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Work-Family Balance

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The concept of work-family balance is usually defined as the act of balancing of inter-role pressures between the work and family domains that lead to role conflict. The conflict is driven by the organizations' views of the "ideal worker" as well as gender disparities and stereotypes that ignore or discount the time spent in the unpaid work of family and community. Balancing actions are mainly aimed at the change of the women's employment by more gender equity in fields of paid employment (including career and responsibilities) and family care work to achieve equal satisfaction, engagement, and good functioning of individuals in both spheres.

A broader version of this concept is a work-life balance, which includes not only family, but also "everything else," the individual lifestyle (for example, leisure, health, spiritual practices, hobbies, community involvement). The main components are time, psychological involvement, and satisfaction balances between gendered work and family roles (Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw 2003).

The work-family balance was coined in the 1970s in the United Kingdom-based on a work - leisure dichotomy, which was invented in the mid-1800s. Early writers such as Karl Marx underlined that industrialization leads to the separation of work and non-work into relatively independent spheres. Balancing solutions were popularized in the last decades of the twentieth century in European Union countries and the United States by legislation (for example, the wage gap, gender discrimination, occupational rights), flexible workplace arrangements, and the market care services (Jain and Nair 2013). Among factors supporting this process was the economic recession of the 1970s, which accelerated women entering the labor market and changed the dominant family model with a single income of the male breadwinner into the dual-earner family. Also, single-parent family and population aging continue to emerge in developed countries, which increase demand for family-friendly work policies. In the 1990s, further workplace shifts were supported by technological solutions (for example, computers, Internet, cell phones) that enable more flexible work, which may be done outside the office.

Work-family balance varies in both developed and developing countries due to socio-

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cultural, organizational, and personal conditions. Usually, balance is important in wealthy communities that allow more leisure time, organizations that may support gender equity with specific benefits based on market forces and individual performance, and in adulthood, that implies care responsibilities of children or aging parents. Also, gender is important in a work-family balance due to the fact that “equal pay” required by laws usually is not a reality and women are paid less than men in similar positions, and the labor market is characterized by dualism - men and women tend to choose different career paths and, for example, women jobs in education, culture, and care are paid less than men in industry and science.

Early studies on the work-family interaction have been focused on the role stress theory or the role scarcity hypothesis that underlines negative consequences of work demands. Such pressures may lead to role overload, role conflict, increased staff turnover and absenteeism, lower performance, increased costs of contracting for personal services, and mental and physical health breakdowns (for example, cardiovascular disease, sexual health problems, smoking, and alcohol consumption) (EU-OSHA 2007). Role imbalance that heavily favors family over the other domains was also examined. More investigation recently concerns the positive role balance, which refers to the tendency of engagement in every role with equivalent and high amount of time, involvement, and satisfaction, which leads to gains such as facilitation and positive spillover. A later developed concept of enrichment further shows that work experiences may enhance the quality of family life and vice versa (Jain and Nair 2013). Supporting positive balance and enrichment aims to a condition in which both male and female employees are good workers and caregivers.

Balance in work-family interaction is becoming important not only as a part of employment and family policies but also as part of human resources management and corporate social responsibility due to the assumption that employees are stakeholders that create a positive image of the organization. Some employers realized that a positive balance helps with recruitment and retention of employees, build commitment and loyalty to the organization, and increase productivity. However, because the “family-friendly” solutions may be criticized by employees without children, broader “life-friendly” benefits are also promoted, such as flexible working hours and telecommuting.

There are many types of benefits that were recognized as fostering a positive work-life balance (European Commission 2005; UNDESA 2012). Depending on their purpose, four groups may be distinguished.

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- Working time innovations, flexible forms of employment and work organization: flextime, compressed workweeks, telecommuting/working at home, part-time employment, job-sharing, term-time work, saving hours.
- Leave: paid and unpaid leave - maternity, paternity, parental, for family reasons (elder-care), adoption; career break scheme.
- Dependent care: childcare arrangements - workplace nursery, contracted childcare places, child-minding, childcare resource and referral, financial assistance, early childhood education, youth care, holiday play schemes/summer camps, informal care and grandparents, care for elderly, people with disabilities.
- Supportive arrangements: employees' counseling/assistance, work-family management training, work-family coordinators, research on employees' needs, financial contributions; partnerships between employers, trade unions, and employees.

Such instruments may be combined with different methods and procedures in programs of specific organizations that adapt to their gender diversity and employees' needs. These include not only combining paid and unpaid workloads of men and women but also the issue of leisure and care.

However, the concept of work-family balance is still in development, and there is no consensus in terms of defining, measuring, researching, and theorizing balance with its components and factors (Rantanen et al. 2011). Techniques for evaluation of the benefits that are aimed at reducing the problematic life role imbalances are also not yet fully described and determined.

SEE ALSO: Division of Labor, Domestic; Gender, Politics, and the State in Central and Eastern Europe; Gender, Politics, and the State in the United States and Canada; Parental Leave in Comparative Perspective

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