

## Addressing the Paradox:

### Motherhood and Labor Market Participation in the Netherlands

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#### Resumen

La autora compara el discurso sobre la participación femenina en el mercado laboral con los hechos, más allá del criterio economicista, y considera, además, la ética del cuidado, la maternidad y cómo operan estos factores en cuanto a igualdad de género en el ámbito holandés. Se cuestionan las políticas aparentemente emancipadoras que en realidad erosionan la agencia económica de las mujeres a partir de convenciones y expectativas sociales que inciden en ellas como normas casi obligatorias. Es interesante el hallazgo sobre el hecho de que la elección del trabajo a tiempo parcial no es una decisión individual, sino asociada a presiones sistémicas y sociales que perpetúan los roles y las normas de género tradicionales. Una reflexión que apunta a la transformación de las políticas laborales, hacia opciones reales de desarrollo integral de las mujeres.

*Palabras clave: maternidad, política, mercado laboral, género, ética, cuidado.*

#### Abstract

The author compares the discourse on female participation in the labour market with the facts, going beyond the economic criterion, also considering the ethics of care and motherhood and how these factors operate in terms of gender equality in the Dutch context. Apparently emancipatory policies are questioned, in reality they erode women's economic agency based on conventions and social expectations that affect women as almost obligatory norms. It is interesting to find that the choice of part-time work is not an individual decision, but associated with systemic and social pressures that perpetuate traditional gender roles and norms. A reflection that points to the transformation of labour policies towards real options for the comprehensive development of women.

*Keywords: motherhood, politics, labour market, gender, ethics, care.*

*It's not that women  
don't want [to work full time];  
they can't; it's impossible,  
and it does not fit into our system.  
Wieteke Grave.<sup>1</sup>*

The perennial discourse around women's labor market participation has been traditionally rooted in an economic framework, viewing participation as a symbol of emancipation and financial independence.<sup>2</sup> However, when delving deeper into the labor market choices of mothers, particularly in progressive contexts like the Netherlands, the narrative becomes rather intricate. This essay seeks to explore this complexity by intersecting the realms of economics, ethics of care, and motherhood. Specifically, the focus will be on the often overlooked dimension of agency: the real or perceived freedom mothers have in making decisions about part-time work, especially under the weight of societal expectations and institutional pressures.

The role of agency in gender equality and part-time working decisions from mothers is examined in this essay with insights from an ethics of care perspective to offer a more nuanced perspective to mothers' conceptualization of part-time work within the Dutch context. The main argument posited is that by interlinking agency, gender equality, and ethics of care, we can pave a way for the formulation of a social agenda that not only meets caregiver needs but also catalyzes the transformation of gender roles associated with motherhood and care. Such an approach can highlight how seemingly emancipatory policies may, under certain societal constructs, inadvertently erode women's agency. Concluding, this essay proposes that by encompassing rights to care, societies can ensure a more equitable distribution of caregiving burdens and, more crucially, elevate the importance of care within their socio-cultural fabric.

From an economic perspective, women's participation in the workforce is largely viewed through the lens of economic productivity and growth. Labor market involvement of women augments household incomes, reduces poverty, and stimulates economic activity.<sup>3</sup> In this context, part-time work or temporary withdrawal from the workforce due to motherhood is often perceived as an interruption or even

a setback,<sup>4</sup> not only for individual career trajectories, but also for broader economic progress. Particularly, part-time work, while seen as a passage for women's participation in the labor market, has also been acknowledged as contributing to the uphill battles women face in the workplace.<sup>5</sup> Such a narrow viewpoint, however, can inadvertently diminish the profound value and significance of motherhood and caregiving roles.

Contrary to the economic lens, an ethics of care perspective brings forth the innate human value of relationships and the profound significance of caregiving.<sup>6</sup> It acknowledges the intrinsic worth of roles traditionally associated with women, such as nurturing and caregiving. In this framework, choosing to work part-time or prioritizing caregiving roles does not diminish a woman's value or potential. Instead, it celebrates the profound contributions mothers make to societal well-being, emphasizing the importance of relational interdependence and interconnectedness.

