

SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER, VYTAUTAS MAGNUS UNIVERSITY  
CENTER FOR EQUALITY ADVANCEMENT

# **Between Paid and Unpaid Work: Family Friendly Policies and Gender Equality in Europe**

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# On Reconciliation of Gender Equality and Daily Routines in Iceland

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## INTRODUCTION

Iceland has Europe's highest participation in the labour market, according to Eurostat.

The employment rate in Iceland was in total 83.8% among the persons aged 16-64 in 2005. This counts both for males and females, but the employment rate among males was 86.9% and 80.6% among females in 2005 (Eurostat 2006). The gap between male and female employment rate is in fact closing, so one could at least assume that the "housekeeper-breadwinner" role model has been dead for quite some time, at least when reading the figures. Employment rate among males has been very high for the last 100 years, but female employment rate began to grow around 1960 and has been growing since then. It should be noted that marriage status does not have any effect on participation in the labour market. The percentage of married and unmarried women who are active in the labour market is equally high (Gíslason, Ingólfur 2006). In fact, the growth of employment rate among women around 1960 was mostly based on married women's participation. Married women started to join the labour market during that time.

The fertility rate in Iceland is Europe's second highest, where only Turkey has a higher fertility rate. According

to Eurostat (2006) then, 2.1 is considered to be a replacement level, so Turkey was the only nation in 2004 who could be considered on a replacement level with 2.20 children born alive to a woman during her lifetime. The fertility rate was 2.03 in Iceland in 2004 according to the same figures but lower in Denmark (1.78), Italy (1.33) and Lithuania (1.26). The figures from Iceland look good on the paper, but the individuals behind these figures are not experiencing the same success in their everyday life, as they are facing problems on reconciling their paid work in the labour market and the unpaid work at home.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The analysis is based on the results of qualitative and quantitative research. The quantitative survey was conducted by IMG Gallup in May 2006. Six questions were asked and the sample size was 1091 parents of both sexes. The same six questions were also asked in the surveys in Denmark, Italy and Lithuania and are comparable between Iceland, Italy and Lithuania, as the same methods were used in conducting the surveys. Some of the questions were also asked in 1995 in a survey conducted by Gallup, so there are also possibilities of comparing the attitudes or a change in attitudes.

The parents were living together, working outside the home and had children between the age of 0-10 years (Ragnarsdóttir, Ásdís G., Valdimarsdóttir, Sóley and Thorvaldsson, Matthías 2006).

The qualitative research was based on separated interviews with couples with children and working outside the home. The qualitative part was also based on interviews with employers from different sectors of the labour market. Nine couples from different sectors were interviewed. They were different in many aspects: came from different employment sectors and different age groups, had different number of children and so on. We also tried to choose different households or different families, as some of the couples were both parents of all their children while other couples had children they were both parents of but also had children from former relationships. Some people chose to call the latter family form “the unclear family”, referring to families with “my children, your children and our children”, as one of the informants described his family form. Almost all of the couples were living in Reykjavík and its surroundings; Reykjavík is the capital city in Iceland. The interviews were conducted in June and July 2006 in order to use the survey as the background information and go deeper into some of the aspects, asked in the survey. Some of the informants mentioned that the summertime was maybe not as stressful as other months during the year as vacations were coming up. The interviews were conducted wherever the informants could meet, sometimes at their home and sometimes at their workplace. When meeting

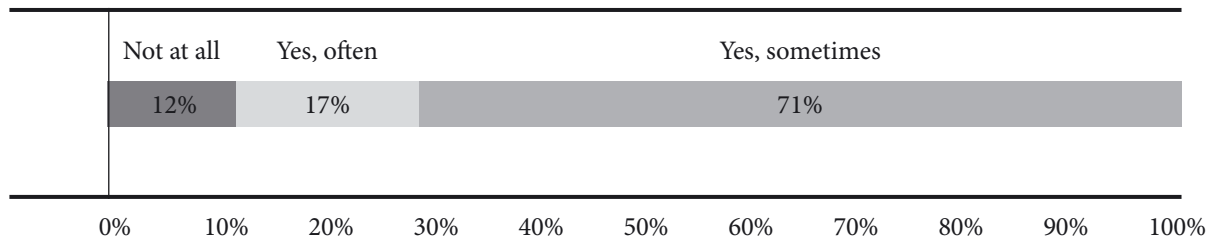
them at their home I usually had a chat with the couple together, then interviews with them separately and again had an informal chat after the interviews.

