

<sup>9</sup> See Brannen and Nilsen (2006) for discussions of similar cases of low-skilled fathers and their role as carers, describing a shift in fathers' roles from 'fatherhood' to 'fathering'.

## Supports and constraints for parents: a gendered cross-national perspective

Janet Smithson, Suzan Lewis, Siyka Kovacheva, Laura den Dulk,  
Bram Peper and Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes

### Introduction

This chapter considers the range of resources available for working parents in different national contexts. We draw on material from countries with different levels of public and private support, working hours and childcare, to provide a systematic overview and some cross-national comparisons of types and sources of constraint and support for working parents. Unlike Chapters Four and Five and the following chapter, the analysis is not based on the case studies of individual parents. Rather we conceptualise differences across countries with reference to the *structural characteristics* that provide support or constraints – the resources that can be drawn on to make working parenthood possible. Thus we analyse what the national contexts are 'cases of', where support for working parents is concerned. We have categorised sources and levels of support (see Table 6.1). We have also distinguished between three main types of support within these levels – regulatory, practical and relational (support from relationships within a workplace). Countries are first examined and categorised according to some of the key categories and comparators which were relevant to our research questions (see Tables 6.2 and 6.3) and which is in line with our multilayered case study approach (see Chapter Three), notably, formal state supports, organisational supports (policies, culture, managers and colleagues), childcare support, support from partners and wider family support. All of these are considered below, and we explore the links to gendered and cultural assumptions.

A cross-national comparative perspective delineates the social structural context of people's lives – in this study, public policy provision, workplace support and community and family support available. Whether this is identified by respondents as being of value to them in their everyday lives is, however, another matter. We therefore also take into account the kinds of support and constraints respondents take as given or fail to mention – what goes unsaid or is not viewed as important or relevant, and what is seen as an entitlement in each country.

### Formal support from the state in the form of regulations and laws

Formal state support is greater in the Scandinavian and Eastern European countries than elsewhere. Employers in these countries are bound by regulations laid down by the state to implement lengthy paid parental leave, and in Sweden and Norway in this study, to provide flexible working hours during the period of breastfeeding. In the other countries such as the UK the state is less generous and seeks to persuade employers to act in a family-friendly way to employees, for example, by promoting a 'business case' in the UK, and increasingly so in the Netherlands. Employment protection is in general stronger in the Scandinavian countries than elsewhere. In the former Eastern bloc countries the right to lengthy paid parental leave is still in place and hence more generous than in many Western European countries, while other supports such as access to subsidised housing has radically diminished.

Table 6.1: Sources of support

Formal support		Informal support	
Macro National laws and regulations	Meso Organisation	Micro	
	Organisational regulations	Organisational culture	
Working time regulations	Organisational working time regulations	Managers and supervisors	Partner
Formal childcare facilities	Organisational childcare facilities and support	Colleagues	Wider family – grandparents, siblings
Leave regulations	Organisational leave policies		Friends and neighbours

Table 6.2: Organisation of time, leave and childcare: dominant model at time of study (2003-05)

Organisation of	Bulgaria	Slovenia	UK	Netherlands	Sweden	Norway	Portugal
Working time norms	Full-time jobs for both partners	Full-time jobs for both partners	Part-time work for mothers, long working hours for fathers	Part-time work for mothers and full-time work for fathers	Over half (56%) of mothers with young children work full time. Nearly all fathers work full time	Over half (54%) of mothers work full time. Nearly all fathers work full time	Full-time jobs for both partners
Parental leave	19 weeks paid maternity leave, 21 months basic rate paid parental leave	15 weeks paid maternity leave, 90 days paid paternity leave, 260 days full paid parental leave	Six months paid maternity leave, six months unpaid, two weeks paid paternity leave, 13 weeks unpaid parental leave	16 weeks paid maternity leave and 13 weeks unpaid parental leave per parent with a child under eight	Eight weeks paid maternity leave, eight weeks paid paternity leave. Parents share 480 days of paid paternity leave per child	52 weeks paid maternity leave, four weeks paid paternity leave, 39 weeks paid parental leave, one year unpaid parental leave	16 weeks paid maternity leave, four weeks paid paternity leave, three months unpaid parental leave
Leave for a caring for a sick child	Fully paid 60 days per year	14 days paid leave	None specified	10 days paid leave per year	120 days paid per child/year	10 days paid leave per year	30 days per year (paid at 60%)