However, the idealized notions of the ethics of care can possibly clash with real-world policy implications, especially when ingrained societal expectations play a role. Take the Netherlands, for instance. Celebrated for progressive gender norms, the country paradoxically has one of the highest rates of part-time work among women in Europe.<sup>7</sup> The reasons are multifaceted, stemming from both policy frameworks and deeply rooted societal expectations. While policies like parental leave and flexible work schedules may be crafted to empower mothers with choices and may reflect an intention to create a society where individuals can harmoniously weave their professional aspirations with familial responsibilities, they can intertwine with societal norms which tend to guide, and sometimes pressurize, women into specific roles.<sup>8</sup> For example, workplaces, on average, appear to be more accommodating towards women reducing their work hours after childbirth than they are towards men.<sup>9</sup> Within households, stereotypical thinking about gender tends to influence the decision about mother's work and child care division of labor.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the presence of these policies, societal expectations in the Netherlands may have inadvertently cornered women into specific roles. The prevailing 'one-and-a-half income' model sees one partner, typically the male, working full-time, while the female partner often takes on part-time roles or withdraws from the labor market.<sup>11</sup> Even in households where the mother is the breadwinner, the father is not more likely to reduce his hours after childbirth.<sup>12</sup> Such patterns, while seemingly offering balance, may inadvertently restrict the agency of mothers, leading them to believe they are making free choices when, in fact, they are being subtly directed

by societal norms. This is particularly highlighted by a significant 75% of part-time working mothers in the Netherlands preferring to work more.<sup>13</sup>

When the societal narrative expects mothers to take extended leaves or opt for part-time roles, the perceived ‘choice’ is not genuinely agentic. It becomes an expectation, a norm that women may feel compelled to adhere to. This conflict is evident in the Dutch context. The nation’s policies, though well-intentioned, combined with deeply entrenched gender role attitudes, push women towards part-time employment or even temporary withdrawal from the workforce post-childbirth. In a qualitative study carried out in the Netherlands consisting of 18 in-depth interviews, it was found that mothers experienced societal pressures leading them into reducing their work hours.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the choice of part-time work is found not to be merely an individual decision but a decision entangled with systemic and societal pressures that perpetuate traditional gender roles and norms. This highlights a fundamental paradox between the belief that part-time work is an expression of agency and the reality that structural and societal capabilities heavily influence such choices, a finding that is starkly misaligned with the ethics of care’s emphasis on genuine agency.

While economic emancipation is vital, it should not come at the cost of genuine agency. As such, reconciling the ethics of care with the economic view requires nuanced policymaking and a reevaluation of societal norms. Policies should be crafted, keeping in mind not just the immediate economic impact but the broader societal implications they might trigger. They need to emphasize genuine choice, empowering women to decide based on their personal aspirations and caregiving responsibilities, rather than on societal expectations or policy constraints. In the Dutch context, this might mean revisiting policy structures, perhaps providing incentives for both parents to share caregiving roles more equitably, or raising awareness about the importance of genuine agency in making employment decisions post-childbirth. Only by addressing these structural and societal issues can the Netherlands —and possibly other countries— hope to bridge the chasm between its progressive image and the realities of its labor market.

In navigating the complexities of motherhood, labor force participation, and societal expectations in the Netherlands, it is essential to underscore my positionality. As an economist, my lens is primarily honed to scrutinize and comprehend the intricacies of labor market dynamics and the broader economic framework. However, I am neither a mother nor a native of the Netherlands. This dual detachment

presents both challenges and opportunities. While I might not viscerally understand the profound personal emotions and experiences associated with motherhood, or the nuanced cultural intricacies of Dutch society, this position affords me an outsider's perspective with both advantages and disadvantages.

In conclusion, while the economic perspective offers insights into labor market dynamics, an ethics of care lens illuminates the profound depth of human relationships. Marrying the two requires delicate balance, understanding, and continuous reflection, ensuring that policies empower rather than restrict, and that societal norms evolve to celebrate choices rather than constrict them.

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