

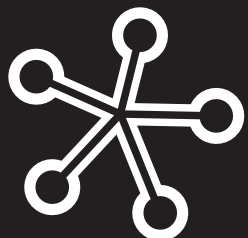


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## **“He would never just hit the sofa”** A narrative of non-complaining among Dutch Mothers

*Justine Ruitenber*



Working Paper 119

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In 2008 Justine Ruitenber started her PhD research at the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies, University of Amsterdam. The study examines the influence of micro socialisation processes on Dutch women's diverse gender and work attitudes, work preferences and employment patterns. Quantitative and qualitative research methods are employed. This article is the first part of her research and contains the qualitative analysis of the relationship between attitudes, preferences and behaviour.

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the sofa”**

**A narrative of  
non-complaining among  
Dutch Mothers**

**A qualitative study of the influences of  
attitudes on work preferences and  
employment patterns of Dutch mothers**

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## Abstract

Working patterns among Dutch mothers differ remarkably. This variation makes the Netherlands an interesting case to study the origins of the labour participation pattern of women and mothers in particular. This article explores the influence of mothers' work and gender attitudes and preferences on their diverse employment pattern through 39 semi-structured interviews with mothers living in Amsterdam. Previous studies have already addressed the question to what extent women's attitudes correspond with their labour market behaviour. Yet, most of these studies are based on large surveys which lack the detail to study the intricacies of the relationship between attitudes, preferences and behaviour. This study shows that a woman's employment behaviour is the result of a dynamic relationship between her personal work preferences and gender and work attitudes on the one hand, and her work experiences and cultural normative gender expectations on the other, rather than the outcome of a free choice. The study further reveals the prevalence of 'a narrative of non-complaining' among Dutch mothers regarding their spouses' contribution to the home work. This finding may help to understand why the division of labour at home along gender lines persists.





# 1. Introduction

In all western societies women’s employment levels vary much more than those of the male population.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly clear in the case of Dutch women, more specifically mothers. In 2010, 32.4 percent of Dutch mothers were not in paid work, 42.5 percent worked 12 to 24 hours a week, 13.8 percent worked 25 to 35 hours a week, and 11.3 percent worked more than 35 hours.<sup>2</sup> This large variation makes the Netherlands a particularly interesting case to study the origins of mothers’ labour market patterns. Why do some mothers have a fulltime job, while others work part-time or are not employed at all?

## 2. Studies of factors on mothers’ labour participation

Most studies of mothers’ employment patterns focus on external factors, which are independent of the individual’s particular circumstances. At the macro level, mothers’ labour market behaviour is shaped by the constraints and opportunities offered by social institutions at the national level (Mandel, 2009). In addition, mothers’ employment decisions are influenced by the dominant culture of care (Kremer, 2007). At the meso level of the industry or organisation, company policies and cultures limit or expand the options for mothers to choose their desired work pattern. This may explain, at least in part, why women predominantly work in education, (health) care and other public services, which often offer family-friendly work arrangements (Tausig and Fenwick, 2001, Hill, 2004, Merens, et al. 2011).

Yet, macro approaches cannot explain the variation of mothers’ labour participation within a country. Meso factors may explain why the distribution of working mothers over industries differs from the distribution of men (and fathers), yet, they do not explain why not all mothers within a country work in family friendly industries.

The micro-economic approach does explain differences between mothers in the same country. This approach usually starts from the standard economic assumption that the number of hours a person wants to work is the outcome of a rational choice between income and leisure (Becker, 1965). If the earning capacity

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1 OECD Statistics (<http://stats.oecd.org/>)

2 Central Bureau of Statistics, Statline 2011.

of husband and wife differs, a gendered division of work is optimal, in which the father has a paid job and the mother stays at home and takes care of the children. However, this theory can only explain a complete division of work and not a partial division, such as the predominance of part-time work among women and full-time work among men in the Netherlands.

Moreover, recent research has shown that rational or economic factors only play a limited role in explaining people's choices (Cloin, 2010, Van Wel and Knijn, 2007). Differences in individual attitudes and work preferences also have to be taken into account. Therefore, this article seeks to explain the current heterogeneous labour market pattern of Dutch mothers by focusing on their work preference and their work and gender attitude. The *central question* is:

To what extent can heterogeneous gender and work attitudes of Dutch mothers, explain their diverse work preferences, and, thus, their diverse labour market behaviour?