Table 6.2: continued

Organisation of:	Bulgaria	Slovenia	UK	Netherlands	Sweden	Norway	Portugal
<b>Childcare</b>	Mother's care in the home up to two or three years, then public childcare, supplemented by informal care from extended family	Mother's care in the home up to two or three years, then public childcare	Private nursery or childminder up to three, then state-funded nursery school part time for a year	Tripartite childcare system: parents, government and employers share the cost of childcare	Most children start public or private day care at 18 months. All childcare is subsidised by the state and at low taxes	Cash for care scheme for under-threes (65%). In 2003 42% in nurseries	Mother's care up to five/six months, then informal family or paid care until three years and childcare (mostly private but state-supported) from three to five years
<b>Age of starting school</b>	School starts at seven, obligatory kindergarten at six	Six years	Four-and-a-half years	Four years	Six years	Six years	Six years
<b>Hours of school per day in early school years</b>	Four to five hours a day. After-school care is organised only at some schools and is paid by parents	Eight hours a day including free afternoon activities	Six hours a day. After-school care is provided by childminders, relatives or limited places in after-school care	Between three, five or six hours a day. Limited availability of formal after-school care	Depending on age, between three to seven hours	Three to four hours a day. Private after-school care	Six hours a day

## Organisational support

State and workplace support are interrelated in many ways. Where state entitlements are lowest, some employers introduce work-family policies such as flexible working arrangements or family leave beyond the statutory minimum, on a voluntary basis, usually for business reasons. Parents may feel less sense of entitlement to take up such policies than in countries where these are legally mandated (Lewis and Smithson, 2001). On the other hand, even when there are statutory entitlements to, for example, generous parental leave or part-time work, these have to be implemented at the workplace level where organisational culture, informal practices, manager attitudes and colleague relationships, as well as global competition and associated management techniques, can all have an impact on the resources and supports available to parents (Lewis et al, 2009). In Bulgaria and Slovenia, the rising insecurity of jobs with diminishing state protection makes parents reluctant to use the statutory provisions to the full. There is often an implementation gap between policy (whether state or organisational) and actual practice, even in 'family-friendly' workplaces (Callan, 2007; Holt and Lewis, 2012).

There is evidence of gendered assumptions: conflating job commitment with hegemonic masculinity (Bailyn, 2006), and constructing ideal workers as those who do not allow work to interfere with family in all the countries, particularly in the private sector (Brandth and Kvande, 2002; Haas and Hwang, 2007). Besides gender, differences in job status also made a difference in the use of family-friendly workplace policies. In countries with liberal and conservative welfare states such as the UK or the Netherlands and Germany, high-status employees, especially in the private sector, had greater access to flexible working hours, for example, than front desk workers. In Bulgaria low-status workers used the lengthy parental leave and care leave for a sick child more often than high-status employees. The low-paid employees in low-qualified jobs did not lose much income during the long leave and would not gain as much career growth if they stayed in the workplace. The high-status workers usually cut some part of their legally allowed leave in order to demonstrate work commitment and to manage to keep up with the rapid changes in the job demands. Nevertheless, in all the countries parents talked about the important role that managers played in the everyday life of parents (das Dorees Guerreiro et al, 2004; den Dulk et al, 2012), either in terms of exercising legitimate discretion or in informally providing or withholding support.

Statutory provision as well as formal organisational policies often include an element of line managers' discretion. This is particularly the

case in the Netherlands and the UK, where several statutory provisions explicitly include an element of discretion. For instance, while parents are entitled to flexible or part-time work in the two Scandinavian countries, both the Dutch and British managers can decline a request to reduce working hours when this is viewed as conflicting with serious business needs. The 'right to request' flexible working arrangements is particularly limited by managerial discretion in the UK (Fagan and Walthery, 2011 ; Fagan et al, 2006).