## STRESSFUL SOCIETY

While participation in the labour market and the fertility rate is relatively high in Iceland we can also see that people are at the same time experiencing quite much stress in their lives. Figure 1 is based on one of the questions Gallup asked in the survey formerly mentioned.

Almost 90% of those who were asked said that work responsibilities clashed sometimes or often with family responsibilities, and there was not a valid difference between males and females. When comparing these numbers with those from other countries, the figures were similar in Iceland and Denmark, but more people in Italy and Lithuania said that work and family life did not clash at all. It is though important to note that the Danish survey was conducted in a slightly different way, so the comparison is not valid. In Italy, 33% of the females and 37.4% of the males said that work and family life did not clash at all. In Lithuania, 40% of the females and 35% of the males said the same thing. There is also more difference between the sexes in these answers as, for example, far more women in Italy experienced that work obligation did often clash with family obligation. 20% of the women in the survey in Italy experienced this, while only 12% of the men did. Maybe female employment rate in Italy has something to do with this difference. While

**Figure 1: “Do work responsibilities clash with family responsibilities?”**



Source: IMG Gallup 2006.

employment rate among males in Italy was almost 70% in 2005, the employment rate among females was only 45% in 2005. Employment rate among women has been growing rapidly in Italy for the last ten years (Eurostat 2006). In a way this is a new situation for women in Italy, that is, doing paid work outside the home and at the same time the unpaid work at the home; so this new situation presumably means more unbalanced life for women than for men.

The interviews with the couples in Iceland underlined this, that is, most of the couples interviewed said that work responsibilities clashed often or sometimes with family responsibilities and all the couples said that at some point in their life they had to struggle when trying to reconcile work and family life. The couples can be divided into two groups. Those who are constantly facing much stress and those who formerly faced much stress but had changed their lives in order to live a less stressful life. Couple negotiation was crucial in this transformation as they made contracts on things around the housework, childcare and other daily routines. As an example, one couple both in their mid forties had made several contracts on daily routines. Formerly the wife did most of the things at home while the husband worked much outside the home with late hours at the workplace. By doing contracts around the housework and work outside the home today they are facing much better times. When describing the former situation the wife said: *"At the time I was not happy, this was not the life I had expected when I fell in love with him. I was becoming isolated, always tied to the home and my social life was minimal. I simply made it clear that we had to change our family life, he had to take more part in the housework and decrease his work outside the home"*. Her husband described the situation in a similar way and said: *"I was probably being selfish. I had this really interesting work and spent much time there and this came, of course, down to our relationship. Our relationship suffered because of the much work I was doing"*. They decided that he would work less outside the home and more inside the home and vice versa on her account. Later she found interesting work and became much happier with having a fruitful career outside the home. This could not have happened unless they had

made such contracts regarding their lives as they did. In another interview a younger couple used almost the same words when describing their ongoing situation. They were not happy with their life and relationship but had only recently started to talk about this situation and were in the first phase of making contracts around their daily routines. Although they had not found solutions yet, they were thinking in similar directions on that he should start to work less outside the home and spend more time within the home and she should try to focus a bit more on her career in order to have a more fruitful life outside the family.

The remaining couples had similar stories on contracts between them but none of them had this discussion in their first months of their relationship or in their courtship. This discussion came later, after several years and at least one child. One couple made a contract on changing their work. They were both working in shifts and had almost no time together as she was doing night shifts and he was doing day and evening shifts. They said that their time together was when they met on the doorstep, when one of them was on the way to work and the other was on the way home from work. In the end they decided to start looking for new jobs for themselves and the first one to get a new job would change. Another couple, both of them almost 30 years old, were arguing about having another child. They had one and the husband wanted them to have another one but she did not want to delay her studies because of that. He came up with the plan that he would take most of their parental leave and would use six months leave while she would only use three months. This was though only possible if they would have their child in June or July as she would have to use at least one month's leave just after birth. This came into being; they had their daughter in July and spent six weeks together on leave. She continued her studies in September while he was on leave. She then took the remaining six weeks after her studies.