## 2.1. Women's employment preferences: a matter of choice?

Numerous studies have demonstrated that attitudes and preferences are significantly related to what people actually do (Bram 1977 in Sanders and Beekes 1993, Hoffnung 2004, Portegijs 2008b, Cloin 2010, Blozendahl and Myers, 2004, Beets, et al. 1997, Marks and Houston 2002). Hakim (2000) was one of the first scholars to claim that attitudinal factors, such as work-lifestyle preferences, are more important than institutions and structures in explaining female employment (Hakim 2000, p.168). According to her, personal *ideas* about labour market participation and childcare are decisive in mothers' decision to participate in paid work and to make use of childcare arrangements.

A prominent element in the current public discourse on female employment is the narrative of choice (Beagan et al. 2008, 666). If formal equality is achieved, if childcare facilities and family friendly policies are provided, and if this is accompanied by processes of secularisation, individualisation and the erosion of traditions (such as the male-breadwinner family), women may tend to believe that they have equal employment opportunities as men and are free to do as they choose. Moreover, if the prevailing opinion is that women's decisions regarding care and work are their own choices, they will also be held responsible for their achievements and failures (Everingham et al. 2007). Komter argued (1990) that as a consequence of this belief, the inner obligation and the moral standard of being a good housewife, mother and wife have become "invisible". Or, as Beagan et al. (2008) describe it, societal gender expectations have gone underground. "*Experiencing constraints of women such as longer work hours, a double burden of paid and unpaid work, and unstable child*

care are seen as individual obstacles that have nothing to do with gender. The pervasive discourse today is one that assumes gender equality, prioritizing choice, thus holding individuals responsible for their achievements or failures” (Everingham et al., 2007, in Beagan et al. 2008, p.666).

However, other researchers have disputed post-modern theories, such as Hakim’s, as well as the research methods used (Sullivan 2002, Crompton and Harris 1998, Beer 2007, Kan 2007). These critics argue that people come up against a number of barriers in their everyday lives, which limit their choices. Women’s educational attainment, their ethnic and social background, their employment record and age all affect their future employment perspectives (Kangas and Rostgaard 2007). Furthermore, Charles and Harris emphasise that “*the individualization thesis is limited in the sense that individuals remain ‘embedded’ in social networks and that tradition – in the form of gendered beliefs about ‘the proper thing to do’ – provides the context within which social actors make decisions about their lives.*” (Charles and Harris 2007, 279).

Yet, it is hard to deny, nowadays, that gender boundaries are blurred, which potentially give women more freedom to pursue their preferences with respect to work (Charles and Harris 2007). This might be particularly true for the Netherlands, which has various laws that enable part-time work (Baaijens, 2005 in Doorne Huiskes and Schippers 2010, p.407), and where many branches and industries have introduced family friendly arrangements which facilitate part-time work (Tijdens 2006).



## 3. Hypotheses

As mentioned above, several previous studies have investigated the relationship between women’s attitudes and their labour market behaviour. Yet, many of these studies are based on large surveys which lack the detail to study the intricate relationship between attitudes, work preferences and behaviour. By applying a qualitative research methodology, this study aims to shed more light on this dynamic relationship.

In addition, most studies treat the concepts of attitudes and work preference (the number of hours a woman prefers to work) as theoretically or empirically equivalent in explaining labour market behaviour. For example, Hakim (2000) assumes that different gender attitudes automatically come along with a particular number of preferred hours in paid work (also Risman 1999, Stähli 2009). This study separates the concept of attitudes (gender, work and motherhood) from the concept of work preferences. It argues that the number of preferred hours does not only depend on a woman’s attitudes, but also on her previous experiences, her life phase and her current situation. The number of preferred working hours is considered to be the concrete outcome of a woman’s rational, personal and social considerations, such as her perception of what she wants herself, what others expect her to do and what she is able to do, taking account of her educational attainment, her work experience, her age, her family income, etc..

Attitudes are perceived as a set of conscious and – maybe, more often – unconscious ideas about various aspects of life in general. As Bem (1965) claimed, people do not think much about their attitudes, in general. This interpretation of attitudes corresponds with the *exposure-based* approach which states that individuals develop their attitudes in reaction to new ideas and situations (Bolzendahl and Meyers 2004). Attitudes are shaped by experiences in childhood, during the school period (young adulthood) and in early work experiences, and are relatively resistant to change after that time (Blunsdon and Reed 2005). The exposure-based approach contradicts with interest-based theories that emphasize that individuals adapt their attitudes to the present situation to facilitate their needs and interests (Kroska and Elman 2009, Bolzendahl and Meyers 2004).