Relational support at work, from managers and colleagues, is a crucial resource for managing work and parenting (Olliere-Malaterre, 2010). Dynamic processes based in relations between social actors shape experiences and behaviours and are a crucial aspect of workplace context. Many of the parents talked about what can be termed a 'management lottery' (Brannen, 2009; den Dulk et al, 2012), suggesting an element of luck in the support received. Even in countries with more formally enshrined rights, a parent-friendly manager is very important for parents with young children and can be a source of both practical and relational support in certain situations or can undermine regulations in others. Managerial support varied both across and within organisations, often reflecting shifting contexts. In Bulgaria and Slovenia, with inflexible working time regulations, the role of managers is crucial in family emergencies (Kovacheva, 2009). In the private sector in Bulgaria new-style managers are described as those who are younger and schooled in capitalism, who regard support for parents as an unaffordable cost in a competitive environment. Old-style managers are more likely to provide informal support. In contrast, in the UK private sector company, new-style managers are described as those who are more likely to endorse informal support and flexibility while old-style managers endorse the traditional ideal worker ideology and expect constant availability. Elsewhere trends such as high commitment management stress the need to support employees' work-family needs to gain their commitment.

Colleagues provide another important source of relational support in the workplace. Where people work interdependently, especially in self-managing teams, such as in the Swedish social services, colleagues can become important for organising the working day in a flexible way. Colleagues cover for each other and such reciprocity is especially valued by parents of young children (Plantin and Bäck-Wiklund, 2009). However, this also has a downside. A common finding across the countries was that although colleagues could be important sources of support, parents were often reluctant to take time off when needed precisely because they knew that their colleagues would cover for them.

Thus colleagues' support was double-edged. This was due to intense workloads which meant that colleagues were already overburdened. This intensification of work was reported in every country as organisations strove to compete in the global economy or to increase efficiency (see Lewis et al, 2009). This, too, undermined to some extent supportive state or workplace policies.

Finally, as discussed in Chapter Three, we selected both public (social services) and private sector (finance) organisations because type of sector can affect employees' experiences of work. Public sector organisations did emerge as somewhat more supportive than the private sector in most cases in this study. However, this difference was declining with the prevalence of new public management (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007) whereby the public sector organisations adopted more market-oriented approaches, including cost-cutting and efficiency measures (Lewis et al, 2009). This generated the intensification of work which was characteristic of both sectors. For example, managers in the Swedish and Norwegian social services were happy to grant leave or part-time work but were often unable to replace the work that was relinquished, leading to intensification of work for the parent on leave or working flexibly, or for colleagues who must pick up the slack. In Bulgaria the private sector, especially the new small companies created with the transition to the market economy, did not always comply with statutory parental leave regulation. This happened in a context of diminishing state control and weakened trades union protection.

## Childcare

Childcare facilities have been singled out as a separate source of support for several reasons, not least because affordable childcare is one of the most important resources for working parents. Their sheer existence is important in its own right. Such *practical* help offers parents the opportunity to work but is also reassuring, helping parents to feel secure that their children are being looked after in a safe place.

In Bulgaria parents consider subsidised childcare as their right. In villages with falling birth rates many kindergartens closed and working parents had fallen back on informal support from the extended family and neighbours. The ESS fourth wave (carried out in 2009) showed that Bulgarian parents still had the highest expectations of European parents about the role of the state for supporting working parents, despite parents' low levels of satisfaction with support for work-family balance and childcare (Kovacheva, 2010). In the Netherlands, in contrast, care at home by parents (the mother) was highly valued and considered

best for the child, and childcare was usually used on a part-time basis. Too many hours in formal childcare was not considered good for the wellbeing of the child. Many Dutch parents considered three days as a maximum.

### Support from partners

In terms of informal sources of support, the partners of working parents were very important in most instances both for *emotional* and *practical* support. However, on the practical side, different gender role ideologies across the countries affected the division of labour in the household between fathers and mothers. Participants did not usually define themselves explicitly in terms of gendered breadwinner/carer roles. Nevertheless their accounts of their working patterns and promotion opportunities reflected assumptions of male breadwinner/female homemaker orientations (Crompton, 1999), although participants did not use these terms. Norwegian and Swedish parents often aspired to shared parenting, although in these countries (among the most 'equal' in the world), women still did more of the domestic work and childcare than men. Scandinavian women were also more likely to report dissatisfaction with a male partner's involvement. Portuguese and Bulgarian women were least likely to express dissatisfaction, despite the low levels of paternal involvement in childcare and housework in those countries. Mothers' expectations of practical and emotional partner support were strongly influenced by gender role ideologies that affect intra-household negotiations. In Portugal and Bulgaria, there was an expectation that grandparents, especially grandmothers, helped a great deal with childcare, but not that the children's fathers would help substantially, and this affected how the mothers and fathers in these countries talked about their support, or lack of support.