Hjálmar Sigmarsson (2006) says in his M.A. dissertation in anthropology on the importance of work in building identity among Icelandic people that paid work is central in the making of identity among Icelandic people. This

is central both by males and females though paid work is even more important among males than females. He says that having much to do is in a way central in identity making and the Icelandic discourse reflects that. This is though problematic according to him as doing the work properly and duties at home create much stress and that many people are loaded with worries around that. Hjálmar Sigmarsson takes also the third factor into this life of stress and worries among Icelandic people as he argues that “consumerism” is also important among people meaning that in identity making people in Iceland put much effort in having the most fashionable goods around themselves. This goes for houses and cars as well as for decoration in the home, clothes and other things.

The couples interviewed had some ideas around these things. At the same time as many of them found it important to have these nice things around them some of them found it also important to relax a bit on consuming, as one of the informants said. Two couples had simply decided to stop worrying about these things and decided that they were not important. It was more

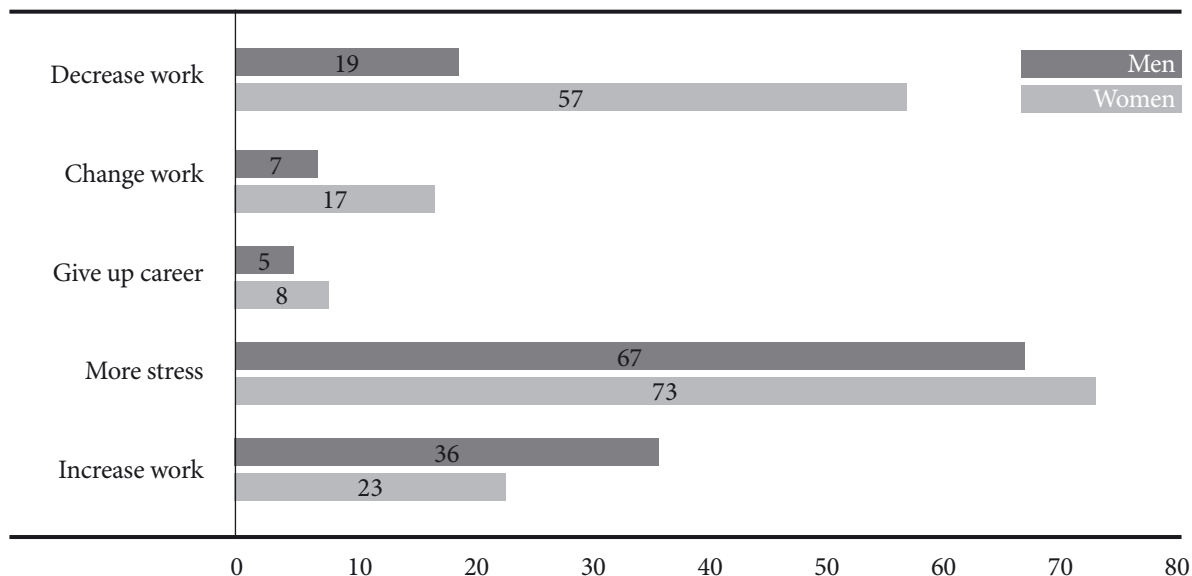
important for them to have more time together and with their children.

## CONSEQUENCES OF HAVING CHILDREN

As mentioned then the informants had not given their future much thought when starting their relationship. Though, most of them had ideas about their future, such as, having a nice and interesting work, having some children and hoping for a happy life. How to manage that had though not been discussed among the couples before having children. They had not decided how much time they would use at home and how much time they would spend at work. They had not had a discussion on how to divide the housework and other daily routines beforehand. The discussions came afterwards.

