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Work-Life Balance - The Irish National Report

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Introduction

The last decade has seen unprecedented levels of measured economic growth as well as employment growth in the Irish economy. A particular feature of employment growth has been a dramatic increase in women's paid employment. Following a period of very high economic growth over the second half of the 1990s, Irish growth rates fell during 2001/2 before leveling out again in 2003/4. Throughout this period, growth rates in Ireland have been above EU average levels, at times significantly so. At the same time unemployment levels, including long-term unemployment, fell from a high point of 10% in 1997 to 4% currently.

The economic situation of women in Ireland has undergone significant changes over the last fifteen years, marked particularly by a dramatic rise in the proportions of women in paid employment. In fact it has been a growth in women's employment which has accounted for most of the recent employment growth. Women's employment rate in 2003 was 55.8% and the gender gap in employment rates was 19.2%. Among the older age group 55-64 the gender gap is much higher, reflected in a 33.1% employment rate among women and a 64.7% employment rate among men in 2003. There has been a significant narrowing of this gap however - between 2002 and 2003 the gender gap in the employment rate among those aged 55-64 narrowed from 34.2% to 31.6%.

This new higher level of women's employment has brought with it new tensions to the issues of work-life balance. From a traditional situation in which the majority of couple households were based on a single earner, dual earner households have become the norm. At the same time there has been an increase in the proportions of lone parents (primarily women) in paid employment, training and education. Supports for households and individuals combining paid employment with care responsibilities is low in Ireland. Statutory leave entitlements are at the lowest end of the EU spectrum and public support for childcare is minimal. On the private market, child and other care services are expensive and limited in availability. Reliance on extended family and community care supports plays a significant role but changes in women's economic position means that the availability of such care services is unlikely to continue at current levels into the future.

“ Current employment policy is oriented towards increasing participation rates for all groups, including carers, and current health policy is predicated on continued availability of informal carers to provide the vast bulk of care and support in the community.” (Equality Authority 2004)

Work-life balance initiatives in Ireland are largely informal and while present in some sectors of the economy are virtually absent from others. Certain large scale organisations, such as the civil and public sector, banking, insurance and other private enterprises have introduced significant work-life balance policies as a result of internal negotiation or individual initiative. Employers and trade union organisations have stated commitments to promoting and pursuing work-life balance initiatives and have clearly articulated policies in this area. Both The National Framework Committee for Work Life Balance Policies (established under a national agreement in the late 1990's and involving the social partners) and the Equality Authority are engaged in programmes to promote work-life balance and 'family friendly' initiatives.

Six major commercial State employers (An Post, Dublin Bus, Iarnrod Eireann, Dublin City Council and Public Appointments Services) together with the social partners have established a Work Life Balance Network (supported by the EQUAL EU Community Initiative Programme) in order to progress examples of good practice and to strengthen the support for work-life balance initiatives particularly within commercial organisations.

There is no comprehensive data on the combining of work and caring activities in Ireland. Available data is most detailed in relation to the employment circumstances of different households with and without children. However, in most instances data collection has taken place as once-off exercises and do not lend themselves at present to time series analysis. Other caring responsibilities are not covered. Recent data provide a profile of the relationship to paid employment of different households in Ireland. It reveals the extent to which different households are combining formal work and childcare responsibilities and also some insight into the extent to which there are households who have been unable to, but wish to, combine paid work and care. It is not a complete picture. Many caring activities remain outside the scope of the data (particularly eldercare) and some employment (particularly unregistered employment) is not captured by the data. Where this report explores care services its focus is on provision for childcare.

Part 1. Reconciliation Policy

1. Child care services

1.1 Introduction

Childcare services in Ireland are largely provided through paid and unpaid relatives, carers and creches/nurseries on the private marketplace. Public funding for childcare is extremely limited. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) which provides funding primarily for the development of childcare facilities in designated geographical areas of disadvantage is the only public childcare programme. This programme does not fund pre-schools as they are defined as 'early education' and only funds 'creches' which are defined as 'childcare'. Low income households in particular depend on the EOCP programme which has limited availability, while middle and higher income families pay high costs on the private market place.

In the most recent budget (December 2004) additional funding of EURO90 million was allocated to EOCP and it was extended to 2011. To date 31,500 childcare places have been funded under EOCP – 20,500 of these were in place by June 2004 - the target is to increase the overall figure by 17,000 bringing to 48,500 by 2011. However, as these figures indicate, the Programme is already significantly behind its target level. The EOCP also provides capital grants for community and not-for-profit groups as well as private sector childcare providers. Staffing grants are provided to groups in designated areas only.

Much emphasis in government policy is placed on EOCP which is aimed at supporting childcare facilities in geographical areas of disadvantage and it remains the only public programme of support for the development of childcare facilities. The NESC Report evaluating the EOCP states that the programme is 'performing poorly' reflected in the fact that by the end of 2002 it had only reached 44% of its spending target and while the numbers of staff places supported was on target, the number of childcare places supported was significantly less than planned (NESC 2005 forthcoming).

1.2 Availability

For the first time in 2003 the Central Statistics Office published data on the use of different kinds of childcare services by different kinds of households in Ireland. This data is based on a special module of the Quarterly National Household Survey carried out in the Fourth Quarter 2004 (Central Statistics Office 2003).

This survey covered a total of 352,800 households with pre-school and or/primary school-going children. Of these :-

- 36% involved couples with one partner in paid employment
- 41% involved couples with both partners in paid employment
- 8% involved lone parent in paid employment
- 9% involved lone parent not in paid employment
- 5% were categorised as 'other'.

What is clearly evident from this survey is that Irish households with young children are heavily reliant on relatives to provide childcare. Nearly a half of all households with young children use unpaid relatives (36.6%) or paid relatives (12.4%) to provide childcare. Paid carers account for 29% of childcare arrangements, while creche/montessori facilities account for 16% of the total.

Table 1 : Households use of different types of non-parental childcare arrangements

	Unpaid relative	Paid relative	Paid carer	Creche/ Montess	Other	Total
All families	36.6%	12.4%	29.2%	16.2%	5.6%	100%
	53.9	18.3	43.0	23.9	8.3	147.4
All couples with children	36.3%	13.1%	32.5%	17.6%	23.2%	100%
	43.6	15.7	39.1	21.1	27.9	120.1
Couples with children - one in paid employment	34.6%	6.1%	13.1%	33.1%	20.1%	100%
	4.5	0.8	1.7	4.3	2.7	13.0
Couples with children - both in paid employment	36.5%	14.1%	49.5%	15.3%	3.5%	100%
	38.5	14.9	52.2	16.1	3.7	105.4
Lone parents	50.5%	13.2%	19.1	13.7%	7.3%	100%
	10.3	2.7	3.9	2.8	1.5	20.4

Source : Calculations based on data in Quarterly National Household Survey. Childcare Module. Central Statistics Office 2003.

Note : Data for lone parents too low in number to breakdown between those in and outside paid employment. Figures may not add up to one hundred per cent due to rounding up.

This data further revealed :

- 120,000 couples with pre-school or primary school-going children - 87% of whom use non-parental childcare arrangements
- 44.2% of lone parents (30,800 families) in paid employment of whom 67.5% use non-parental childcare arrangements.
- 42.5% (73,000 families) with pre-school children use non-parental childcare arrangements - 69% of this is paid care.
- 25.3% (67,000 families) with primary school-going children use non-parental childcare arrangements - 54% of this is paid care.

