

Reconciling Work and Family Life – Policy and Practice in Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

The term ‘work-life balance’, virtually unheard of ten years ago, has rapidly entered the lexicon of managers, employers, professionals and journalists alike. Better described as ‘reconciling work and family life’ in respect of the view that life includes work and that work and life are not two opposing forces, it is usually defined as the implementation of policies that assist workers in combining employment with other responsibilities. The topic has received considerable policy and research interest in recent years, and is one of the criteria for assessing quality of working life (European Foundation for the Improvement in Working and Living Condition, 2002) and continues to receive emphasis across Europe as a means of promoting equity and health in society.

Despite this general interest, practice often falls short of policy ideals. In any country, the national policy framework sets the overall context, signaling the cultural value attached to ‘having a life’ as well as a job, to women’s contribution to the work world and men’s contribution to family and child development. The state has a role in facilitating sectoral and organisational level initiatives, via employment, childcare and elder care policy. Within this overall context, however, more specific arrangements are at organisation level, and can be trickle-down and voluntary.

This paper reviews recent workplace and childcare policy development in Ireland and the evidence regarding practice. It identifies key challenges facing policy makers and organisations



in the next century in assisting Irish people in the reconciliation of work and family life.

POLICY CONTEXT

Reconciling work and family life has been a live policy issue within the EU at least since the introduction of the Working Time Directive in 1993. Social inclusion is an important EU-level policy target, and increased labour market participation with its potential for generating income and increasing opportunities for personal fulfillment is seen to be a key to achieving an inclusive European society for all (Bielenski, Bosch and Wagner, 2002). Particular attention has been focused on increasing female labour force participation. Helping parents raise healthy and happy children is another valued societal goal, and since women still retain primary responsibility for family care¹, policies and practices that enable people to combine work and non-work commitments are clearly required. Thus, all EU member states are called to include measures to assist in the reconciliation of family and working life in their employment policies (Fisher, 2000).

While it is difficult to tease apart the interacting factors that have led to this focus, demographic and labour force factors are clearly central. Changes in the organisation and distribution of employment, family and community activity have been observed in many states. Increased rates of female labour force participation have been recorded in most EU states in the second half of the twentieth century. These are driven by an overall increase in demand for labour, increased female achievement in higher-level education, diminishing family size, and changes in the occupational and industrial structure of the labour force, in particular expansion of the service sector. The European Commission has called for determined action to further increase women's participation in the labour force. The EU average rate of participation for women is 55 per cent, still shy of the targets of 57 per cent by 2005 and 60 per cent by 2010 (European

¹ Eighty per cent of women compared to 25 per cent of men are main contributors to care of children (*Health Impact of Employment*, 2005), 64 per cent of women compared to 13 per cent of men do cooking and 63 per cent of women compared to 12 per cent of men do the housework (*Quality of Work and Life in Europe: Issues and challenges*, 2002)

Foundation for the Improvement of Working and Living Conditions, 2005).

Other related demographic factors feed into the cross-national attention to reconciling work and family life matters. Increased levels of single parenthood and marital breakdown, decreased family size, the ageing of most EU populations and increased rates of participation in lifelong learning have all changed the way in which individuals and families relate to paid work and the labour market (Dex, 2003).

Changes in the occupational and industrial structure of the labour force also play a role, in particular the decline of traditional industries in favour of a substantially expanded services sector, with an accompanying move towards non-standard forms of employment. Expansion has been strong in the community, social and personal services. Flexible working is particularly suitable in the service sector to meet the demands of irregular hours, especially for example in retailing or call-centres. Part-time working has increased in most EU member states since 1985, temporary employment is a feature of all EU state labour markets and arrangements such as multiple-job holding have emerged (Yeandle, Gore and Herrington, 1999).

Changes in the nature of work and the working environment are also part of the backdrop to the current interest in work-life balance. Increases in work intensity have been noted in most EU states, with work being carried out faster and often to tight deadlines (European Foundation for the Improvement in Working and Living Conditions, 2002). This trend has many possible causes, although downsizing and de-staffing are likely to be key, combined with demands for increased productivity in the commercial sector or accountability in the public sector. Technological advances may also contribute to work intensification.

High work intensity is strongly linked to health problems, especially stress. Work related stress has been identified as one of the most serious health and safety issues currently in the EU countries (European Foundation for the Improvement in Working and Living Conditions, 1996, 2000) with 28 per cent of EU workers having reported stress-related problems (Cox, Griffiths and Rial-Gonzalez, 2000). Many workers are dissatisfied with the demands of work and would prefer reduced hours. There is a growing demand generally for more flexible work. This trend is stronger with, but not confined to, female workers (European

Foundation for the Improvement in Working and Living Conditions, 2002). Commissioned studies exploring changing work preferences reveal that at least half of employed workers would like to work for less, have preferences for flexibility, part time work options and options where both partners could be in the labour force. The preference generally in Europe is for a combination of high labour market participation rates and short individual working times (Fine-Davis, Fagini, Giovanni, Hojgaard and Clarke, 2004; Bielenski et al., 2002). Interest in the topic is reflected in the on-going debate on working time and quality of working life and in particular the call for an EU wide study into the effects of long working hours on the family, and health for both men and women (European Foundation for the Improvement in Working and Living Conditions, 2005).

Governments and individual organisations are increasingly seeing work-life balance practices as a logical response to problems of absenteeism and high employee turnover. Often called the ‘business case’, it is argued that although there may be costs associated with the provision of policies to reconcile work and non-working life, these are outweighed by the savings in retention, recruitment and re-training. Evidence is accumulating to support this case (Dex, 2003).

While organisational reconciliation of work and family life policies and practices can clearly contribute to improving labour force participation, other policy areas clearly impinge on this objective, most particularly childcare policy. Although the shift in terminology from ‘family friendly’ to reconciling work and family life is in the interest of inclusivity, the fact remains that the key driver of policy development in the area has been changes in women’s employment activity, and although reduced hours, career breaks, and flexi-time may be theoretically available to both men and women, uptake remains highly gendered. ‘Strengthening Equal Opportunities Policies for Women and Men’ is one of the four strands of EU Employment guidelines. Under this strand it is stated that ‘In order to meet the objective of equal opportunity and reach the target of an increased employment rate for women in line with the conclusions of the Lisbon European Council, Member States’ policies towards gender equality should be strengthened and should address all relevant conditions influencing women’s decisions to take up employment’. Member states are asked to ‘design, implement and promote family-friendly policies, including affordable, accessible and high quality

care services for children and other dependants, as well as parental and other leave schemes' (International Labour Organisation, 2002).

NATIONAL POLICY

The broad policy stance in relation to family and work in Ireland is to support parents to have a real choice in making work and care decisions. Ireland, with other EU states, has committed to introduce family-friendly policies and facilitate women to enter and remain in the labour force. The partnership programmes, which have dominated the economic and social policy process in Ireland since 1987, have facilitated a positive, inclusive approach to meeting many goals, including those that improve workplace environments. Through the various partnership programmes, both childcare facilities and supports for organisational work-life balance policies have been addressed.

Ireland is no different than its EU counterparts with regard to labour being a scarce resource, and the recognition that the major potential for growth in the labour force is an increase in the number of women at work (Fisher, 2000). It is estimated that an additional 300,000 employees with third level qualification will need to enter the labour force by 2010 (National Workplace Strategy, 2005). The current rate of female labour force participation is 51.4 per cent (CSO, 2005), having increased by 8.3 per cent since 1999, showing the second greatest increase across EU states. The percentage of couples in which both partners are working full-time has risen from 3.6 per cent in 1984 to 11.4 per cent in 1997, a leap greater than other selected EU states (Fine-Davis et al., 2004).

Relevant legislation includes The Maternity Protection Act 1994-2004, The Parental Leave Act 1998, and The Adoptive Leave Act of 1995. These provide the basis of leave entitlements to all workers. The Maternity Act entitles mothers to twenty-two weeks leave with the option of a further twelve weeks additional, unpaid leave. The Act also provides for the following: a reduction in the compulsory pre-confinement period of maternity leave from four weeks to two weeks; expectant mothers to attend ante-natal classes without loss of pay; a right of fathers for paid time off to attend two ante-natal classes; adjustment of working hours or breaks for breastfeeding mothers; and absence from work on

additional maternity leave to count for employment rights (except remuneration and superannuation benefits), such as seniority and annual leave (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006). The Parental Leave Act 1998, amended in July 2000, allows parents to take parental leave from employment in respect of children born or adopted after 3 June 1996. Fourteen weeks leave is available for each child, and can be taken in one continuous period or, following agreement with one's employer, can be separated into periods of days. Under the Adoptive Leave Act 1995, an adopting mother or a sole male adopter is entitled to twenty weeks adoptive leave. There is also the option to avail of a further twelve weeks unpaid additional leave.

In addition to statutory leave entitlements, individual employers can provide flexible working arrangements (FWA)² at their own discretion. These do not have a statutory basis although protection of part-time workers against discrimination is provided for under the Protection of Employees (part-time work) Act (2001). Facilitating FWAs and work-family reconciliation policies have been explicitly on the national policy agenda since the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000-2003) with the establishment of a National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies. This commitment continued under the last National Agreement, 'Sustaining Progress' with the aim of promoting and facilitating the development of workplace family friendly policies (OECD, 2003). The committee is now called the National Framework Committee for Reconciling Work and Family Life Policies. It is chaired by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and membership is made up of representatives from IBEC, Congress, The Equality Authority and various government departments. The committee provides consultants to assist organisations with their work-life balance policies, provides a toolkit which acts as a support to unions in negotiating and developing initiatives at enterprise level³, and organises a reconciling work and family life day once a year, providing ideas and support for actions individual organisations can take to promote reconciling work and family life.

² e.g. flexitime, part-time work, job sharing, tele or e-working, term time work, career breaks, personalised hours.

³ It provides information on the background, rationale and principles underlying reconciling work and family life policies, on definitions, on challenges and on statutory entitlements.

Childcare policy options available to any democratic state range from state provision of child care facilities which necessitates a high tax regime, to minimal state support, characterised by low tax regimes. At the latter end of this spectrum, policy issues include equity, in particular the extent to which parents can be assisted to pay for childcare, e.g. by tax incentives, vouchers, or direct cash payments such as child benefit. Other concerns across the spectrum include choice issues (provider choice, flexibility), quality of care, and supply-demand mis-matches for different age groups (OECD, 2003).

Historically, Ireland, despite wishing to support parents to have a real choice in work and care decisions, has had a policy of non-intervention (OECD, 2003). Parents have, in the main, been left to arrange their own childcare with the payment of Child Benefit Allowance being the central plank in policy provisions (Fine-Davis et al., 2004). Childcare services have, as a result, developed in an unplanned and piecemeal fashion. Services are unmonitored, unregulated and ad hoc (IBEC/ICTU, 2005). Best described as a minimal state support approach, there is as yet, no, comprehensive statutory childcare provision. Direct provision, where it exists, has been to specific disadvantaged communities, although recent developments show promise for a more comprehensive approach. Not too surprisingly, rates of use of informal, unmonitored, childcare arrangements are very high in Ireland, reflecting the gap in formal provision. Among parents of pre-school children, approximately one third use unpaid relatives and for primary school children the figure is 45 per cent (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2004).

Policy directives on childcare facilities in Ireland date back to the report of the Working Party on Child Facilities for Working Parents in 1983, although this and several other subsequent reports focus mainly on examining the issue rather than implementing facilities (Fine-Davis, 2004). Recommendations for increasing availability of state funded places have been made in the face of predicted labour force projections and slow expansion of privately funded childcare places. More recently the childcare issue has been given priority both through the development of a National Child Care Strategy (1999) and in the National Development Plan 2000-2006, which marks a turning point for childcare in Ireland (IBEC/ICTU, 2005). The findings of the Partnership 2000 expert working group, which underpinned the National Childcare Strategy led to the introduction of

regulations and setting of minimum standards for pre-school services, ensuring quality in provision of services to children under six and the first example of legislative control in the area (*ibid.*)

The strategy has also led to the establishment of national and local structures and in particular the introduction of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), which aims to provide quality childcare in order to enable parents to avail of training, education and employment. The programme aims to expand services, ensure quality in service provision, and to make services accessible, affordable and flexible. This is achieved through the provision of capital and staffing grants to community (not-for-profit) childcare groups and to the development of national and local structures to implement strategic plans that impact on the programme objectives.