In the survey conducted by Gallup, people were asked what consequences of having children were. The people had a chance to answer yes or no to all the questions,

**Figure 2: Consequence of having children**



Source: IMG Gallup 2006.

that is, they did not have to choose in between. In other words, they were asked if they had to decrease working hours as a consequence of having children. They were also asked if they had to increase working hours; if they had to give up a career; if they had to change their work and if physical and mental stress increased as a consequence of having children. As mentioned before, the increased stress both physically and mentally is quite high as a consequence of having children. When comparing these figures with those from other countries, there is more difference between the sexes both in Italy and Lithuania, which could mean that the caring of children is even more related to women in these countries than in Iceland. Increased stress is though relatively low in Lithuania, where only 7.6% of the males experience increased stress, while 23% of the females experience increased stress. The numbers are much higher in Italy, where 57% of the males experience increased stress, while 76% of the females experience increased stress.

Another interesting aspect is that women in Iceland have to decrease their working hours more often than men in Iceland as a consequence of having children, as 57% of the women said they had to decrease their working hours, while only 19% of the males said they had to decrease their working hours. At the same time males in Iceland said more often that they had to increase their working hours in order to be able to handle increased financial spending as a consequence of having children. Women in Iceland also had to change work and they had to give up their careers more often than males in Iceland or at least said they had to do that. This fact is quite interesting as it seems that the major consequence of having children means that parents fall into what might be called traditional role models where we view males as breadwinners and females as caregivers. Ingólfur Gíslason (2006: 6) says “The task of combining work and family life has obviously been mainly shouldered by women. They reduce their working hours to make it possible for family life to function”. Ingólfur Gíslason was referring to another Icelandic research carried out by Lilja Mósesdóttir and David Thor Björgvinsson (1998). Thorgerdur Einarsdóttir and Gyda Margrét Pétursdóttir (2004: 20) came to a similar conclusion in their research

on parental leave in Iceland, admitting the following: “The relatively weak public family support and rather unequal social position of men and women have brought couples into coping strategies where the man takes on the male-breadwinner role and the woman assumes the responsibility of caring, although often against her own will”. They also said that couples were in a way “haunted by the spirit of the male breadwinner” (2004: 41), meaning that couples tend to fall into this “traditional” way of thinking. Ingólfur Gíslason (2006) says though that these facts are slowly changing, meaning that the lives of men and women are more symmetrical now and he notes some changes from 1991 to the year 2002 where the men slightly shortened their working hours, whereas the women increased theirs. Ingólfur Gíslason (2006: 5) says furthermore: “This is in all probability an effect of increased availability of public institutions for child care which relieve families in this area”. Ingólfur Gíslason says that the impact of this fact has, for example, caused reduction in women working part time as, for example, 48% of the women worked part-time in 1991 while in 2004 this percentage went down to 37%.

When comparing the gender differences in these figures across the countries which took part in the survey, we see the same gender difference in Italy and Lithuania as in Iceland. Even more women had to give up their career in Lithuania and Italy than in Iceland. Almost 25% of the Lithuanian mothers and 16% of the Italian mothers had to give up their career. Only 6% of the Lithuanian fathers had to give up their career and this percentage was down to 2% in Italy. More women in Lithuania had to change their work or leave their job as a consequence of having children and this was also the case in Italy. It is also interesting that relatively many respondents had to increase their work in Italy: 44% of the fathers and 31% of the mothers. Most parents had to increase their work in Italy, and Iceland comes as number two when comparing the four countries. Maybe the financial impact of having children in Italy and Iceland does influence parents in these two countries more than in Lithuania and Denmark. It is though important to note, as previously mentioned, that the fertility rate in Italy and Lithuania is much lower than in Iceland and Denmark.

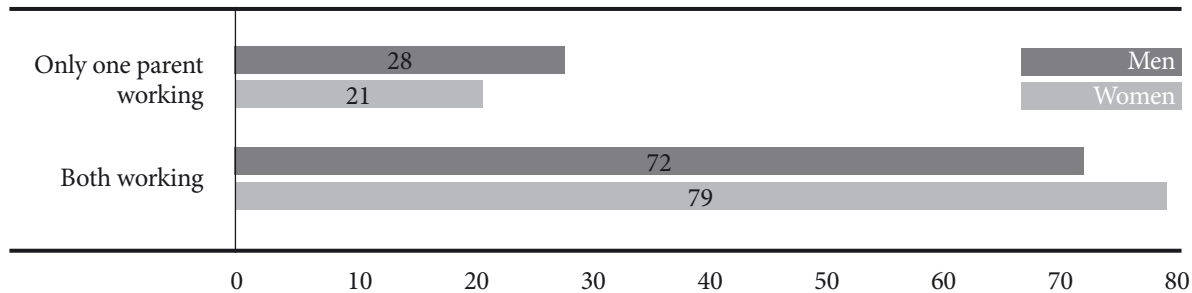
## WHICH FAMILY MODEL IS THE BEST FOR OUR SOCIETY?