- 75% (53,000) of couples with both partners in paid employment use non-parental childcare arrangements for pre-school children - 70% of this is paid care.
- 50% (50,100) of couples with both partners in paid employment use non-parental childcare arrangements for primary school-going children - 67% of this is paid care.
- 30% of lone parents (7,600 families) with pre-school children use non-parental childcare arrangements - 67% of this is paid care.
- 28.0% of lone parents (12,800 families) with primary school-going children use non-parental childcare arrangements - 46% of this is paid care.

Out of the total of 352,800 households with children of pre-school or primary school age 124,000 or 29% use paid childcare arrangements. Both partners are in paid employment in just under half of households of couples with young children - just over one-third (36%) or 64,000 use paid childcare. Even where both parents are in paid employment 81,000 or 46% do not use childcare services, either paid or unpaid, indicating significant demand for policies and systems facilitating the combination of work and care responsibilities (Central Statistics Office 2003).

This data is confirmed by a recent OECD Report which showed that 50% of women in Ireland in full-time employment use a paid childminder, a further 8% rely on paid relatives while only one in seven use formal nurseries (OECD Babies & Bosses 2005). A similar picture of the types of childcare arrangements used in Ireland was revealed in another survey published in 2002 (Fine-Davis, M. et al 2002) and presented in the table below.

Table 2 Percentage of respondents using different types of childcare

Self	0%
Partner	15%
Grandparent	17%
Other relative	1%
Workplace Crèche/Childcare Centre Nursery	11%
Non-Workplace Crèche/Childcare Centre Nursery	28%
School/Ecole Maternelle	12%
Childminder (registered)	12%
Childcare (unreg.) Neighbour	12%
Other	0%
Total	100%

Source: Fine-Davis, M. et al 2002.

In a recent Irish Congress of Trade Unions' survey "Congress Report on Survey of Childcare Practices" in 2002, respondents were asked about their childcare arrangements. According to the survey 68% of respondents' children were looked after in some form of childcare arrangement. In just 4% (30) of all cases childcare arrangements were provided by the employer (26 in the public sector, 4 in the private

sector). Where employer childcare arrangements were available, only 17% said they availed of the arrangements. The reasons for failing to avail of the facility included “facilities being booked out”, “crèche being situated too far away or is located in an awkward spot.” All five respondents who availed of the service provided by the employer were working in the public sector. ‘The European Community Household Panel survey also looked into the area of child-minding facilities provided by employers. When the employees were asked if their employers provided childminding/crèche facilities, of the 1,758 employees who replied to the question, 97% said their employers did not provide these facilities (Irish Congress of Trade Unions 2002).

Table 3 Childcare Arrangements

Childcare Arrangement	No. Men	No. Women	Total
By partner	147	23	170
By other relative	28	36	64
By childminder	32	21	53
In private crèche	23	27	50
After school by childminder	22	28	50
In work based crèche	5	4	9
After school in school	2	3	5
Other	16	11	27

Source : Irish Congress of Trade Unions’ survey “Congress Report on Survey of Childcare Practices” in 2002

The most common form of childcare arrangement provided is by female partners, reinforcing the major inequality that exists between male and female parents on the labour market. Among mothers, the most common childcare arrangement is provided by a relative followed by after school care by a childminder, in a private crèche and care by partner. For men the most frequent arrangement is their female partner, followed by a childminder, relative, in a private crèche and after school by a childminder. Only a handful of respondents used a work-based crèche. (Irish Congress of Trade Unions 2002)

A detailed study carried out in 2001 by Sinead Riordan of the Centre for Social and Educational Research at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Rathmines explored the pattern of childcare use across households at different income levels. In her survey 25% of mothers compared to 90% of fathers were in full-time employment. Most of the mothers in employment were in part-time employment. A mixture of formal and informal childcare was used by parents in this survey with a stronger reliance on informal care. Those households which used more formal care tended to be either low income or high income households.

“ The reported higher use of creche type childcare by parents with either higher or lower incomes suggests that access to ‘formal’ childcare depends on either, parent’s ability to pay (hence the greater use by high income parents) or eligibility for subsidised childcare (hence the greater use by lower income parents). This suggests the existence of gaps in current provision of childcare, particularly among those whose income is not high enough to pay childcare but not low enough to be admitted via targeted funded childcare services.” (O’ Riordan 2001)

1.3 Flexibility

Because so many households in Ireland depend on relatives for childcare arrangements, it can be assumed that there is a high level of flexibility involved. This is not the case in formal childcare. Most creches in Ireland open set hours from 7.30 or 8.00am in the mornings to 6.00pm or 6.30pm in the evenings. The recent survey carried out for the Sunday Business Post found no example of childcare facilities operating during evenings, overnight or weekends (Sunday Business Post January 2005). School hours in Ireland are shorter than the hours childcare facilities are open. Children at primary (first level) schools generally attend school between 9.00am and 1.00pm for the first two years and from 9.00am to 2.00pm for the following six years. At second level schools generally operate from 9.00am to 4.00pm. After school facilities are available in only a small number of schools at second level and are rare at first level.

Part-time places in creches and other childcare facilities are limited in their availability. Many creches offer only full time placements in what is predominantly a suppliers market. Frequently women find themselves paying for a full-time place but using the place for less than full-time hours.

A recent comparative survey of fathers and mothers and work-life balance issues carried out in Ireland, France, Italy and Denmark revealed that Irish parents (predominantly women) have no option but to use annual leave in circumstances in which the usual childcare arrangements are unavailable (e.g. during holidays, when creche is closed, when grandparents are unavailable or when a child is sick). Irish parents were shown to use annual leave more than any other country and to have a very low usage of parental leave. This low usage of parental leave is most likely accounted for the fact that it is unpaid and that many employers require it to be taken as a block. Some changes were made in relation to entitlement to flexibility in taking parental leave - these are detailed in Section 2.2. below. (Fathers and Mothers – Dilemmas of the Work-Life Balance – A Comparative Study of 4 European Countries).

1.4 Affordability

The most recent research on childcare reveals that Irish people are paying almost twice as much as the EU average for childcare, and the cost of childcare in Ireland is among the highest in the EU. The average cost of a full-time place in a pre-school childcare facility (creche) is about 20% of earnings compared to an EU average of 12%. This high cost of childcare has a particular effect on low-income households and creates a definite barrier to accessing paid employment, education and training.

“The cost of childcare is a particular issue for disadvantaged families and is acknowledged as remaining as a significant barrier to the uptake of further education or work for low income families, particularly single parents. Affordability is also a major issue for higher income levels, particularly for families with more than one child requiring childcare.” (National Economic and Social Council (NESC) 2005 unpublished)

The lack of public subsidisation of childcare is highlighted by the National Women’s Council of Ireland as the main reason why the costs of childcare are so high in Ireland.

“ There is practically no public subsidisation of childcare in Ireland, so that’s what’s making us more expensive in comparison with other European countries. “
(Orla O’ Connor, National Women’s Council quoted in Sunday Business Post January 23 2005.)

Data from the Childcare Module of the Quarterly National Household Survey 2003 revealed that parents who paid for childcare spent on average EURO 97.47 per week on the main type of childcare used - varying from EURO 118.96 in Dublin to EURO 79.24 in the border region (Central Statistics Office 2003). A recent survey carried out by the Sunday Business Post (January 23rd 2005) estimated that the monthly cost of sending a six month old baby to a creche could be as much as EURO 918 – two or more children were estimated at double that amount. This survey concluded that the annual cost of childcare, ranging from over EURO6000 in rural Donegal to over EURO11,000 in urban Dublin were equivalent to monthly mortgage payments on the average house price of EURO250,000.