There was considerable media debate on the need to address childcare and reconciling work and family life in advance of the 2005 budget, and the provisions were heralded in some quarters as a welcome attempt to assist working parents. In relation to childcare facilities, this included the introduction of a multi-annual investment programme with the aim of funding 50,000 additional childcare places by 2010, over and above the places already provided under the existing EOCP. The provisions included an increase in child benefit, which is customary, but also the addition of an early child care supplement: a direct, non-taxable cash payment of €1,000 to all parents, regardless of income, for all children less than six years of age.⁴

RECONCILING WORK AND FAMILY LIFE IN IRELAND

Any examination of the literature on this topic requires qualification. Surveys are not easily comparable, varying as they do with regard to base (sector, organisation or profession specific), sampling (random or convenience), and response rates. Some surveys report organisational level data, others individual level data. Further, many work practices can be classified as flexible working arrangements, with varying degrees of intention to reconcile work and non-work-life. Some practices, for example shift work, are not intended specifically to reconcile work and non-working life, being integral to the work of the organisation

⁴ Editor's note: This paper was completed before Budget 2006.

and primarily for the employer's benefit. Flexibility in a job may not always be in the interests of employees, it can be used to describe work that is temporary and insecure. To be categorised as 'family friendly', a service or programme must be one that has been explicitly introduced to assist employees reconcile work and non-work-life. Few surveys explore all of these options in a comprehensive manner. Informal practices such as allowing staff to leave early or finish work at home are not always captured in large scale formal surveys, yet may be quite significant especially in small organisations. Availability, access and uptake are not synonymous. Availability refers to an organisational statement or agreement that a facility or option is there. Access, on the other hand, is the actuality regarding availability: only certain employees may be eligible. Access reveals the variations across gender, age, tenure, type of job, and qualification. Uptake is the actual numbers who avail of a flexible working practice, and is the truest 'measure' in practice.

The literature on work-life balance practice in Ireland is limited. The above caveats notwithstanding, the following summary is based on ten studies identified for this review⁵.

Response rates in the surveys reviewed are varied. Organisational surveys yielded the following rates; 72 per cent for the IBEC 2002 survey on manufacturing and wholesale sectors, 27 per cent for the survey of SMEs (Fisher, 2000), and 24 per cent for the national survey (Drew et al., 2003). The latter study also conducted an employee survey across five large companies, which yielded a response rate of 23 per cent. These were predominately in the Dublin area although the sample was balanced with respect to gender. The Fine-Davis et al. survey of 100 employees was also confined to Dublin. The ICTU members survey yielded a rate of 17 per cent. Other studies were confined in various ways; Coughlan (2005) and Hodgins et al., (2005) each to one organisation, and Cullen and McLaughlin (2006) to the hospitality sector.

In 2000, 53 per cent of a sample of Irish SME work organisations report having one or more family friendly arrangement. In 2002 78 per cent of companies had such arrangements, rising to 82 per cent in 2004 (IBEC, 2002, 2004).

⁵ Fisher, 2000; IBEC, 2001; ICTU, 2002; Drew et al., 2003; Fine-Davis et al., 2004; IBEC, 2004; Coughlan, 2005; Hodgins, Galvin and Hogan, 2005; O'Connell and Russell, 2005; Cullen and McLaughlin, 2006

Overall, it is hard to draw conclusions about availability and uptake, given the disparate nature of the surveys (see Table 1). However, some generalities emerge. It would seem that, on balance, availability and uptake have improved over the six years to 2005. Part time work is the arrangement most frequently available, followed by flexi-time and job sharing.