In the second half of the 20th century the one party regimes in Eastern Europe established a pattern of gender relations in which both partners worked full time, supported by both state and enterprise welfare structures (Pascall and Kwak, 2005). The high rates of participation in full-time employment by women and men were, however, accompanied by a vertical and horizontal segregation, a significant pay gap and unequal division of unpaid domestic and childcare work (Stoilova, 2001; Mrcela, 2008). The social transition to a market economy and party pluralism after 1989 involved changes in the relationship between the state, the market and the family as main providers of services. In Bulgaria (to a lesser extent in Slovenia) explicit gender stereotyping resurfaced (Kovacheva, 2000). With the expansion of the paid part of

parental leave and continued protection of mothers against dismissal, younger women in particular were increasingly considered unreliable workers, especially in private sector companies. Despite gender equality legislation in Slovenia, parenthood continues to be seen as a mother's responsibility. Younger women are often discriminated against in terms of jobs and promotions because they are viewed as potential mothers (Mrcela, 2008, p 153).

### Wider family supports

When both partners were employed and where little formal childcare support was available, other informal sources such as the wider family, particularly grandparents, became important. Family support featured more typically in the interviews from Slovenia, Bulgaria and Portugal. However, it was also an important support for many of the UK and Dutch parents and, in some instances, a resource for working-class parents in the Scandinavian countries. In Slovenia and Bulgaria both family support and state support were important for childcare. Family support came to compensate for the inflexibility of public childcare and was an invaluable resource when parents worked extra hours, travelled on business trips or were involved in training and education.

In Northern Europe there was a strong discourse of autonomy and independence. However, the extended financial support often provided by parents in these countries to cover higher education and house buying were not viewed as dependency. This demonstrates, as with gendered expectations of partners, how perceived support and constraints can be viewed differently depending on the norms in a particular country. In the Netherlands, informal support by grandparents or childminders was widely used, although formal support existed.

### Cross-national comparisons

In order to illustrate in more depth the differences between countries on these dimensions we have chosen to provide a description of selected countries from the study – Slovenia, the Netherlands, Sweden and Portugal, following the logic of the North/South/East divisions of European history (see Chapter Two). We focus on two of the main formal sources of support and constraint as perceived by working parents: affordable childcare and choice and flexibility of working hours, and view these in relation to informal support networks.

In most of the countries in this study, working hours were seen as critical. The Northern countries in this study all had high rates of part-

time working, especially among mothers of young children (see Table 6.3). Where a workplace allowed flexible working hours this was often seen as a huge advantage by parents. In the majority of cases mothers, but not fathers, of young children reduced their working hours when this option was available. However, not all had the opportunity or the means to do so and then other resources had to be drawn on in order to make working parenthood possible.

**Table 6.3: Employment rate in partner countries, 2003 (%)**

Country	Total employment rate	Women in employment	Women in part-time employment
Bulgaria	52.5	49.0	1.1
Netherlands	73.5	65.8	48.7
Norway	75.5	72.6	32.5
Portugal	68.1	61.4	8.6
Slovenia	62.6	57.6	3.9
Sweden	72.9	71.5	25.0
United Kingdom	71.8	65.3	28.3

Note: Total employment rate in the age group 15-64.