A new Report published in March 2005 by the Forum on the Workplace of the Future argues that the high cost of childcare in Ireland – the highest in the Europe – are keeping large numbers of women out of the workforce. This Report highlights that childcare costs in Ireland are almost twice the EU average resulting in a “serious under-utilisation of women’s high standard of education and skills”. (National Centre for Partnership and Performance 2005).

1.5 Acceptability

Given the very low level of public provision of childcare and the high cost of private market childcare services, there has been little scope to establish a sense of the preferred or most acceptable system of care. Choice is highly limited and choices are constrained by high costs and lack of flexibility. Reliance on private carers is at least partly a result of the high cost of private nurseries. For women with two or three children, private nurseries are generally not affordable. Reliance on relatives may be partly a question of choice but is also significantly affected by cost and availability issues on the private market.

1.6 Summary and Conclusion

Availability and affordability of good quality childcare has been shown to be a huge issue in Ireland, particularly among women and increasingly among households with young children and with two earners. Despite this, the political will to develop a more comprehensive system of childcare provision has been absent. Linked to the high rate of economic growth over the last decade employers organisations have joined women's organisations, trade unions and others in calling for improved childcare facilities and services. To the extent that a debate on childcare has taken place in Ireland, the focus has been on the lack of provision, high costs and the needs of the growing proportion of women workers. There has been little discussion on pre-school education and the benefits of early childhood education from the standpoint of the child.

The OECD has predicted that the need or demand for childcare is likely to double over the next five years i.e. a demand for 220,000 childcare places – double the current level. More women in the workforce means that in the future the level of availability of informal care is likely to decrease. Yet given the current cost of childcare it is to the informal sector that many women have turned. And among many immigrants working in Ireland, there is no extended family or established community networks to provide informal care.

2. Time Facilities

2.1 Introduction

Provision for leave entitlements in Ireland is particularly limited, there is a low level of statutory entitlement to paid maternity leave, restrictive parental leave and no paternity leave. Neither are there any specific incentives to women returning to work early after a period of leave or to facilitate a return to paid employment generally. Leave for family and other purposes is largely discretionary. Certain key employers of women, for example the civil and public sectors, provide for a range of flexible work and leave arrangements. Individual private sector companies have also implemented work-life balance initiatives. Development is slow however, and there is evidence that a growth in long-hours culture and excessive commuting time is in practice undermining the quality of life for a large section of the Irish workforce.

2.2 National Regulations and additional provisions

Maternity Leave : New provisions were introduced under the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004 including the following:

- extension of paid Maternity leave from 14 weeks to 18 weeks and additional unpaid maternity leave from 4 weeks to 8 weeks,
- reduction in the amount of leave that must be taken before the actual date of confinement to two weeks,
- provision for expectant mothers to attend one set of ante-natal classes without loss of pay and provision
- provision of a once-off right to fathers to paid time to attend the two ante-natal classes immediately prior to the birth.
- breast feeding mothers who have given birth within the previous four months will be entitled, without loss of pay, to either an adjustment of working hours or, where breast feeding facilities are provided by employer, breast feeding breaks.
- provision for an employee to postpone the period of maternity leave/additional maternity leave in the event of hospitalisation of the child.
- provision that an employee's absence from work on additional maternity leave will count for all employment rights associated with the employment (except remuneration and superannuation benefits) such as seniority and annual leave.

Under the review of the national pay agreement (Sustaining Progress 2003-2005) it was stated that Maternity Benefit would be restored to 80% of earnings from its current level of 70% over the lifetime of the agreement (Dept of the Taoiseach, 2004). This commitment has not been fulfilled. There was an increase of €10 per week in the minimum rate of Maternity Benefit, from €141.60 to €151.60 effective from January 2004.

Paternity Leave : Paternity leave is not recognised in employment law in Ireland. Therefore employers are not obliged to grant male employees special paternity leave

(either paid or unpaid) following the birth of their child. Annual leave taken following the birth of a child is treated in employment law in the same way as leave taken at any other time of the year. It is at the discretion of the employer to decide who can and cannot take annual leave at a given time. Some employers in Ireland, however, (for example, the Civil Service), do provide a period of paid leave from work for male employees following the birth or adoption of a child. Fathers employed in the Civil Service can apply for a period of special 3 day (paternal) leave with pay in respect of children born on or after 1st January, 2000 or for children adopted after 1st January 2000. Arrangements where employers provide this type of leave following the birth or adoption of a child are, however, the result of negotiation and agreement reached between the employer and employee. The employee usually applies for this leave in writing before the birth (or adoption). These arrangements are not covered by employment law so if an employer agrees to provide time off to an employee as paternal leave for a specified period (either with or without pay), it is entirely discretionary.

An important recent development in relation to paternity leave emerged following a claim by the three main teachers unions (TUI, INTO, ASTI) which was negotiated through the Conciliation Council for Teachers that fathers be granted special leave with pay in respect of children born after 1st January 2000. It was agreed with the Department of Education and Science, that fathers would be allowed three days special leave with pay in respect of children born on or after 1st January 2001. This leave may be taken at the time of the birth or up to 4 weeks after the birth. In the case of adoption, where the date of placement is on or after 1st January 2001, the leave may be taken on or up to 4 weeks after the date of placement of the child. Paid substitution will be allowed in respect of such absences. (Teachers Union of Ireland, www.tui.ie/contracts/paternity.html 29th January 2001).

Parental Leave : While male employees are not entitled under Irish law to either paid or unpaid paternity leave, they are entitled to Parental Leave. The Parental Leave Act 1998, as amended from July 2004 entitles both parents who qualify to take a period of up to 14 weeks unpaid leave from employment. An employee is not entitled to pay from their employer while on parental leave nor are they entitled to any social welfare payment equivalent to Maternity or Adoptive Benefit. Regulations to ensure preservation of social insurance records for employees who avail of Parental Leave have been introduced.

The Act also provides an entitlement to limited paid 'force majeure' leave for urgent family reasons owing to the injury or illness of an immediate family member, in circumstances where the presence of the employee, at the place where the family member is ill or injured, is indispensable. The employee may not be absent on 'force majeure' leave for more than 3 days in any period of 12 consecutive months or 5 days in any period of 36 consecutive months. During an absence on parental leave an employee is regarded as being in the employment of the employer and retains all of his/her employment rights (except the right to remuneration and superannuation benefits).

The Parental Leave Act, 1998 states that the dismissal of an employee who exercises his/her right to parental leave or force majeure leave is regarded as unfair under the Unfair Dismissals Acts 1977-2001 unless there are substantial grounds justifying the

dismissal. Following an absence on parental leave, an employee has the right to return to work in the same employment and under the same terms and conditions of employment. If it is not reasonably practicable for an employee to return to the same job, suitable alternative employment may be offered.

A Review Group reported on Parental Leave in 2001 but did not reach consensus on either on the principle of paid parental leave nor on the introduction of paternity leave. The majority of the Review Group recommended increasing the duration of Parental Leave by four weeks bringing the total entitlement to 18 weeks and to allow for more flexibility in the taking of leave (rather than in a continuous block).

2004 saw the introduction of the Parental Leave (Amendment) Act. The main provisions of the Bill are as follows:-

- Raising the maximum age of the eligible child from 5 to 8 years;
- Increase in the maximum age of the eligible child to 16 years in the case of children with disabilities;
- Extension of parental leave entitlements to persons acting in loco parentis in respect of an eligible child.
- A statutory entitlement to take the 14 weeks parental leave in separate blocks of a minimum of 6 continuous weeks, or more favourable terms with the agreement of the employer;
- Where an employee falls ill while on parental leave and as a result is unable to care for the child, they may suspend their parental leave for the duration of the illness following which period the parental leave recommences;
- Provision for statutory codes of practice on the manner in which parental leave and ‘force majeure’ leave might be taken and the manner in which an employer can terminate parental leave.
- Duration of adoptive leave benefit was increased by 2 weeks from 14 weeks to 16 weeks.