Every survey finds that access to and uptake of flexible working arrangements are considerably lower than availability. In some cases, arrangements are only actually available to a very small number of workers. Restrictions are common, and uptake is typically gendered with women much more likely to seek and take FWAs. Further, men are more likely to take up working from home options and women more likely to take reduced hours options (Drew et al., 2003). These findings are consistent with international literature (e.g. Fine-Davis et al, 2004; Dex and Smith, 2002; Kodz, Harper and Dench, 2002).

By contrast very few organisations provide comprehensive family supports. Two per cent of organisations have worksite crèches and less than 1 per cent subsidise a local crèche or provide financial assistance. Three per cent provide other informal support for child, elder or other care. However, employees rank flexi-time, reduced hours and working from home higher than childcare support as options for improving reconciling work and family life (Drew et al., 2003). There is some indication, albeit crude, that demand is not being met, especially for female workers. In the Drew et al. employee survey, 99 per cent of men were working full-time, yet 5 per cent would prefer to work part-time and 2 per cent to job share. Eighty-three per cent of women were working full-time although nearly one quarter of women would prefer to work part-time and 10 per cent would like to job share (*ibid.*).

Flexible working arrangements are more common in the public sector (Drew et al., 2003; O'Connell and Russell, 2005), to the point that in the former study they were described as 'civil service practice'. They are also more common in large organisations and organisations in which trade unions are recognised.

Both employers and employees typically perceive flexible working arrangements to have positive outcomes, at both the individual and organisational level (e.g. job satisfaction, motivation, reduced absenteeism, improved retention) although organisations also perceive difficulties with implementation such as added workload for supervisors, being open to 'abuse', or

Table 1: Summary of availability of and uptake of flexible working arrangements

<i>Flexible working arrangement</i>	<i>% of organisations in which available</i>	<i>% of workers who report it is available in their organisation</i>	<i>% of workers who have used</i>
Part time work	52% (IBEC, 2002) 53% (ESRI, 2005) 66% (NCFCCFP, 2003)	49% (Fisher, 2000) 23% (ICTU, 2002) 66% of male and 84% of women (Fine-Davis et al., 2004)	22% (ESRI, 2005) 9% of men, 35% of women 12% of men, 42% of women (Fine-Davis et al., 2004)
Flexi-time	17% (ICTU, 2002) 43% (ESRI, 2005) 52% (Drew et al., 2003)	31% (Fisher, 2000) 27% (ICTU, 2002) 48% of men and 50% of women (Fine-Davis, 2004)	24% (ESRI, 2005) 36% of men and 38% of women (Fine-Davis, 2004)
Job Sharing	18% (IBEC, 2002) 30% (ESRI, 2005)	23% (Fisher, 2000) 51% (ICTU, 2002) 60% of men 48% of women (Fine-Davis, 2004)	6.5% (ESRI, 2005) 4% of men and 12% of women (Fine-Davis, 2004)
Working from Home	14% (ESRI, 2005) 21% (NCFPP, 2003)	28% (Fisher, 2000) 2% (ICTU, 2002)	8% (ESRI, 2005)
Term Time leave	23% (NCFPP, 2003)	4% (Fisher, 2000) 23% (ICTU, 2002) 24% of men and 4% of women (Fine-Davis, 2004)	10% of men and 0% of women (Fine-Davis, 2004)

opening 'floodgates' of unmet demand (Fisher, 2000; Drew et al., 2003). Both Irish and UK studies draw attention to issues for line managers who must implement programmes. Managers need guidance around assessment for eligibility, administration, balancing arrangements with targets, having negotiation skills, and dealing with senior management who despite stating support are actually ambivalent and not visibly supportive (Drew et al., 2003; Kodz et al., 2002). In reality, there are few empirical studies on the outcomes of flexible working arrangements, (McCarthy, 2004). The limited evidence available indicates that outcomes are broadly positive, but not clear cut. Complexities emerge, indicating that other job related factors confound simple cause effect relationships and that trade-offs may be part of this rather complicated picture (O'Connell and Russell, 2005).