Source: Eurostat (2004)

#### *Part-time work and childcare – a ‘private matter’: the Netherlands*

As Table 6.3 shows, the Netherlands had the highest rate of women working part time. The Dutch case is noteworthy in that there is a traditional division of labour between men and women and the idea of institutional childcare facilities has yet to be fully integrated into the Dutch system and mindset. Parenthood and childcare have been historically regarded as a private matter in this country. Only in the last decade of the previous century has childcare facilities entered the public discourse as a public concern. The high part-time rate among working mothers must be seen in the light of the ideological notion that children are best cared for by their mothers at home. Even in couples where the mother earns a higher income than the father, the mother in most cases reduces her working hours to care for the child. One Dutch mother, Nadine, who works in the private sector, explained her decision to reduce her hours, by referring to the fear of her partner losing his career perspectives when working part time and her own wish to spend more time with her child. This specific situation

of Nadine indicates in a broader sense that the norm of motherhood is still strongly embedded in Dutch culture. This norm implies that at least part of the daily care of children needs to be provided by the parents themselves, preferably by the mother.

Employees (mainly mothers) are entitled to reduced working hours, and this is mentioned as one of the most important sources of support for parents in the Netherlands. However, as other studies demonstrate, part-time work can also be regarded as a constraint, limiting positive career development for women<sup>1</sup>. In the Dutch case part-time work was viewed favourably by interviewees. Part-time work was not presented as a gendered measure and it was not a right for mothers in particular. By law<sup>2</sup> Dutch employers are obliged to treat employees equally regardless of working time, and the Act on the Adjustment of working hours entitles all workers to reduce or extend working hours. Employers have to grant a request unless they can show that it conflicts with serious business needs (den Dulk et al, 2012). In a context of a traditional division of labour between men and women in the household, however, the majority of those who work part time are mothers.<sup>3</sup> The tacit trade-off that Dutch women accept is that part-time work entails no or very slow career progress.

Partner support is itself likely to be shaped by mothers' working patterns – part-time working gives mothers more time to spend with children and to take care of domestic tasks. The men in such households are hence the main breadwinners (where they work full time). Part-time working mothers are also a source of both practical emotional support for full-time working fathers, while full-time working husbands provide financial support and reassurance for mothers but at the expense of mothers' work careers. The situation of one Dutch couple illustrates this point. Gerben is a full-time working father and his partner, Nienke, is a part-time working mother. Gerben tried to fulfil his professional duties in four days a week. It often happened, however, that Gerben felt he had to go to his work on his day off. When this happened, Nienke says: "That is a nuisance; then I have to organise ad hoc day care and I don't like that." When Gerben – as the main breadwinner – was called to his work, Nienke defined it as her responsibility to organise the conditions for Gerben to go to his work. This is an interesting example of gendered responsibilities, adopted by both partners in a taken-for-granted way.

In the context of the gendered division of labour in the home, the gender segregation in the labour market and the gender pay gap, most responsibility for weaving the strands of work and family together fall on women, perpetuating gender inequalities.



*Part-time work and childcare – a 'public issue': Sweden*

The right to work part time is also an issue in the Scandinavian context. Many mothers in the Swedish social services reduced their working hours when they had children. However, when a distinction between long and short part-time hours is made, it is clear that mothers with higher education tend to reduce their working time to long part-time hours (four days a week) compared with those who have lower education.

Sweden has by far the best publicly funded childcare programmes of the countries in this study, and 80 per cent of one- to five-year-olds are in pre-school. In recent years the focus has been on keeping public childcare affordable, and a maximum price has been set. This is considered one of the main sources of support for parents (Bäck-Wiklund and Plantin, 2005). Swedish childcare, in contrast to childcare in the Netherlands, is a public issue, and has been so for many years. Moreover, where the Dutch authorities have chosen a 'private-public' partnership in the funding of childcare institutions, involving employers in their efforts to provide for their particular employees, Sweden has continued to see this as a provision of the welfare state.

In this context, Swedish parents do not look to their employers for support. In the social services, where the Swedish organisational case study was conducted, the practical and relational support of colleagues proved important. This was because these workers were organised in self-managed teams. In order to enable flexibility during the working day, such as staying at home with a sick child or taking children to the doctor, colleagues negotiated the 'lost' work time with one another, thus making being a working parent easier. This informal support provided flexible working hours but also contributed to goodwill and high morale at work. There was nevertheless a downside to this as parents were often reluctant to stay away from work as they knew that their already overburdened colleagues would have to take over their work. So this system would work better if there were enough staff.

Parents who had moved to the city for work often did not have family living nearby. For those who did have extended family nearby, the most frequent type of support available from kin was babysitting, which made leisure time possible for the couples.