2.2 Take-up of leave

A national survey of 912 public and private sectors organisations (stratified to size and sector, using a mail questionnaire) carried out in 2001 explored patterns of work and working time and issues of family-friendly policies was carried out by the National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies. This survey was conducted on a larger and more extensive scale than previous studies by the Equality Authority (1999) and IBEC (2001). Five “case study” organisations were selected for a follow-up survey of managers and employees. Published in 2002 this research report “Off the Treadmill – achieving work-life balance” represents the most comprehensive survey to date to address work-life balance in Ireland. The following table presents this survey’s findings on the availability and take-up of various forms of leave. The most striking feature of this data is the low take up of parental leave (although higher among women than men), an indication how the lack of payment discourages most parents. Men are more likely to take study leave than women while women are more likely to take career breaks reflecting the family and care issues which tend to shape women’s leave decisions.

Table 4 Forms of Leave Available to, and Availed of, by Respondents

Leave	Available to			Availed of		
	No.Men	No.Women	Total (n)	No.Men	No.Women	Total(n)
Compassionate	244	217	461	184	123	307
Study	248	209	457	101	81	182
Force Majeure	266	227	493	79	51	130
Maternity	n.a.	273	273	n.a.	105	105
Career break/ Sabbatical/leave of Absence	252	207	459	33	42	75
Parental (unpaid)	278	258	536	15	35	50
Paternity	234	n.a.	234	36	n.a.	36
Carer Leave (unpaid)	182	188	370	5	5	10
Adoptive	145	227	372	4	3	7
Other	11	10	21	25	21	46

Source : ‘Off the Treadmill’ National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies (2002)

A report published in 2002 reviewing the Parental Leave Act 1998 provided details of a survey carried out on the uptake of parental leave and force majeure leave up until 2001 and further reinforces the inadequacy of provision in Ireland. 517 private-sector employers and 138 public sector employers participated. The data showed that less than 7% of the labour force was eligible for parental leave. Of these eligible employees in the labour force, it was estimated that only one-fifth had taken parental leave, with women accounting for the majority of these. Overall, 2% of employees took ‘force majeure’ leave, amounting to an uptake of 34,330 employees for the entire labour force. As with parental leave, the uptake was higher amongst women and those employed full-time. 29,042 maternity benefit claims were awarded (amounting to expenditure of EURO 99 million by the Department of during 2002. During 2003 the number of awards had risen to 30,211 (amounting to expenditure of EURO 107 million) – an increase of 4% over one year reflecting the recent rise in the number of births annually in this country.

2.4 Factors determining take-up

Research on attitudes in relation to parental and ‘force majeure’ leave revealed that the largest barrier for employees taking parental leave is concern for their finances (42%). The National Women’s Council have been critical of current parental leave provisions for the lack of supports to women at a time when they need it most and argue that it particularly discriminates against low paid workers, who are predominantly women. (National Women’s Council of Ireland, 2003).

2.5 Other working time arrangements

Table 5 Patterns of Work as a Percentage of Total Employment (%) 2000

	Part-Time	Shift	Evening	Night	Saturday	Sunday
Males	7%	11%	10%	6%	28%	16%
Females	31%	10%	8%	4%	18%	10%
Total	17%	10%	9%	5%	24%	13%

Source: ‘Off the Treadmill’ National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies (2002) Figures for Shift, Evening, Night, Saturday & Sunday work relate to Quarter 2, Quarterly National Household Survey 2001.

Part-time working : The growth of part-time work in Ireland follows a similar pattern as that of other European countries. In line with other EU countries, part-time work is more common among women than men, and much of the growth in part-time employment can be explained by women’s increased labour market participation, mainly in the services sector. The survey found that 17% of the Irish workforce worked part-time and confirmed that part-time working is predominately a female phenomenon involving 31% of the female labour force compared to 7% of the male labour force. (National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies (2002)

Various different surveys over recent years have shown the extent of part-time working among companies in different sectors of the economy, and in some cases the extent to which those companies have formal or informal policies towards part-time working.

Table 6 Percentage of Employees Working Part-time

	Percentage of Employees on Part-time Working
IBEC study of Manufacturing and W/sale Distribution (2000)	2.0%
Coughlan study of High-Tech Manufacturing Companies (1999)	Average between 1% - 5%
Clifford <i>et al</i> (1995)	49% have less than 1% 43% have between 1%–10%
Fisher study of Small and Medium-sized Companies (1999)	9%
European Foundation (1990)	4%
Quarterly National Household Survey (March/May 2000)	17.8% (All Sectors) 5.8% Manufacturing; 21% Services

Table 7 Percentage of Companies with Part-Time Working Policies

	Part-time Workers	Formal Policies	Informal Policies
IBEC study of Manufacturing and W/sale Distribution (2000)	37%	39%	61%
Fisher study of Small and Medium-sized Companies (1999)	49%	-	-
Coughlan study of High-Tech Manufacturing Companies (1999)	48%	53%	47%
Clifford <i>et al</i> (1995)	75%	-	-
European Foundation (1990)	41%	-	-

Flexible working arrangements : The extent to which flexible working time arrangements were available to, and availed of, by women and men in the companies surveyed was also examined in the Report ‘Off the Treadmill’ National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies (2002). As is evident from Table 5 above, shift work, evening, night, Saturday and Sunday working are engaged in by men to a greater degree than women. Weekend working involves a significant proportion of both the male and female workforce – 28% of men and 18% of women work Saturdays and 16% of men and 10% of women work Sundays (National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies (2002).

Table 8 Forms of Flexible Working Time Arrangements

	Available to			Availed of		
	No.Men	No.Women	Total (n)	No. Men	No.Women	Total (n)
Flexitime	79	68	147	174	193	367
Working from home	32	41	73	64	36	100
Reduced Hours	72	89	170	17	77	94
Term-Time	28	56	84	8	11	19
Other	6	2	8	13	8	21

Source : Off the Treadmill National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies (2002).

Flexitime emerged from this survey as the most significant form of flexible working arrangements for both women and men. Gender differences in relation to flexible working are evident in the greater significance of reduced hours among women compared to working at home among men. In total 77 women, compared with 17 men, availed of this working time arrangement. The majority of staff availing of reduced hours were working in administrative/clerical posts (37 women and 5 men), followed by middle management (15 women and 4 men) and senior management (7 women and 5 men) (National Framework Committee for Family Friendly Policies (2002).

Job Sharing : The most comprehensive and recent study of job sharing was undertaken by Fynes *et al* (1996), based on 319 companies (both private and public sectors) and 759 employees in these companies. This research indicated that 5% of companies offered job sharing and 1% of employees worked under a system of job sharing. (Fynes, B, T. Morrissey, Wk. Roche, BJ. Whelan and J. Williams. ‘Flexible Working Lives.’ Irish Studies in Management – Oak Tree Press. 1996.)

Most research on job sharing indicates that it is predominantly females who take up this form of flexible working. Some 98 per cent of employees on job sharing in the IBEC survey (2000) were female, as were 74 per cent employees in Fynes *et al* study (1996). In IBEC’s study 13% of companies offered job sharing with a breakdown of 72% of whom had a formal policy in place and the remaining 28% had an informal policy. Only 0.1% of employees worked under a system of job share. (‘Job Sharing Report.’ Dublin: IBEC 06/01/2003.)