Heavy workloads make it very difficult for workers to take up actual programmes when available. Heightened competitiveness, globalisation, increased demand and expectation on employees – combine to create a 'long-hours' culture, a countervailing force to the work-life balance imperative. Evidence indicates that practice is poor in this area. Average working hours in the EU have decreased, although these decreases conceal significant extremes. In 2000 when the EU average weekly working hours were 38.2 hours, the average in Ireland was 40.4, the fourth highest country (European Foundation, 2000). More recently, 62 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women report working longer than standard hours, and nearly half of these report receiving no compensation for this extra time (Drew et al., 2003). In a comparison of four EU states Irish men worked the longest hours, at 45 per week (Fine-Davis et al, 2004). Often these long hours and expectations of over-commitment are part of an organisational culture of 'instant response, and instant and constant availability' (Kodz et al., 2002) that make it very difficult for workers to take up actual programmes when available.

CHILD CARE PROVISION IN IRELAND

With regard to statutory provision for assisting parents, it is very difficult to evaluate 'practice'. The number of births in 2004⁶ was 61,684. During that year 33,495 maternity benefit claims were awarded. This represented approximately 54 per cent of all births,

⁶ Latest available data at time of writing.

factoring in some multiple births covered by single awards of maternity benefit. There is no data with which to ascertain the number of people who didn't claim the benefit but who may have been entitled to it (Stokes, 2006). Similarly, we have no information on uptake of antenatal classes by either mothers or fathers as a function of recent statutory provision.

Comparing Ireland to various other EU states, leave provisions, financial support for families with children and availability of affordable quality childcare are limited in Ireland (OECD, 2003). Public social spending on families with children is low by EU standards. It is higher in Austria than Ireland, although lower again in Japan. Ireland is however characterised by an absence of direct policy intervention. Irish social policy supports mothers well for six months or so after birth, although after this support does not compare favourably to many of our European neighbours (*ibid.*). The amount of time allowed for maternity leave is broadly similar to most other EU states, although there is some variation in the rate at which it is paid. Ranging from full pay to 50 per cent, Irish mothers fare quite well, retaining 80 per cent of pay during their twenty-two weeks leave. There is much more variation in parental leave however, with most other EU countries providing longer time periods than available to Irish parents, with more flexibility and some form of pay. Only four of the fifteen countries reviewed by Drew et al., (2003) do not pay parental leave, and nine have statutory paternity leave ranging from three to fourteen days. Several states provide for time to tend to sick children in addition to parental leave, which compares very favourably to the three days per year *force majeure* leave available in Ireland. Although statutory paternity leave is the norm in Europe, it is not a legal entitlement in Ireland and is only granted at employer's discretion.

Provision of childcare places in Ireland has been reviewed principally by the CSO (2002), the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2004) and by IBEC/ICTU (2005). Non-parental childcare was used regularly by 42 per cent of families with pre-school children and 25 per cent of families with primary school going children (CSO, 2002; Congress, 2002). Unsurprisingly, families in which both parents work are more likely to use childcare. Lone parents with pre-school children use childcare less than average although those with primary school children have a higher than average use (28 per cent vs. 25 per cent). Unpaid care, provided by relatives, is the predominant form

of care, especially for lone parents, followed by paid non-relative care, and by relatives for pay. Group or centre based care was least availed of especially at primary school level, with only 4,000 families of pre-school children using a crèche (CSO, 2002). Most children attending group care attend it on a sessional basis. While some childcare centres or crèches are community-based and charge only nominal fees, many centres are private sector.