As it seems we are still carrying a burden of old ideas based on the “traditional” idea that males should be the major breadwinners and females should be the major caregivers, one of the questions in the survey conducted by IMG Gallup was on what kind of family model parents preferred. Figure 3 represents these figures and it shows that three of every four parents in Iceland think it is better for a society to have a family where both parents earn wages and both parents take care of the family and housework. It is interesting to look at the gender differences, as more males prefer a model where only one parent is working outside the home and the other parent is fully dedicated to the family. Those who preferred a

model where one should be working outside the home and the other parent should take care of the family were asked which parent should stay at home. Figure 4 shows the results of that question.

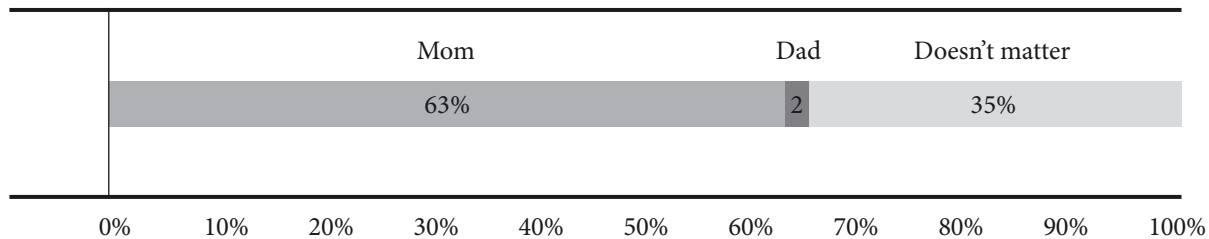
There is no valid difference between the sexes in this question, although slightly more fathers (or 2.8%) said that fathers should be the main caregivers; while only 1.8% of the mothers said the same thing. All this is really interesting bearing in mind that the vast majority admitted that parents should both work outside the home and should both take care of the family and housework. Even so then only 35% of the parents said that it did not matter who should stay at home and 63% of them said that the mother should stay at home. Again we might be experiencing what Thorgerdur Einarsdóttir and Gyda Margrét Pétursdóttir (2004: 41) described as being haunted by the

Figure 3: What kind of family do we prefer



Source: IMG Gallup 2006.

Figure 4: Which parent should take care of the family.



Source: IMG Gallup 2006.



spirit of the male breadwinner. We are also experiencing a gap of cultural ideas in our everyday lives. That is, both parents are working outside the home even though they have children. Speaking about the employment rate in Iceland, the employment rate is relatively high and that counts both for males and females. When comparing the figures with Denmark, Italy and Lithuania we can see similar things. There are though fewer parents in Italy and Lithuania, who said that both parents should work outside the home and should share responsibilities at home. 72% of the males in Lithuania stated that both parents should work, while 76% of the females said the same thing. In Italy, only 63.5% of the males and 74.4% of the females said that both parents should work. In Denmark, 83% of the males and 84% of the females said that both should work. It is though important to remember that the survey was conducted in a different way in Denmark, as mentioned before. It is tempting to say that the gap between cultural ideas and everyday lives of the individuals in Italy and Lithuania is smaller than in Iceland, when looking at the employment rate where far more women are participating in the labour market in these countries than in Iceland.