Detailed data produced in 1998 revealed that 95% (112) of job sharers are women and 5% (2,359) men. 42% of women who were job-sharing were doing so in order to care for members of their family, 22% for other domestic reasons. Only 1% were job

sharing for study reasons. Take up of job sharing is extremely low among men in the civil service and there are no job sharers at a higher grade than principal officer. Most job sharers (66%) were clerical workers (Drew, 1998).

Teleworking /Telecommuting /eWorking : Teleworking/telecommuting/eWorking can refer to different types of worker such as self employed workers, direct employees of companies who telecommute by working all or part of their working week from home, workers employed in call centres, engaged in telemarketing, telesales, customer services and data processing. (While often included under the umbrella term ‘teleworking’, these types of worker are generally not included in many studies of teleworking). (‘Teleworking/Telecommuting Report.’ June 1998. Dublin:IBEC.) Ireland has a total of 61,000 employees under this category of work, which accounts for 4.4% of the total working population. (ECATT Survey (funded by the EU Commission, DGXII, 1999) in Fisher, H. (2000) ‘Family Friendly Work Arrangements in small and medium sized firms’).

The Department of Enterprise and Employment (1999), estimate that overall, 3.5% or 50,000 of the Irish labour force are teleworkers using the broad definition. ECATT Survey (EU Commission, DGXII, 1999), estimate that there are 61,000 people in Ireland who telework. Telework Ireland (a professional association of teleworkers in Ireland) state that there are approximately 15,000 teleworkers in Ireland, over 2million in the EU and about 5.5 million in the US. A study of electronic, commerce and telework trends in the Eu carried out in 2002 found that 4% of the Irish labour force were teleworkers, of those 2% were regular teleworkers and the remainder were supplementary teleworkers. In Ireland it was found that 9% of all teleworkers were female, a figure well below the EU average figure and ranking Ireland third lowest of the 10 countries surveyed. (EcaTT Survey - Electronic Commerce and Telework Trends 2000)

Career breaks : Across the civil and public service there were 616 employees taking career breaks in 1997 – 60% of these were women. These breaks enable employees to take leave for up to a period of five years (where there is agreement from their employer) for study purposes, for family and for personal reasons. 42% of those on career break in 1997 were clerical workers indicating that career breaks rather than job sharing are more attractive among the middle and higher grades. 25% of those on career breaks were at HEO level or higher. Of women taking career breaks 38% indicated that they did so for care of family or other domestic reasons. Only 13% of men taking career breaks did so for care or domestic reasons. Study and travel were the main other reasons for taking career breaks. “In summary women were more likely than men to have taken breaks for ‘family’ related reasons. While a higher proportion of men also took career breaks (40%) they tended to do so for reasons that would broaden their future career options. These differences were even more acute in relation to job sharing.” (Gender Imbalance in Irish Civil Service Grades at Higher Executive Officer Level (HEO) and above. Report to the Equality Committee, Strategic Management Initiative. Dept of Finance, Dublin 1998.

Term-time working :A term-time working policy allows employees to take leave of absence without pay for 4 to 12 weeks during the summer months, when school children are on holidays. The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

within the Civil Service, launched a pilot scheme on 'term-time' working in 1998. The scheme was extended to other government departments in 1999. The scheme allows for special leave for a continuous period of 13 weeks commencing in early June or 10 weeks commencing towards the end of June. The leave is available to look after school-going children aged 17 years or younger, or to care for a person who resides with them and who has a serious disability requiring on-going care. The person must be the primary carer of a person for the period of the term time. The period of term-time special leave is in addition to normal annual leave. In order to facilitate participating staff, reduced salaries were paid over the twelve month period. In effect nine months pay was spread over twelve months. ('Family Friendly Work-life Balance Policies.' IBEC Research and Information Service, Dec 2000, p. 28.)

In terms of the percentage of employees operating on term-time working arrangements, this data is only available from the IBEC study (2000). Out of a total of more than 105,000 employees in the survey, only 19 employees were on term-time working. 2% of companies offered term-time working, 30% with a formal policy in place and the remaining 70% with an informal policy. (IBEC. 'Flexible Working Arrangements.' Dublin: IBEC. 2000.)

Flexitime : Flexitime systems operate on the basis that employees work, on average, a standard number of hours per week but may vary the time worked on any particular day or week as long as a core number of hours are completed. As a result, hours may be varied to suit the needs of the employee as well as changes in workloads. The IBEC study identifies 13% of companies offering flexitime work, with 63% with a formal policy in place and the remaining 37% an informal policy relating to flexitime. A total of 3.5% of employees availed of flexitime in the IBEC study. The Fisher study of small and medium sized companies identified 31% of companies offering flexitime in 1999. Flexitime appears to be availed of by similar numbers of women and men in these surveys of private companies. (Fisher 1996, IBEC 2000)

2.6 Summary and Conclusions

Statutory entitlements to leave in Ireland are set at a lowest end of the EU spectrum, both in terms of time and pay. As a result, the take-up of leave arrangements, which play a significant role in other EU countries, is particularly low in Ireland. Research clearly indicates that only a small proportion of workers avail of parental leave and most of those who do are women. Lack of payment is the primary reason for this low take-up. In the public sector non-statutory leave entitlements and flexible working arrangements (which are mostly discretionary although supported by practice) are much more common than in the private sector. Definite gender lines are evident in the proportions of women and men availing of different types of leave arrangements and also in the reasons for taking leave. Women are far more likely to take leave for care reasons whereas men are more likely to take leave for career or travel reasons. There has been a growth in part-time and other forms of atypical work in Ireland and here again research data indicates marked gender differences in the pattern of atypical employment – for example, women make up the large majority of those working part-time, job sharing, on reduced hours and term-time working.

Eileen Drew comments on the gendered nature of work/life balance ;

“ ...the take-up of work/life balance is highly gendered. The options that imply no loss of pay are sought equally, if not predominantly by men. Apart from the potential loss of earnings there is also a perception that opting for less than full-time hours signals a lack of commitment or that the individual has put their career ‘on hold’. A major challenge will be to avoid a twin track in which men are in the fast lane working excessive hours and women are in the slow lane working reduced hours and that work/life balance is for ‘mothers of young children’ and hence to be avoided by all other employees” (Drew 2002)

3. Money

3.1 Introduction

The Irish taxation and benefits system incorporates both incentives to parents to enter employment as well as incentives aimed at full-time carers in the home. There is evidence of tension at the heart of public policy particularly in relation to increasing women's engagement in paid employment. Economic and social policy largely relies on the existence of a large section of women in unpaid care and community activities. Aspects of the public financial system in Ireland are targeted at those in full-time care positions and involve strict limitations on any paid employment. The Irish system of childcare is hugely dependent on unpaid and paid relatives and other private carers. Public childcare provision is extremely limited and benefits only around 4% of pre-school children. On the other hand some recent changes in taxation policy have been aimed at reducing the financial disincentive towards paid employment for married women through greater individualisation. At the same time new tax reliefs for married couples where one spouse is full-time in the home were also introduced. It is interesting to note that this tax relief is available only to married couples (not co-habiting) and is not linked to the presence of children. It is evident from the data however that the proportion of women in paid employment continues to rise, and the percentage of couples with young children where both partners are in paid employment is also rising.