Demand clearly exceeds supply, with parents showing strong preferences for paid carers or group care, often unavailable to them, either due to costs or lack of facilities (CSO, 2002; Congress, 2002; Fine-Davis et al., 2004). However, the recent national response to poor delivery of childcare services has been noteworthy. Since the launch of the EOCP, over €440 million has been committed to the development of childcare places, quality and staffing, which represents a serious commitment to the issue from the government. Quality and standards have been addressed through the provision of FETAC training awards, and local structures have been put in place with county development boards, through the creation of city and county childcare committees, and links with local ADM programmes. There has been a significant increase in numbers of centres availing of grants between 2002 and 2003, and by 2003 there were 1,163 beneficiaries (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2004). The number of childcare places has risen significantly and the programme is on target for a 50 per cent increase in places by 2006 (Department of Equality, Justice and Law Reform, 2004). There has been a significant increase in the number of centres availing of grants between 2002 and 2003, and by 2003 there were 1,163 beneficiaries (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2004). In these respects the programme has made significant strides in provision and standard setting. The 2005 budget provided another 90 million capital funding to increase the number of places, bringing government commitment to about €550 million (IBEC/ICTU, 2005), and signaling an on-going recognition of the need for funding and a willingness to provide places. There is however still a need to address service gaps, for example in the provision of full day care, or care throughout the summer months.

Although the EOCP has delivered at a pace, we are so far behind that there is still considerable unmet need. Fundamental issues such as affordability and access to childcare still require attention. Despite facilitating capital and staffing development

many providers remain outside the system and a national, comprehensive system is not in place (IBEC/ICTU, 2005). A nationwide network of childcare centres which could act as hubs for training and administration, as recommended by OECD, is still beyond reach within the current structures. County childcare committees have potential but limited budgets, and no official obligation to register and monitor standards (*ibid.*).

CONCLUSION

So, how easy or difficult is it for Irish parents to reconcile work and non-working life? Overall, it would seem that we have improved considerably in terms of basic provision, but much could be done on the ground to make work-life balance a reality for all.

Statutory leave provision for mothers has increased in recent years, bringing Ireland into line with other EU states. Coming from a low base with only half of organisations providing some form of non-statutory flexible work arrangement in 2000, at a time when provision in the UK was 86 per cent (Dex and Smith, 2002), the situation in Ireland has improved quite dramatically. Most recent data (IBEC, 2004) indicate almost 80 per cent of organisations have some form of flexible work practice. Part time work is the arrangement most frequently available, followed by term-time and job-sharing. So while in 2003, work-life balance practice was seen as a 'civil service practice', something which is associated with female administrative or clerical workers and which unions are not openly in favour of (Drew et al., 2003), it seems that practices are gaining in currency. Similarly, with regard to childcare, the number of childcare places has risen. The EOCP target of increasing provision in 2000 by 50 per cent has been met and exceeded. The programme is on target for increasing places by 50 per cent by 2006, with 88 per cent of the target met by 2005 (IBEC/ICTU, 2005).

Substantial barriers remain, however, to the reconciliation of work and family life. Within organisations, the gap between policies that make work life balance programmes available and actually getting the practice 'right' is considerable. Uptake of work-life balance options is surprisingly low, given the multiplicity of 'arguments' in their favour. There are clearly difficulties at the level of the organisation. Lack of information

and support, poor management of work and deadlines, restrictions on eligibility, and lack of implementation training for managers have all been identified in the literature (e.g. Kodz et al., 2002; Drew et al., 2003, Hodgins et al., 2005). There is evidence of considerable managerial discretion over work life arrangements (Kodz et al., 2003; Drew et al., 2003; Hodgins et al., 2005) implying that subjective factors apply a lot in deciding who is eligible. In short, organisations make options available but rarely follow through with support, adequate cover or conviction. A key difficulty is the assumption that balancing work and family is seen to be essentially a matter of individual responsibility, with the organisation playing a minimalist role. Thus, entrenched assumptions pervade organisations and seriously limit practice. Further, assumptions about individual responsibility do not challenge gendered patterns of uptake. As long as problems of work-life balance are regarded as 'problems for women', an organisation does not need to look to itself for answers.