In spite of having a high score on the GEM index it is accepted that mothers do the bulk of domestic work and childcare, whereas mothers have to *negotiate* with fathers if they want to share the tasks. The division of labour in the household frequently became an issue of conflict between partners, as the case of Patricia illustrates. Patricia

picked up the children from nursery. This affected her work since she was the only one in her team with young children. She reported many heated discussions with her partner about this. When the children were ill she was usually the one who had to take time off. Asked if her partner could do more, she said:

'Of course he could. I mean if I can stay home, he can do the same. But he is a better negotiator than me and he always makes it sound like his work is more important than mine and that he HAS to do certain things at work. And in the end he earns a lot more than me and that's also something that matters....'

This quote illustrates a frequently recurring theme across the countries: how gendered structures, including the pay gap, shape parenthood and make motherhood different from fatherhood both in everyday family life *and* in the workplace.

*Full-time working hours and childcare – a public issue: Slovenia*

Like Bulgaria, Slovenia has moved from having a plan economy to a market economy, resulting in a decline in public services. Full employment and public childcare facilities were taken for granted in the former Yugoslavia, of which Slovenia was a part. After the transition to a market economy the situation for working parents became more stressful.

The part-time employment rate in Slovenia is low (Fagnani et al, 2004), and most mothers work full time, after a year or more of maternity and parental leave. There is, however, a legacy from the old regime, namely affordable public childcare. All the parents in the Slovenian bank who were interviewed made use of it. Since the opening hours of day care centres in many cases did not coincide with the parents' working hours, additional support had to be found. Most of the interviewees would not be able to balance work and family were it not for additional support from their families, especially mothers and mothers-in-law (Černigoj Sadar and Kersnik, 2005, p 55). In one case (Nina), both her mother and her mother-in-law helped out by picking up the children from nursery and by sometimes cooking the evening meal for the family.

Despite widespread public childcare in Slovenia, there is a strong tradition of family networks to be relied on if needed. In these networks, female relatives give practical assistance on an everyday basis. The gender

division of labour in the household follows the same standard pattern in Slovenia as elsewhere. However, increased availability of family help serves to let fathers off the hook, as we can see in Chapter Seven in the case of Janez. The unusual case of Marija is also illustrative in serving to underline what is seen as the desirable norm, at least from a male point of view. Marija is a financial analyst with a degree whose partner is a student. Currently Marija is the breadwinner while her partner stays at home with their young daughter. They share the housework between them, and Marija seems satisfied with the situation. However, her partner, who was also interviewed, says that if he was working he would work full time and she would probably either take time off work or work reduced hours if possible, thus suggesting the strength of the male breadwinner model in fathers' perceptions (Černigoj Sadar and Kersnik, 2005, p 54). While in the Northern countries' interviews there was a theme about part-time work simultaneously helping and de-privileging mothers, in Slovenia and Bulgaria the long parental leave and sick child leave (taken mostly by women) were seen as a support but also an obstacle to gender equality.

#### *Full-time working hours and childcare – a family issue: Portugal*

Only the UK surpassed Portugal in terms of long working hours at the time of this study. However, where British mothers typically worked part time when they had young children,<sup>4</sup> both Portuguese mothers and fathers worked full time. There is no tradition of part-time work in Portugal apart from some recent flexible working hours schemes related to family-friendly policies in the public sector,<sup>5</sup> and there are no specific policies for parents in the private sector (das Dores Guerreiro et al, 2005). In two-income families, the juggling of long working hours, the lack of fit between nursery opening hours and working hours, and short maternity leave is in most cases solved with a combination of formal and informal care, such as help from kin. Only when parents and parents-in-law live far away from young families, or are ill or too old and frail to be of much help, are they not relied on for support (das Dores Guerreiro et al, 2005).

Family support for childcare comes in different varieties. In Alexandra's case, for instance (see Chapter Four), her in-laws moved in with the family to look after the children. Her mother-in-law did all the domestic work, including the cooking. In Dália's case (see Chapters Four and Seven), her parents lived with the family when she was working in order to help with childcare. Sergio, a father in a higher status position in the private company, was the only one whose wife

stayed at home to look after the children. They also had paid help in the house, and his father sometimes helped with childminding.

