

KOVACHEVA, Siyka: Work-Family Balance. Young Working Parents between Opportunities and Constraints

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Kovacheva's book is devoted to an important issue in modern societies – the reconciliation between work and family with a focus on young people and the challenges they face as employees, partners and parents. The work is impressive with its volume, the richness of empirical material and its deep and detailed analysis, as well as the balance achieved between the theoretical, methodological and empirical components.

Kovacheva is searching for an answer to the question about the balance between work and family in post-communist Bulgaria by examining the forms of support employees receive from the state, employers, and family members. The book is well structured and the author is strictly following her objective – to identify the main types of strategies employed by men and women working in Bulgaria's developing economy in a comparative perspective with the situation in other European countries. The book belongs to the wide field of applied sociology and the analysis is situated under the framework of the sociological theory of the quality of life. Work-family balance – an issue with a growing importance in present day societies feeling the pressures of global market competition – is addressed by exploring the interests of different social groups and revealing the existing social inequalities.

The rich empirical base on whose analysis Kovacheva's conclusions about the (dis)balance between work and family in Bulgaria in the beginning of the 21st century includes data from the National Statistical Institute of Republic Bulgaria and Eurostat, official documents of the European Commission, the Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, other public agencies and private companies, as well as research results of the European Foundation for Improvement of Working and Living Conditions, the World Bank, the OECD and most importantly, the two international comparative studies in which the author acted as a national coordinator: 'Transitions: Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace. Young Adults negotiating the borders of work and family' and 'Quality of Life in a Changing Europe', funded by the 5th and the 6th Framework Programme of the European Commission.

Skilfully applying structural and stratificational approaches, Kovacheva conducts the comparative analysis on three levels: the macro level of societal economic and labour market trends, changes in population and social policy; the meso level where the analysis targets business companies, their working conditions, methods of human resources management and organisational policies and practices; and the micro level of individuals and their families,

value orientations towards work and family, living experiences and future expectations.

The volume starts with a comprehensive theoretical part, followed by a thorough account of the research methodology. The author makes a significant conceptual contribution concerning the notions of quality of life and reconciliation between the multiple social roles of the individual while applying a sociological approach and demonstrating its heuristic opportunities. Based on the in-depth analysis of various theoretical and empirical perspectives to the quality of life, the author defines the balance between work and family as a social construct encompassing 'the processes of conflict and enrichment between the two life domains experienced by individuals in the two related social roles, including personal choices and negotiations with household partners, workplace colleagues, employers and the wider social institutions. The various patterns of work-family balance are influenced by the set of resources and constraints at the different levels of social context in which the individual life strategies are embedded' (p. 72).

The second part of the book focuses on the institutional context of the balance between work and family life by examining economic, political and social trends on the macro level of European societies. The author presents the typology of five main welfare state regimes and examines the specific characteristics of the changing Bulgarian model. The countries included in the analysis are grouped in the following types (p. 83): social-democratic/universalist one, represented by Sweden and Finland; corporatist/continental – Germany and the Netherlands; liberal/Anglo-Saxon – the United Kingdom; sub-protective/Mediterranean – Portugal; and post-socialist/East-European – Hungary and Bulgaria. The book examines the principles, methods and means, by which the different European countries stimulate, assist or restrict the achievement of work-life balance by their citizens. The Bulgarian case is defined as one mixing liberal and universalistic elements with a growing importance of minimal means-tested benefits while still preserving the legal provisions for long paid parental leaves and dense networks of public childcare centres. The country's institutional context tends to assume some familialistic features with more responsibilities attributed to the family – a trend which strengthens the traditional gender division of unpaid household work.

The third part examines the problem at the level of the work organisation by studying concrete company policies and practices. The analysis reveals the role of organisational culture and the forms of organisational social capital for achieving a work-family balance. The results from a survey of employees in four companies in Bulgaria's service sector demonstrate the importance of the organisational context. The balance between work and family is studied in its both negative and positive aspects for the quality of work and life – conflict,

stress and interference, as well as enrichment and flow (p. 174). Factors which have a significant impact for the satisfaction of employees are the flexibility of working schedules and place, work autonomy, team work and family friendly organisational culture. For those with care responsibilities for family members the most negative effects come from overtime work on a short notice and a low degree of autonomy in managing everyday working tasks. One chapter is devoted to the case study of a university hospital and its gendered business oriented work-family culture which makes it quite distant from the model of 'healthy' organisation found in other European countries. The private and state companies which took part in the research have not yet assumed the double agenda for achieving not only economic efficiency but also employees' well being and the dominant model of working organisation in Bulgaria neglects the problems in the reconciliation of work and family life. One of the interesting conclusions of the analysis in this part is that the informal relations with colleagues and line managers in the work place are more important for the employees in Bulgaria to achieve a work-family balance than the formal structures and policies and this in turn is due to the dominant type of trust (p. 262). The values of trust and solidarity in the country are based more on personal ties and norms of reciprocity than on generalised trust and confidence in public institutions.

In the fourth part of the book the author's attention turns to the micro level – to the inquiry into the individual strategies for achieving a work-family balance. A special focus is placed on the young working parents and the challenges they face in their transitions from education to employment and from the parental family to a family of their own and parenthood. A strong argument is made about the specific sets of opportunities and constraints that individuals have to manage in the different stages of the life course when trying to achieve a work-family balance. The analysis moves from the important question about the quality of work to the quality of family relations and from then on to the family social capital and the informal support from the extended family for the childcare responsibilities. The focus on the micro processes of choices about work and family strategies reveals that working parents strive to achieve a high quality of work, personal development and family happiness in accordance with their value orientations, professional and social competence (p. 361). In Bulgaria the most common model for achieving a balance between work and family is the full-time jobs for the two partners and sharing of childcare (the latter supported by organised public crèches and kindergartens and the traditions of grandparents' help). Behind the seemingly equal division of work and care between the partners the dominant culture still assumes that the main responsibility for paid work is carried by the father and the main responsibility for unpaid care belongs to the mother.

It should be noted that the rich empirical data are analysed in detail and organised in numerous tables and figures which illustrate the cross-country comparison and demonstrate the high professionalism of the author and the skills in combining quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, the merits of the book are not only its theoretical and methodological depth but also its contribution to evidence based social policy. Besides summing up the main outcomes of the analysis, the Conclusions contain well developed policy implications and recommendations. The author shows that work-family balance is formed in accordance with the structure of institutional opportunities and barriers while an important influence comes from the individual preferences and choices. Kovacheva's conclusion is that despite its official adherence to gender equality, the model in Bulgaria stimulated by the legal norms and social and organisational culture in the country is a specific modification of the traditional division of gender roles.

The book goes beyond the customary analysis of research results: it gives a synopsis of the social transformation under way in Bulgarian society in a comparative perspective with other European societies through the investigation of the changes in the reconciliation between work and family life. This approach is among the leading innovations in modern social theories – presenting a deep conceptual and methodologically unblemished analysis, drawing a holistic picture of the specific paths the social transformation takes in Bulgaria in the first decade of the 21st century. Its comparative European perspective makes it a reading of particular importance for all those interested to understand current social change: academics, researchers, educators, students, politicians, managers and wider public.

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