In 1995 Gallup asked the same question but the sample was though different. In 1995 the sample was based on individuals from the age of 18 to 75 from all around the country (Gallup 1995). The sample size was 1200 individuals. As mentioned before, the sample in the survey conducted in 2006 was based on parents living together and participating in the labour market with children from 0-10 years of age. Even though the sample is different and cannot be compared in a valid way, it is interesting to look at the differences. In 1995 only 34% of the male population said that both parent should work and share responsibilities at home, while 63% said that only one parent should work and the other should be dedicated to the family. 45% of the women asserted that both should work outside the home and 50% said that only one parent should work. There is a drastic change in these figures but note again that the sample is different, as only parents working outside the home with children from 0-10 years of age were asked these questions in 2006. Even so it is tempting to view this “change” as other

changes in the Icelandic society for the past years and decades. That is, women are working more nowadays and more seldom doing part-time work than before. We have seen changes in the day care service for children as well as we had new laws on parental leave in the year 2000 (lög no. 95/2000). The mothers have three months leave according to the laws and fathers gained an individual right of three months leave in steps and then parents can divide the remaining three months as they like. Almost 90% of fathers are taking parental leave today and the average numbers of days used by fathers were 97 in 2003, but 16% of the fathers used more leave than their basic right of three months the same year (Gíslason, Ingólfur 2006). Ingólfur Gíslason says furthermore that Icelandic fathers are more than ever actively involved in the care of infants and that we do have indications that the labour market position of males and females is becoming more similar because of the new laws (2006: 8). The interview material in the qualitative part underlined this, as all the fathers and the mothers said that those fathers who had a possibility of taking parental leave were taking more active part in all the remaining housework and care of the children. The fathers who had children after 2000 said also that the leave had provided them with more opportunities of building their relation with their children as well as their partners, as relationship can only be built by using time with the children and staying at home for a while. It was also important for them to be able to see that the workplace succeeded without them while they were on leave. Most of them had not been able to take such a long leave before, only a short summer holiday or something in that direction. At the same time the fathers were more confident in taking care of their children as well as doing other home related tasks. Their partners did also put more trust into their work at home than before. The Danish researcher Kenneth Reinicke (2002) described the processes like that as a “win-win-win” situation where fathers are getting more opportunities on using more time with the children and at the same time experiencing new sides of themselves as caregivers. The mothers are also “winning” because they have more opportunities to develop their work career as they do not have to spend as much time at home than before. Last

but not least, he says that the children are also “winning” by getting more attention from both their parents and getting more opportunities to develop a loving relationship with their fathers and mothers.

## ARE EMPLOYERS RESPONSIVE TO PARENTS?

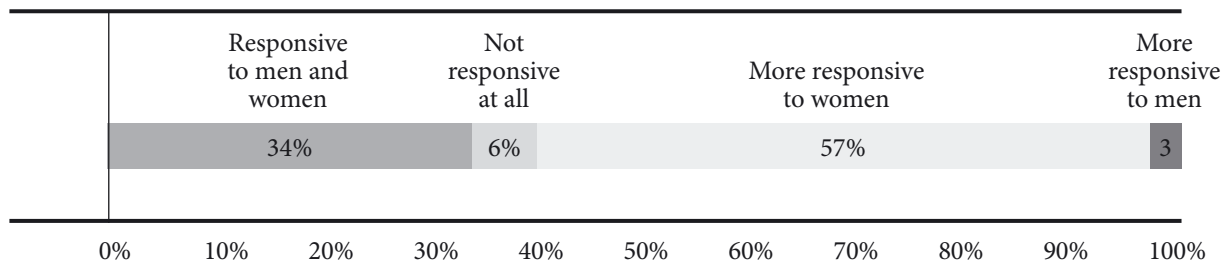
When looking at reconciliation of work and family life the impact of the work outside the home is crucial. The informants in the qualitative interviews had different ideas of work and family life. Some of the parents separated their work outside their home completely from the work inside the home, while others looked at their life in a more holistic way saying that it is impossible to separate these two fields completely as it was important to be happy at work in order to be able to be happy at home and vice versa. It was also crucial for all of the informants that the workplace took into account their family life. Some of the informants also said that when employers were being responsive they would as employees be more responsive regarding the work itself. These were the stories around viewing the work at home and the work outside the home in a holistic way. In the quantitative research we asked if the parents thought that employers were more responsive to men, more responsive to women or equally responsive regarding when it comes to taking care of the family. Figure 5 shows the results on that question.