Strong criticisms of both the lack of, and the cost of, childcare services over the last decade have been expressed by women's organisations, trade unions, community organisations and recently, employer organisations. Governments, on the other hand, argue that putting resources into child benefit is their way of supporting childcare costs. In practice, child benefit is a universal payment and is related neither to employment nor to childcare costs. By using this argument government is effectively deflecting criticism from its lack of provision for childcare and for women entering and remaining in paid employment. Child Benefit is payable to all families with dependent children regardless of social insurance contribution record or household income and is often viewed as a positive direct income support to women, particularly women outside paid employment.

3.2 Financial Benefits at National Level

Family Income Supplement : The Family Income Supplement (FIS) was introduced to increase the reward from work by providing low paid households with additional income. FIS is only available to low income households with children. To qualify for a payment, the family must have a minimum of 19 hours paid employment a week – the hours of two partners can be added together to make up the required hours. The FIS received is 60% of the difference between net family income and the income limit, which applies to the family. There was a €7 per week increase in the minimum FIS payment in 2004, from €13 to €20 (the intention being to make the scheme more attractive to people at the lowest Family Income Supplement payment levels) and an increase by €28 in FIS weekly income thresholds, bringing the limits for a family with one child to €407 and €433 for a family with two children. These increases have been criticised for not keeping pace with increases in average earnings. It is a potentially important income and employment support, however the Department of Social and

Family Affairs (DSFA) has estimated that the take-up may be as low as 40% of those entitled (OPEN, 2004). The number of families receiving Family Income Supplement in 2003 was 12,317 compared to 14,686 in 1999. Most of the effort to improve take-up of FIS has focused on information dissemination. Other factors which have been found to inhibit take-up in the UK include perceived eligibility and negative attitudes towards dependence on state benefits. According to the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) another issue is the means by which FIS is delivered, and suggest the possibility that a tax-based system of identifying and subsequently paying FIS might improve take-up (CPA, 1997).

One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP) : The One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP) was introduced in 1997 (replacing the Unmarried Mothers Allowance) and represented a further step towards a more employment-friendly support for one-parent families. The new payment changed the way income from employment was assessed - those on the OPFP are now entitled to a significant earnings disregard before a loss of benefit occurs.

Individualisation : The key financial reform adopted by recent governments in relation to the tax/benefit system has been the move from the household based tax system to an individualised tax system. In particular this measure was aimed at making work pay for married women who had traditionally been subject to very high marginal tax rates as 'second earners'. Up to 2000 Ireland had a household-based tax system that allowed for transferability of tax bands and allowances between married couples. The effect was that married couples could avail of a standard rate tax band and allowances that were double that available to a single person, even if there was just one earner. At each Budget over the period 2000-2002 incremental reform towards individualisation of the tax bands was implemented but full individualisation has not yet been achieved as was envisaged at the time. The stated aim of individualisation was to ensure that each individual had their own standard rate band and that the standard rate tax bands would no longer be transferable between spouses. After the 2002 budget, the last movement on this reform, the standard rate tax band for a single person was €28,000 and for dual-income married couples it was twice that amount at €56,000. A married couple with one income could still transfer €9,000, about one third, of the non-working spouses standard rate tax band to the working spouse to give a standard rate tax band of €37,000. Individualisation measures are confined to the standard rate tax bands. An evaluation of these reforms showed that married women's labour supply was more responsive to individualisation than to tax rate cuts and demonstrated how a move to full individualisation would increase married women's participation by 3 percentage points. However this is still a relatively small effect in the context of the 30-percentage point rise in married women's participation over the past 20 years. (Russell et al 2002)

3.3. Financial benefit at the level of the firm

There is no research in the Irish context on the financial benefits at the level of the firm linked to work-life balance policies. However, capital grants are available to eligible employers in relation to the provision of childcare facilities under the EOCP.

Summary and Conclusions

There is evidence of tension at the heart of public policy particularly in relation to increasing women's engagement in paid employment. Most areas of public policy continue to rely on the existence of a large section of women in unpaid care and community activities. At the same time certain policies are aimed at retaining in, or bringing more women into, paid employment including women with children (lone parents, married and co-habiting women). It is often these later policies which are put forward within the context of the European Employment Strategy while the former are more often articulated at national level. Where significant work life balance policies are in place in Ireland, they are largely informal. Direct financial supports towards work-life balance initiatives are weak. Public support through the taxation or benefits system treats employment and caring largely separately. Where care activity is supported through the state system that support is largely conditional on no, or minimal, employment. Financial support for parenting among employees is extremely weak. There are no tax allowances or credits for child rearing or childcare. Parental leave is unpaid and there is no paternity leave. In effect public policy fails to address, through its financial supports, the combining of work and care responsibilities and consequently the better achievement of work-life balance.

Part 2 Effect of Reconciliation Policies

4. The effects of reconciliation policy for the individual

4.1 Introduction

Reconciliation policies affect the level and degree of attachment to the labour market, particularly among women, the take-up of different forms of leave and different kinds of working arrangements between women and men and the position of women and men within organisational structures. In practice, gender rather than parenting is more apparent in examining the effects of reconciliation policies.

4.2 Typical reconciliation strategies

Considering the three dominant reconciliation strategies (leaving labour market for a certain period, taking up parental leave and/or changing working hours) in an Irish context, there is evidence that both leaving the labour market for a period and changing working hours are the most common strategies adopted by women. Among men it is difficult to identify any clear pattern although there is evidence of changing hours among some men linked to parenting, and career breaks linked to study and travel taken up by men in the public sector. Women with high educational attainment and/or who are higher earners in both the public and private sector are less likely to avail of reconciliation policies than women on low incomes. Job sharing in the public sector for example is largely taken by women in clerical and administrative positions. Parental leave plays only a minor role in reconciliation strategies among both women and men due to its low value in the Irish system.

In the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) survey carried out in 2002, of the 436 respondents who have children, 27% of the men, compared with 62% of the women, modified their working time since becoming parents. Parents were asked whether their working time had increased or decreased after having children: 90% of mothers and 78% of fathers have reduced their working time while 10% of mothers, and 22% of fathers had increased their working time (Irish Congress of Trades Unions 2002). A recent comparative study of four European countries shows Ireland with the longest average working week for fathers (45 hours compared to an average of 42 hours) and the shortest average working week for mothers (32 hours compared to an average of 34 hours). (Mothers and Fathers, 2004). These kind of figures reinforce a picture of strong gender differences in relation to work-life balance strategies, both within and between households.

Managing childcare responsibilities within a system of low level public support acts as the main reason why work-life balance initiatives are availed of by parents, predominantly mothers.

‘Childcare responsibilities were found to be the main reason why certain portions of the workforce are availing of family friendly work arrangements. This is more likely to be the case for female employees.’ (Irish Congress of Trades Unions 2002).

In addressing the question of reconciliation strategies among women and men it is important to explore the extent to which adopting such strategies are seen as likely to have an effect on the careers of those who avail of them. A European Community Household Panel survey in 1998 (covering 2,729 Irish households, 6,324 individuals) revealed that a minority of women and men believe that flexible working arrangements will impact negatively on their careers. Interestingly, almost the same percentage of women and men who identified a ‘negative impact’ identified a ‘positive impact’ from availing of family-friendly initiatives. However among those who availed of certain kinds of flexibility the perception of ‘negative impact’ emerges as strong and significant. Reduced working hours was associated with the strongest negative impact while flexitime was associated with the lowest negative impact.

Table 9 Impact on Career

Impact on career	No. Men	% Men	No. Women	% Women	Total
Positive	55	13%	53	15.5%	108
Neutral	106	24%	100	29%	206
Negative	52	12%	53	15.5%	105
Don't Know	80	18%	251	73%	125
Total	293	77%	251	73%	544

Source : European Community Household Panel 1998.