Support from partners is shaped by gendered practices in Portugal along the same lines as in the other countries. As reported in Chapter Four, Alexandra had support from her parents when the first child was born, and they also had paid help in the house. Her husband did not take much part in either childminding or housework. In only one Portuguese case (a worker in the private sector company) did a mother report that she and her partner shared the housework. Where mothers had access to wider family, in most cases their mothers or grandmothers, the father's lack of help in the house was rarely remarked on as a constraint. It could be argued that support from wider kin, or paid help, absolves fathers from sharing family work. It avoids conflict and makes life possible, but perpetuates gender inequities.

The main difference between Portugal and the Eastern European countries (Bulgaria and Slovenia) that also report considerable help from kin is their greater public childcare provision compared to Portugal and the long parental leave in Eastern Europe.

#### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have considered the main sources of support and constraints for working parents, and what support is expected or taken for granted. We have demonstrated how different regimes of working hours and different forms of formal and informal childcare and systems of leave create complex webs of support for parents of young children across the seven countries. The cross-national variation in type of support is related to current and historical institutional frameworks and regimes of welfare in each country. These regimes encompass state provision and regulation (working hours, parental leave and public childcare), informal care from family networks and gender practices as they shape the contributions of both mothers and fathers in the household and in childcare. We have also made explicit the importance of the organisational context, not only the existence of formal policies, but also relational support and workplace culture and practices on parents' understandings and take-up of the support, and the constraints in those countries that have discretionary policies. The relative importance of public or private sector employment varies in the countries in the study, as does the difference between parents with high and low employment status, and between fathers and mothers. We have also highlighted how childcare is variously considered a private, a family or a public concern, in the different national contexts, and



how resulting practices have an impact on working hours, feelings of entitlement to support and specifically gendered experiences of constraints or support.

Gendered complexities underpinning the ways that parents talk about support and constraints are also highlighted. The gendered nature of parenting is acknowledged in some countries, and taken for granted in others. Fathers and mothers typically talk about constraints in different ways and in practice mothers are more likely to compromise their careers for family reasons. The gendered expectations of new fathers and mothers, as well as gendered organisational expectations, vary in the countries studied, but in every country mothers are more likely than fathers to take up the policies available for leave or flexible working. Part-time working, where available, is also overwhelmingly undertaken by women that, while supporting the transition to parenthood, also reproduces gender inequalities in the home and the workplace.

It is notable that in those countries with more equal gender roles, there is not only a higher expectation from fathers and mothers that fathers will participate in childcare and domestic work, but there is also more conflict between couples on this issue. Raised expectations of gender equality appear to take a while to translate into the experience of gender equality within households, and this is not helped by gendered expectations from organisations (managers and colleagues), nor by gendered state provision in some countries. In other contexts where extended family support is available and often essential for both parents to work, this can reduce tensions but can also absolve fathers from the need to make more significant contributions, thus perpetuating gendered family practices.

To understand the ways in which these complex contexts, support and constraints play out in the day-to-day lives of parents we turn, in the next chapter, to look at how comparable mothers and fathers experience their lives in the present as they confront different time frames as working parents. We explore how combinations of resources and constraints are reflected in more positive or negative evaluations of mothers' and fathers' lives and feed into feelings of pressure and/or contentment with their lot.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Norwegian case study report discusses this in some detail based on the focus groups, and similar viewpoints were expressed in the individual interviews. In both private and public sector organisations women expressed concern that part-time jobs could make them seem less committed to work than employees in full-time jobs, and hence they were afraid to lose out on

promotion opportunities and salary rises. In the Dutch case this only discussed in relation to fathers and less so for mothers (viewed as a personal choice between care and work).

<sup>2</sup> Which is also EU law.

<sup>3</sup> Only a private sector organisation was studied in the Netherlands, but in the public sector there is a slight trend for more highly educated men to share parental leave with their partners, that is, both working less than full time in the early years (Gambles et al, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The part-time rate for mothers in Britain is the same as for Norway, approximately 42 per cent.

<sup>5</sup> The so-called 'continuous working day' means a six-hour working day (das Does Guerreiro et al, 2005).