## Figure 5: Do you think that employers are more responsive to men or women?

57% of the females and 52% of the males thought that employers were more responsive to women. Only 3 per cent said that they were more responsive to men, while 31% of the males and 34% of the females admitted that employers were equally responsive to men and women. 6% of the population said that Icelandic employers were not responsive at all. When comparing with the other countries it is interesting to view the Italian data as far more people said that employers were more responsive to men than to women and 22% of the males and 26% of the females said that Italian employers were not responsive at all. The data from Denmark and Lithuania was more in line with the Icelandic data, although more people said that employers were equally responsive in Denmark and Lithuania.

It seems again that the society falls into “traditional” role models when it comes to doing work outside the home and taking care of the home. It seems as it is viewed as more normal that women take care of the children and this is also supported by the differences in part-time work and the fact that more women had to decrease their work, change work or give up their career. In a way it seems as the problems at home are still viewed as the problems of women not as the problems of parents although some changes have occurred, as earlier mentioned. The qualitative interviews also underlined this.

Figure 1: “Do work responsibilities clash with family responsibilities?”



Source: IMG Gallup 2006.

Firstly, most of the males said in the beginning that they did equally much housework and took equally much part in the care of the children. When we had separated some of the tasks at home, it became clear though that the division of housework differed more than they had assumed. Secondly, some of the fathers had experienced problems of leaving work because their employers had not considered that male employees had to take care of their children. The interviews with the employers underlined this, as how and what solutions they provided depended on their own view upon male care giving. Those who viewed the role of fathers as an active role were much more likely to develop some solutions and at the same time more likely to develop a family friendly environment. Those who did not view the role of fathers as an active one were likely to view things such as paternity leave as problems, which were difficult to solve. The other group had changed the way of doing things at the workplace in order to find solutions and if viewing the

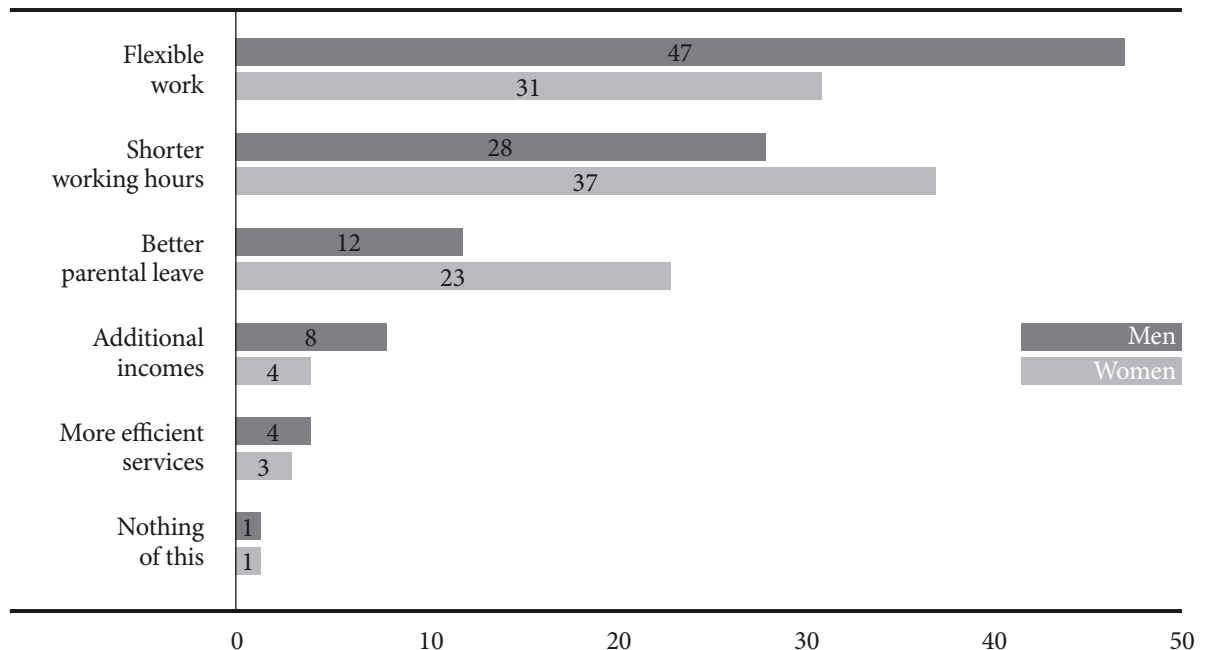
roles of father as an active one then the solutions were just around the corner.