Among respondents who had availed of flexible working, over one-third, (34%) of those who worked reduced hours felt that this had had a negative impact on their career, compared with 22% of those who had opted for term-time working and 20% of those working from home. Only 13% of those who worked flexitime stated that it had a negative affect. Among the respondents who felt that flexible working had a negative impact on their career, it was mainly senior managers (21 men and 6 women), administrative/clerical 5 men and 21 women), and middle management (6 men and 13 women who believed this to be the case. Another study of work-life balance issues focusing on mothers and fathers across four european countries including Ireland found that male respondents were significantly more likely than females to think that men who participate in available work-family programmes (e.g. job-sharing, part-time work) are viewed as less serious about their career than those who do not participate in these programmes. Other findings from this Report reveal that around three-quarters of Irish fathers stated that they would avail of parental leave had it been paid. All of the Irish mothers in the sample expressed support for paid parental leave, as did 94% of the Irish fathers. Over 80% of fathers and mothers were strongly favourable. (Mothers and Fathers 2004)

4.3 Linking Strategy to Policies

In examining the range of issues affecting work-life balance for individual women and men it is evident that a range of different policy areas act together to determine the context in which reconciliation of paid employment and private lives, particularly caring responsibilities, takes place. Employment policies together with childcare, social welfare, education, transport and other policies all affect the constraints and choices of individuals and households. Recent research on work-life balance issues in

Ireland places much emphasis on the lack of childcare supports and limited opportunities for flexible working arrangements but also on the huge issue of commuting time for many of those on the labour market.

The Irish economy has undergone very rapid growth over the last decade and there is enormous pressure on physical infrastructure as well as social support systems. Dramatic rises in house prices has forced many of those in the Eastern region and in areas around other large urban centres to locate in commuting areas further away from the centres. Underdevelopment of physical infrastructure, particularly public and private transportation, has resulted in long commuting hours for those accessing paid employment in Dublin and other large centres. Commuting time has become a key issue in terms of both 'quality of life' and work-life balance for large numbers of households. As well as affecting the amount of time added to the working day, long commuting time also makes it difficult for many couples in the organisation of their childcare arrangements.

In a recent comparative research study of four European countries (France, Denmark, Italy and Ireland) Ireland emerged as the country with the longest commuting time averaging 39 minutes compared to Italy with the shortest average of 24 minutes. In each country the car was the most common form of transport to work - Irish parents were the ones most likely to use a car – 70% usually did so. The greater reliance on the car in Ireland relative to the other countries is partly responsible for the longer commuting times due to traffic congestion. Those countries that relied more on trains and cycling and less on cars had shorter commuting times. In this study, commuting time was seen as a key predictor in successfully combining work and family and indicates how different economic and social policies act together to affect work-life balance issues for individuals in different countries.

4.4 Summary and Conclusions

Exploring the effects of reconciliation policies from the standpoint of the individual involves considering the way in which different policies at national level and at the level of the firm interact. Ireland operates largely under an informal system of work-life balance initiatives. Statutory systems are weak. For individual women and men this weakness means that certain key entitlements (e.g. paid parental leave) have not been established undermining attempts to create greater work-life balance and reinforcing gender inequalities in the household as well as on the labour market.

Working time, limited leave entitlements, lack of public childcare support and extensive commuting time are all key elements in the policy framework which affects work-life balance issues for the individual in Ireland. Without improved access to, and affordability of childcare services, other work-life balance initiatives will have limited impact on the individual in Ireland. There are indications from research that improved leave entitlements, if provided, would be positively availed of and that flexible working hours are being sought by increasing numbers of women and men, particularly in the context of long commuting hours linked to traffic congestion. There is also evidence of a significant level of fear that opting into certain kinds of work-life balance initiatives will have a detrimental effect on career development. For most households the key issues in relation to work-life balance are childcare supports and time – issues which operate differently for, and impact differently on, women and

men. To address these issues requires an integrated approach across the different policy arenas at national and firm level. Without such an approach work-life balance policies will remain marginal within the Irish policy system and individual households (particularly women) will continue to experience the double burdens of care and paid employment without support structures and effective policies at national or firm level.

5. Effects of Reconciliation policy for the Firm

5.1 Introduction

There is evidence of increasing interest in work-life balance issues among employers organisations and employers in Ireland over recent years. Research and policy studies by the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) have taken a strongly positive view towards work-life balance initiatives and the organisation is engaged in national initiatives to promote work-life balance, for example the National Framework Committee for Family-Friendly Policies. However, the extent of work-life balance initiatives in practice remains quite limited in individual companies and private organisations but are much more common in public sector organisations. The lack of a strong system of public support (in relation to childcare and paid parental leave) means that individual companies are operating in a situation in which pressures of care responsibilities are intense on many employees, particularly women. Faced with a large gap in the public support system, workplace initiatives play only a small, but nonetheless important, role. A recent new initiative from the Irish Industrial Development Authority to provide childcare facilities in industrial development estates is an indication of the growing concern with work-life balance issues in relation to attracting and retaining staff – particularly women. (IDA 2005).

5.2/3 Reconciliation Policy and the Level of Productivity, Recruitment of Personnel

There is no specific research in the Irish context linking work-life balance policies with productivity levels and recruitment processes. The Work-Life Balance Website put in place by the National Framework Committee for Family-Friendly Policies emphasises a number of benefits to firms from the establishment of work-life balance initiatives including :

- improved recruitment
- attraction of skilled and experienced people
- matching skills and job shortages
- improved retention of staff
- improved productivity levels
- reduction of casual sick leave absences
- improved morale, creativity and team spirit (<http://worklifebalance.ie>)

Two recent studies, by IBEC and ICTU have shown the extent to which private companies are providing flexible working arrangements and the extent to which employees are availing of these arrangements.

Table 10 Availability of Flexible Working Arrangements IBEC

Type of Flexible Work	% of companies where flexible working arrangements in operation or under consideration	% of total employees on flexible working arrangements
Permanent part-time	52%	2%
Shiftwork	28%	10%
Flexible hours	20%	1%
Job Sharing	18%	1%
Flexi-time	17%	4%
Career Breaks/Sabbat	11%	<1%
E-Working	10%	<1%
Other type	2%	1%
Term-time working	1%	-

Source : National Framework Committee for Family-Friendly Working Arrangements 2002.

Part-time employment and shift work emerge as the most widely available work arrangements which may indicate that these are arrangements set in place for employment organisation reasons rather than in the interests of work-life balance. Only a tiny proportion of employees are on job sharing and career breaks although flexitime is availed of by 4% of employees according to this company survey. A 2000 Report by Fischer analysed the availability of family-friendly work arrangements according to company size and showed that medium-sized organisations were significantly more likely (60%) to have such arrangements compared to small organisations (49%) (Fischer 2000).

Table 11 Availability and Take-up of Different Flexible Work Arrangements

	Have access to FFWA	Availing of FFWA
Job sharing/worksharing	51%	34%
Flexitime	39%	69%
Employment/career break	38%	<1%
Shiftwork	30%	63%
Part-time work	28%	40%
Term-time work	23%	6%
Annualised hours	5%	36%
Teleworking	2%	13%
Carer's Leave	n/a	-
Parental Leave	n/a	9%

Source : ICTU 2002. Note : FFWA : Family Friendly Work Arrangements.