The idea that deep-seated assumptions impede the uptake of work-life balance options is not new. For example, low sense of entitlement, the interpretation of commitment and productivity in terms of time spent at work, the assumption that family and occupational spheres are distinct, have been identified as underpinning much male and female employment behaviour, and work-life balance option uptake in particular (e.g. Lewis and Lewis, 1996; Lewis, 1997; Lewis, 2001; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher and Pruitt, 2002). As long as work life is prioritised over family life, people who make choices for reduced hours/part-time work/family leave of any sort will be seen as less committed. There is evidence that taking up flexible working arrangements is seen to be (by both bosses and employees) 'at the expense' of career advancement (e.g. Lewis, 2001; Kodz et al., 2002; Drew et al., 2003; Hodgins et al., 2005). Choosing an option that signals low commitment is likely to be avoided, explaining both low uptake, particularly by men, and the gendered nature of uptake.

These assumptions, along with the assumption that work-life balance is principally the responsibility of the individual, are essentially rooted within organisational culture. It is contended here that work-life balance in organisational life will not become a reality until such cultural assumptions are challenged. The persistence of low work-life balance uptake, noted in the literature since the mid-1990s, is clearly due to intangible but powerful assumptions. It is part of the gendered nature of

organisations, described as systemic and pervasive (e.g. O'Connor, 1996) and potentially resistant to change. Top-level leadership, both within high profile organisations and at the level of the state, would constitute one important step in achieving this.

Assumptions about the location of responsibility for the provision of childcare underpins child care services in a related way, and further limits genuine reconciliation of work and family life. Prior to the EOCP, childcare provision in this country was heavily criticised, being notable mainly by its absence (e.g. Commission on the Family, 1998; OECD, 2003; Fine-Davis, 2004). This minimalist state intervention approach is underpinned by the assumption that childcare is the responsibility of individual parents. Despite increased provision in the past few years, it seems that this core assumption still underpins policy, with consequent limitations on increased labour force participation, and the integration of work and family life.

This is reflected in the provision of cash benefits rather than a comprehensive state funded childcare system. Although the underlying rationale for child benefit is to increase parental choices around child care provision, it may not always impact directly on either the purchase of quality childcare or facilitating second earners into the labour market. Cash payments double as measures to reduce poverty, and may be captured in many others ways in the context of diverse financial demands on families. Neither are they linked to spending on childcare, (e.g. rates paid contingent on use of quality services, following state assessment) as recommended by the OECD (2003). The new early childcare supplement is no different to child benefit in this respect and the broad thrust of policy – to ‘allow’ parents to purchase childcare – may not fully translate into a reconciliation of work and family life.

Even where parents do find themselves in a position to channel cash payments into childcare, it may still not lead to desired labour market options. Provision is still heavily reliant on private operators, albeit with some grant aid. Childcare costs in Ireland consume very high proportions of working parents’ earnings, in comparison with other EU countries and costs are not tax deductible (Fine-Davis, 2004). Costs have increased over time and vary regionally, with care in the Dublin region being the most expensive (IBEC/ICTU, 2005). The costs of childcare interfere with decision making in the context of reconciling work and family life. In adapting their working lives, parents may find

themselves faced with options of either moving from full-time to part-time, and not working over-time in order to limit costs of child care, or working long shifts and over-time, in order to pay for child care but not see much of the children (Congress, 2002). This will only be addressed by capping parental fees, something which successive governments have not been willing to countenance. As long as the state expects parents to pay for childcare in the context of a free market economy, there will be problems for parents with affordability and thus with access. Arguably, current policy promotes private enterprise as much as it offers a real opportunity for second earners to take up employment for the reconciliation of family and work life, or for social inclusion.

It is argued here that for work-life balance to become realistically attainable, visionary policy making is required. The reconciliation of work and non-working life will not be a reality for Irish people until it is accepted that that it not just the responsibility – or the problem – of individuals (usually women) to solve, but that the state, through the development of a national, state funded comprehensive childcare service, and through challenging organisational culture and the gendered nature of organisational life, has a central rather than a subsidiary role to play. Work-life balance issues need to be construed, as espoused at EU level, as social inclusion issues, rather than service provision targets. Policy responses need to be more than window dressing. Deep-seated assumptions, values and ideologies about work and the family – the heartland of policy – must be exposed, examined and challenged.

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