

## The International Corner

### Work and Family in Bulgaria



Siyka Kovacheva

**Bio:** Siyka Kovacheva is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. She is a researcher and teaching professor with a significant experience in the social transformation of Bulgarian society, youth and family policies. She also acts as the Head of New Europe Centre for Regional Studies in Plovdiv which specialised in policy oriented research and consultancy. She has been the national coordinator of more than 10 international comparative studies under the 5th and 6th FP of EC and other international foundations. She is a member of the International Sociological Association, RC34: Sociology of Youth and the European Sociological Association. Her interests lie in the field of youth transitions to parenthood and intergenerational relations, policy programmes and measures in support of the young unemployed, and social inclusion more broadly. She has published on the changes of work and family, work-life balance and organisational social capital.

#### An Interview with Siyka Kovacheva by Judi Casey

In post-communist Bulgaria, the public debate about work and family life has been strongly linked to the country's transition from central planning to a market economy and the concerns about the dropping rates of both fertility and employment. Women have been working in the public sphere, at least since the middle of the 20th century, and the current mass feeling of imbalance comes from a forced retreat to more traditional gender roles.

Gender differences in employment are not as visible in Bulgaria as they are in many advanced economies. For example:

- Eurostat data show that women's employment rate in 2010 was 8% lower than that of men and that the gender pay gap was 15% lower, which is slightly less than the EU average of 17%.
- The average number of hours worked weekly is 41 for both women and men.
- The predominant employment pattern for households in Bulgaria is still full-time jobs for both genders.
- Flexibility in terms of time, place, and legal conditions for both genders is very low. Thus, only 1.5% of the employed held part-time jobs in 2010.

Case studies of public and private companies in Eastern Europe (Kovacheva, 2010) revealed that there was less formal flexibility but more informal flexibility at the workplace allowed by line managers. However, this practice was more common among older managers, perhaps as an influence of the previous regime, whereas flexibility was rare among younger supervisors, who give preferences to work efficiency.

What contributes most to the imbalances of work and care for women and men in Bulgaria is the unequal division of housework among the partners and the traditional gender ideologies about family roles (Stoyanova & Kirova, 2008). The European Quality of Life Survey (2007) found that women did about 6 hours of housework more than men every week. And respondents from Bulgaria in the European Social Survey (Tilkidziev & Dimova, 2010) scored among the lowest on the scale of gender equality.

The dominant culture assumes women's greater commitment to unpaid care for dependent family members and men's greater responsibility for career advancement and entrepreneurship. Given the long hours spent in the workplace, working mothers commonly alternate between full-time care for their young children and full-time jobs, reducing both their number of children and their career achievements.

In Bulgaria, the national regulation on parental leave and provision of public childcare services is among the most generous in Europe. For example:

- The statutory leave arrangements for parents include 410 days of maternity leave paid at 90% of earnings, followed by 1 year of parental leave paid at a fixed sum and an additional year of unpaid leave.
- There is an extensive network of subsidised public childcare centres (even though shortages are experienced in big cities), and more than 80% of children between the ages of 3 and 6 are enrolled in them.
- When parents return to work, they are allowed to take up to 60 days per year of paid leave to care for a sick child.

Although parental leaves do present good opportunities for staying economically active when caring for very young children, they also replicate outlived models of gendered divisions of work and care in the family, as it is almost always women that use the caring leaves. The long absence from the workplace serves as an obstacle for women's occupational development and often is a discriminatory factor in employers' recruitment policies.

Attempts to involve fathers to a greater extent in parental leave have not yet been successful. When the paid maternity leave was prolonged to 315 days in 2007 and then to 410 days in 2009, fathers initially were not allowed to use any part of it. Under outside pressure, the law was amended so that fathers are currently allowed to take a "maternity leave" once the child is six months old.

In addition, since 2009, there has been a paid paternity leave of 15 days, which fathers can use upon the birth of a child. These efforts have been frustrated, however, by the reduction in income families experience when fathers take this leave and the consequent negative effect on family budgets and fathers' careers.

We can conclude that while officially attesting to gender equality in employment, the country's family policy does not seriously challenge the assumption that caring for young children is a mother's responsibility and that the father should join in caring much later, if at all.

#### **References:**

Eurofound. *Eurofound European Quality of Life Survey*. (2007). Retrieved from <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/qualityoflife/eqls/2007/index.htm>

Eurostat. *Eurostat Labour Force Survey*. (2011). Retrieved from [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search\\_database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database)

Kovacheva, S. (2010). *Work Family Balance*. Sofia: East-West.

Stoyanova, K., & A. Kirova. (2008). *Gender Inequality in Paid and Unpaid Work*. Sofia: Academic Publishing House Marin Drinov.

Tilkidziev, N., & L. Dimova. (2010). *Wellbeing and Trust. Bulgaria in Europe. Comparative Analysis of ESS 2006/2009*. Sofia: East-West. (ESS data available on <http://ess.nsd.uib.no/>).

\

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.

E-mail: [wfnetwork@bc.edu](mailto:wfnetwork@bc.edu) - Phone: 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-9202



[www.bc.edu](http://www.bc.edu)

*The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation*