

The International Corner

Work-Family Balance From a Gender Perspective: Some Observations from Finland

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The Gender Equality Index recently ranked Finland as the second best country when it comes to gender equality. The Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland) have long been known for their gender equality ideologies and practices. Accordingly, a dual-breadwinner ideology in which both mothers and fathers work full-time has characterized the Finnish society for centuries. As a result, different types of statutory family-friendly policies have been developed to help parents achieve better work-family balance and shared parenthood. In general, family-friendly policies are available to men and women employees alike. Both mothers and fathers are allowed to take a relatively long parental leave (until a child is 3 years old) as well as a partial care leave (allowing part-time work for family reasons). (For the Finnish system in detail, see www.kela.fi and click on “families with children”.)

However, despite gender neutral legislation in Finland, it is primarily women that take advantage of family-friendly policies. According to a recent study concerning parental leaves and their use, fathers very rarely utilize long parental leaves (Lammi-Taskula, 2007). Furthermore, a brand-new national gender equality barometer (N = 2000) published by Statistics Finland shows that about 90 percent of respondents (both men and women) report that Finnish fathers should participate more in caring for children. There seems to be a gap between the ideological and practical levels when it comes to shared parenthood. At an ideal level, both men and women are allowed to participate in work and family roles, but in practice, traditional gender role expectations hinder men and women from fulfilling equally their roles as worker, parent, and spouse. Therefore, despite the top position in global gender equality comparisons, gender inequality does characterize family life in Finland.

The Finnish workplace is also not free from gender inequality. Again, statistics portray promising figures for Finland. Women's participation rate in the labor market is very high; 68.2 percent for women and 69.8 percent for men in 2008 (Statistics Finland). Despite this equal labor force participation rate by gender, occupations and organizations are still highly segregated by gender in Finland. The overall trend is that the public sector (especially health care and education) is female-dominated while the private sector (especially manufacturing and ICT) is male-dominated. This kind of segregation has natural implications for work-family balance. Firstly, because women employees most often take family leaves and use flexibility policies, female-dominated fields (i.e., the public sector) need to recruit constantly for many temporary employees in order to substitute for permanent workers who are absent for family-related reasons. Thus, the Finnish female-dominated public sector is hit quite dramatically by the high costs of family-friendly policies. This, in turn, has two important consequences, which can also be negatively reflected in work-family balance. First, for a great proportion of Finnish women, it is hard to establish a stable working career, and many women are stuck in involuntary

temporary employment. Temporary workers may again be in a disadvantaged position in their organization; for example, they are often offered less resources and benefits. All of this may have implications on employees' work-family balance; research on this topic has just begun, but national reports do support this reasoning.

The second consequence of gendered organizations is that the male-dominated organizations operating in the private sector tend to ignore family-friendly policies because their (male) employees do not use them. A kind of second-order outcome of this is that male-dominated organizations are likely to remain family-unfriendly by their every day practices and organizational culture. Contemporary Finnish work-family research has seized upon this idea and some recent studies (Mauno et al., 2005; 2006) have shown that a family-unfriendly organizational culture is likely to prevail, especially in the Finnish male-dominated manufacturing sector. In particular, family unfriendly management culture has turned out to be one of the main problems in Finnish organizations. As a result of this, Finnish organizations should develop their management culture as more family supportive; this is especially true for the private sector companies.

A list of selected recent publications on the work-family interface by Finnish teams

Heponiemi, T., Elovainio, M., Kouvonen, A., Pekkarinen, L., & Sinervo, T. (2008). The effects of job demands and low control on work-family conflict: The role of fairness in decision-making and management. *Journal of Community Psychology* (in press).

Kinnunen, U., Feldt, T., Mauno, S., & Rantanen, J. (2008). Interface between work and family: A longitudinal, individual and crossover perspective. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* (in press).

Kinnunen, U., & Mauno, S. (2008). Work-family conflict in individual's lives: Prevalence, antecedents and outcomes. In K. Näswall, J. Hellgren, & M. Sverge, M. (Eds.), *The individual in the changing working life* (pp. 126-147). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

Lammi-Taskula, J. (2007). *Parental leave for fathers? Gendered conceptions and practices in families with young children in Finland*. STAKES, Finland: Research reports 166.

Mauno, S., Kinnunen, U., & Piitulainen, S. (2005). Work-family culture in four organizations in Finland: Examining antecedents and outcomes. *Community, Work & Family*, 8, 115-140.

Mauno, S., Kinnunen, U., & Ruokolainen, M. (2006). Exploring work- and organization-based resources as moderators between work-family conflict, well-being and job attitudes. *Work & Stress*, 20, 210-233.

Rantanen, J., Kinnunen, U., Feldt, T., & Pulkkinen, L. (2008). Work-family conflict and psychological well-being: Stability and cross-lagged relations within one- and six-year follow-up. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 73, 37-51.

Väänänen, A., Kumpulainen, R., Kevin, M. V. et al. (2008). Work-family characteristics as determinants of sickness absence: A large-scale cohort study of three occupational grades. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 13, 181-196.

Väänänen, A., May, K., Ala-Mursula, L., Pentti, J., Kivimäki, M., & Vahtera, J. (2004). The double burden of and negative spillover between paid and domestic work: Associations with health among men and women. *Women & Health, 40*, 1-18.

Wiese, B., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2008). Goal conflict and facilitation as predictors of work-family satisfaction and engagement. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 73*, 490-497.

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