## HOW CAN WE GET A GOOD BALANCE BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY LIFE?

In both the quantitative part and the qualitative part we could find some data on what people thought around what policies in the society would help in order to be able to reconcile work and family life. Figure 6 shows the data of the quantitative part.

Answering this question people could only put an answer to one of these things; in other words, they had to place one thing in the first place. The six answer possibilities were read in a random order. It is interesting to compare the answer regarding flexible work and shorter working hours. Most of the males thought that flexible working

**Figure 6: What do we want to do?**



Source: IMG Gallup 2006.

hours were the answer while more women put shorter working hours in the first place. The interviews with both the parents and the employers underlined this, as more men talked about the importance of flexibility but more women thought that flexibility could not be viewed as a magical solution, as flexibility itself could cause more stress in their lives. Some of the informants said that because of flexibility they were always on duty at work, which caused extra stress and a feeling of not being able to do the paid work properly nor the work at home. All the informants said though that flexibility at work was crucial for their life as they had to be able to leave work during working hours because of the children. It was important to be able to stay at home with a sick child or to be able to attend meetings at school, for example. Other things were also mentioned and not only related to the children: the car needed maintenance or they had to go to the bank, to see a doctor or just do some shopping.

It is interesting to look at the figures concerning better legislation on governing parental leave. There is a great acceptance regarding the new law but many people think that the leave is too short and they are facing problems in dealing with the situation when the child is 9 months old and up to 18 months old. Far more women put better or longer parental leave in the first place than men. 23% of the females gave preference to better/longer leave while only 12% of the males did so. It seems that the caring of children is still a problem of women, although men are increasing their part in taking care of infants in Iceland. It is also interesting to look at the figures on “better additional incomes for families”. 8% of the fathers put that in the first place while only 4% of the mothers did so. It is important to remember that far more men had to increase their work as a consequence of having children and it seems like they would like to decrease their work, spend less time at the office and more time with their families.

## CONCLUSIONS

The participation in the labour market in Iceland is highest in Europe and that counts for both men and women. At the same time the fertility rate in Iceland is second

highest in Europe, where only Turkey has higher fertility rate. This success has though caused some problems for the individuals behind the figures, which can be viewed from different points of view.

Firstly, the Icelandic society can be viewed as a “stressful society” where up to 90% of those who were asked in the survey said that they often or sometimes experienced that work responsibilities clashed with family responsibilities. The interviews in the qualitative part underlined this as all the couples were experiencing hard times or had experienced hard times in their family life. The qualitative interviews also underlined the importance of negotiation in the relationship and by doing contracts on work and family life people experienced a more balanced life.

Secondly, the consequences of having children or being a family still have impact upon the sexes very differently. Even though we have experienced slow changes in the direction towards a more equal society, such as, having better services regarding childcare, witnessing more women in the labour market, fewer women doing part-time jobs and so on, it seems that we are still falling into the pits of the idea of the male breadwinner model. Women are still mainly shouldering the burdens of the family life; the survey underlines that women more often than men have to decrease their work in the labour market, give up their career or change their work as a consequence of having children. At the same time Icelandic fathers more often than mothers are experiencing that they have to increase their work as a consequence of having children. 75% of the parents in the survey think that both the parents should work outside the home and take care of the family and housework together. 25% of the parents in the survey thought that one parent should work outside the home and the other should take care of the home and most of them thought that it should be the mother who should take care of the home. In a way then it can be stated that we are experiencing a gap between cultural ideas and reality, as more women are active in the labour market, as the figures on participation show. It can also be stated that we have experienced changes on the surface or in our every day lives but we are still

holding on to old ideas regarding the family life. In a way it could be stated that a part of the population wants to use old ideas on new situations.

There are though some slow changes in progress, as mentioned, and we have also seen a drastic change in the care of infants, as men in Iceland are now taking much more active part and most Icelandic fathers are now using their rights to parental leave. Icelandic fathers are now stepping into traditional female roles and by doing that they are becoming active caregivers. This is a crucial part for the years to come as the development to a more equal society and a less stressful society has to be the development of both genders. Women have been changing their way of living by becoming active in the labour market. In order to go further in this development men have to become more active in care giving and at the home.

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