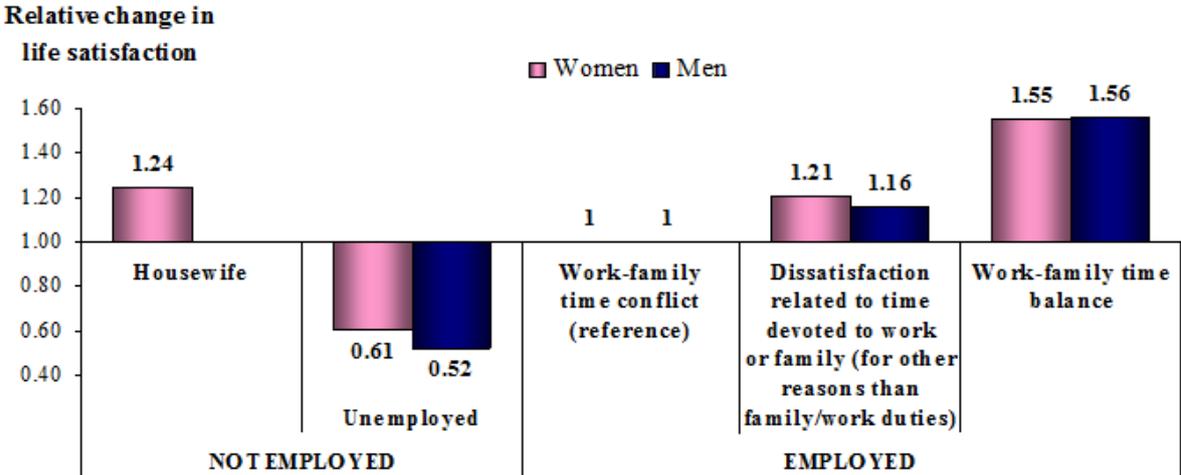


**Figure 3: Life satisfaction by gender and number of children of ordinal logit model controlled for a set of demographic, social and economic characteristics.**



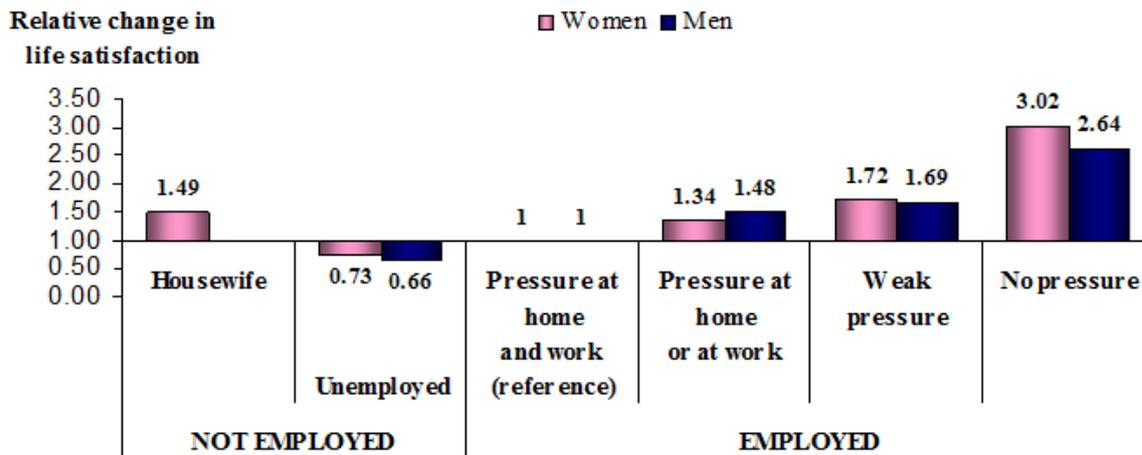
Based on ordinal logit modelling  
 Source: EQLS 2007

**Figure 4: Life satisfaction by gender, employment status and perception of time-based work-family conflict– results of ordinal logit model controlled for a set of demographic, social and economic characteristics.**



Based on ordinal logit modelling  
 Source: EQLS 2007

**Figure 5: Life satisfaction by gender, employment status and perception of strain-based work-family conflict – results of ordinal logit model controlled for a set of demographic, social and economic characteristics.**



Based on ordinal logit modelling  
Source: EQLS 2007

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