The results of the ICTU survey reveals a higher proportion of employees with access to, and availing of, family-friendly working arrangements (partly due to the difference in the populations surveyed – the ICTU survey includes public sector employees). It is

clear that flexitime is the most widely available/used form of family friendly work arrangement by employees. A survey carried out by the National Framework Committee for Family-Friendly Working Arrangements also explored attitudes among employers towards both the benefits of, and the constraints to, the implementation of work-life balance initiatives. Employers identified the key benefits as improved employee satisfaction and greater capacity to attract and retain key employees. Linked to these were higher productivity, reduced labour turnover, improved reputation and lower absenteeism. The three key constraints identified by employers were the complexity of implementation, lack of demand by employees and competing organisational priorities (National Framework Committee for Family-Friendly Working Arrangements 2002).

5.4 Summary and Conclusions

There is little Irish research on the impact of work-life balance initiatives on firms. Employer organisations have adopted clear positive policies towards family-friendly work arrangements and attitudinal surveys do indicate a relatively positive outcome. In practice, however only a limited number of initiatives are widely available. Where positive benefits of work-life balance initiatives have been identified by employers these encompass both employee satisfaction and recruitment and retention of key skilled staff.

6. Effects of Reconciliation Policy for Society as a Whole

6.1 Introduction

Quality of life and work-life balance are major political issues in contemporary Ireland. Childcare costs, the length of commuting time and house prices have dominated much public debate over the last seven or eight years. These are issues affecting middle and even higher income groups as well as having particular effects on low income families. The pace of change has been extremely fast over the last decade in Ireland and the lack of adequate social and physical infrastructure is very evident. Eileen Drew analyses the relationship between trends in the wider economy and work organisation and makes the point that flexible working arrangements have been introduced in Ireland both at times of high economic growth and of economic downturn but that the quality of options available has been lower during the downturn

‘Other sources of pressure have arisen in the tightening labour market associated with economic boom, especially in the mid to end 1990’s which witnessed an excess demand for labour, reverse out-migration, greater encouragement to women returners and rising female participation rates. This excess demand for labour created opportunities for an increasing proportion of women to work part-time while paradoxically, the economic constraints of the early 1980’s created similar opportunities for work sharing in the Irish Civil Service that led to the introduction of job-sharing and career breaks. Hence the Irish experience to date shows that the impetus for flexible working arrangements can arise in conditions of economic growth and/or downturn. However the quality and/or quantity of work-life balance options available may be adversely affected by an economic downturn.’ (Drew 2003)

6.2 Reconciliation policy and participation level

While women's employment rate has risen dramatically in Ireland over the last fifteen years, lack of social infrastructure and supports for parents with young children continues to act as significant barriers to accessing paid employment. Over two-thirds of Irish women in the 25-34 age group - the key childbearing age group - are in the labour force. Parenting - particularly motherhood - does put significant negative pressure on labour market attachment in Ireland. In a comparison of four EU countries (France, Ireland, Italy and Denmark) Irish women emerged as the most likely (46%) to interrupt work on the birth of the youngest child, compared to 38% of Italian women and 21% of French women. (Fathers and Mothers 2002)

"Childcare costs here are the highest in Europe and are keeping large numbers of women out of the workforce. Irish parents spend almost twice the EU average on childcare and the problem is getting worse. There is a serious underutilisation of women's high standards of education and skills. A critical factor in this is the lack of affordable childcare. The cost of childcare is just one of a number of barriers to women's participation in the workforce. They also receive on average lower pay than men and are very much underrepresented in managerial positions" (National Centre for Performance and Partnership 2005)

6.3 Reconciliation policy and poverty level

Given that childcare in Ireland carries such a high cost and accounts for such a high proportion of household expenditure (see section 1.4) it follows that those on low incomes are going to be particularly disadvantaged in terms of accessing paid employment. While the EOCP plays an important role in areas of designated disadvantage, its overall impact is limited. Lone parents and others dependent on welfare are particularly likely to become trapped in situations of poverty due to the cost of childcare acting as barrier to taking up education and training opportunities as well as paid employment possibilities (OPEN 2001). For families on low incomes with two or more children, establishing satisfactory childcare arrangements is extremely difficult.

Differences between income groups (as well as between women and men) are also evident in different kinds of participation in flexible working arrangements. For example, low paid, predominantly women workers in clerical and lower administrative jobs in the public sector are those most likely to engage in job sharing whereas men and women at medium and higher levels are more likely to avail of career breaks. It is also job sharing which is the family friendly work arrangement most associated with a perceived negative career impact (see section 2.3). This can mean that low paid women workers in the public sector, who avail of certain work-life balance initiatives, are likely to find themselves trapped in the lower end of the jobs hierarchy over the long-term.

6.4 Reconciliation policy and fertility level

There is no specific research in Ireland on the relationship between fertility patterns in Ireland and the availability of work-life balance initiatives. Fertility levels have declined very significantly however, from a level significantly above the EU average

only fifteen years ago to the EU average level at present. In their Report last month focusing on the 'workplace of the future' the National Centre for Performance and Partnership highlight the way in which changing demographic trends means that pressures on families with young children and demand for childcare services will likely increase.

" In recent times a high proportion of Irish women have deferred childbirth until their early 30s. By 2013, the population cohort in their 30s will have increased by 150,000. It seems likely that this will further accentuate the need for adequate childcare provision." (National Centre for Performance and Partnership 2005)

Research evidence shows clearly that it is childcare responsibilities which is the overwhelming reason why family-friendly initiatives have been taken up by Irish workers - particularly women. In their survey of members in 2002, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions questioned respondents in relation to their take up of family friendly work arrangements for childcare reasons. Just over 66% of respondents felt that their childminding responsibilities had a bearing on their decision to avail of the flexible work arrangements. However this was twice as likely to be the case for women (76%) as men (37%) (ICTU 2002).

6.5 Summary and conclusion

Issues of work-life balance have become very important in Ireland over the last decade against a background of rapid economic growth. While research shows that the need for work life balance initiatives, and particularly childcare supports, has grown, it also indicates that policy and practice has been slow to change. In effect, there is a childcare crisis in Ireland and responses at the level of employment policy and in broader social and economic policy have been weak. As a result pressures on families with young children are intense and while this affects all sectors, it presents special constraints on women in low income families to accessing employment, training and education.

7. Summary and Conclusions

The positions of women and men in relation to work-life balance issues in Ireland are different. Women are the primary carers and their position on the labour market is directly affected by their caring responsibilities. In this context, the level and quality of flexible working arrangements has a particular significance for women, reflected in the gendered pattern of take-up of flexible working arrangements.

" This study reinforces the findings of previous research in demonstrating that the take-up of work-life balance is highly gendered. The options that imply no loss of pay (flexitime and working from home) or overtime tend to be sought equally, if not predominantly, by men. In contrast to this, women who seek flexibility have opted for reduced hours (mainly in part-time working/job-sharing and to a lesser degree term-time working) and many more seek such arrangements in preference to working from home." (Drew 1998) Analysing the findings from the various different studies of work-life balance in Ireland, it is evident that there is need for a diverse range of policies and initiatives which can meet the needs of different sectors of the population

and different household situations. As Eileen Drew has argued "employees do not seek the same solutions to the need for work/life balance. Individual needs may alter radically throughout their lifetime" (Drew 2002)

Public policy provides little support in Ireland to women and men aiming to reconcile work and family life. Leave entitlements are extremely limited and financial supports are inadequate. On the central question of childcare, successive reports have highlighted a growing crisis in childcare provision and affordability. This situation seriously disadvantages those on low incomes, and particularly women, in relation to employment, education and training. Reconciling work and family is on the social and political agenda in Ireland but the response from the system is slow and weak. Government, employer's organisations, trade unions and others all express support for work-life balance initiatives but there is little evidence that the necessary resources are being put in place to achieve a greater level of availability of quality working arrangements.

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