Next, attitudes are subdivided into gender, work and motherhood attitudes. Previous research has shown that job ambitions and motherhood ideals can exist in different spheres. Katchadourian and Boli (1994), for example, concluded that both women and men were better prepared for the world of work than they were for family life (in Hoffnung 2004, 712). Once women did have a child, contrary to their earlier career

expectations, they automatically placed family demands ahead of career demands, and anticipated long maternity leaves and subsequent part-time employment.

However, several other studies did not find a clear relationship between expectations of motherhood and employment behaviour. For example, Marks and Houston (2002) found that work commitment explained women's employment behaviour best, while women's ideological views on motherhood did not differ: all women agreed that motherhood is more important than work. Research by Beets et al. (1997) demonstrated that women with a positive attitude towards children have a somewhat stronger preference for either the traditional or the egalitarian model, compared to females with a negative attitude towards children.

Previous research does not indicate that mother's current attitudes towards motherhood are related to their current work preferences and work behaviour. Moreover, the causal relationship between motherhood attitudes and labour market behaviour is complex, since mothers may find ways to reconcile their employment decisions with their mothering ideology cognitively (Jonhston and Swanson 2006, 517). Yet, if attitudes are formed and adapted throughout life, it is relevant to explore whether a woman's wish to become a mother when she was a young adult is related to her current gender attitude.

These theoretical notions about work preferences and work and gender attitudes lead to the following three hypotheses.

*1) The number of hours a mother works is largely based on her work preference*

Work preference is defined as the number of hours a mother desires to work. If mothers have relatively realistic considerations about work, the preferred number of hours in paid work is expected to largely determine her actual working hours.

*2) A mother's work preference is determined by her gender attitude and her work attitude*

Gender attitudes are interpreted as moral views on the desired division of care and employment between men and women (Duncan et al. 2003 in Tomlinson 2006, 273). A traditional gender attitude means consent with the ideology of a traditional unequal division of labour between men and women. Children and family are a woman's main concern in life. An egalitarian gender attitude implies that one approves of the idea that partners take an equal share in paid and unpaid work. Egalitarian women are the most work-centred. In between, there is a group of adaptive women without a fixed priority who try to combine paid work and family tasks (Hakim 2000, 176). The hypothesis holds if mothers with the lowest work preference have the most traditional gender attitude, if women with a preference for part-time work have an adaptive gender attitude, and if women who prefer to work fulltime have the most egalitarian gender attitudes.

*Work attitude* is defined as the motivation of people to pursue paid work. We hypothesise that women who do not want to be employed have a weak work attitude, i.e. that they are not and have never been strongly motivated to have a paid job, whereas women who desire fulltime work, were already strongly orientated towards paid work when they were young adults and have an intrinsic work motivation, such as desiring self-development and economic independence (Cloin 2010).

3) *A mother's gender attitude is influenced by her early adult wish to become a mother.*

The third hypotheses implies that, in case a mother has pictured herself as a mother with many children since her youth, she has a more traditional gender attitude compared to mothers who used to think they would never become a mother or who had no clear expectations regarding motherhood.

For the three hypotheses, different patterns in the relationship between preferences and attitudes due to educational differences, are examined. In general, it is known that a higher educational level leads to a higher level of labour participation, especially for mothers (Merens, et al. 2011). Sufficient education is then understood as a precondition for labour market participation. Explanations for these differences are for example that higher educated women work more, because their higher wage allows them to pay for child-care facilities (Doorewaard et al. 2004, 11). Furthermore, it is known that women's and men's education are positively associated with egalitarianism (Kroska 2009, 373), which might be a result of exposure to ideas about equality and/or the establishment of career oriented networks (Cunningham 2005, 887).





## 4. Research Method

The three hypotheses are tested with a qualitative research method, based on semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 39 mothers with at least one child younger than 12 years, living in or in the vicinity<sup>3</sup> of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The data were collected between April 2010 and November 2010. The interviews took on average one and a half hour.

In order to select the interviewees, first, four categories of mothers were differentiated according to their employment pattern: mothers who work 0 to 11 hours, 12 to 24 hours a week, 25 to 35 hours and 36 hours or more. As mentioned, employment patterns of women differ between educational levels. In 2009, 37 per cent of Dutch higher educated mothers worked more than 35 hours, as opposed to only 18 per cent of lower educated mothers. 52 per cent of the lower educated mothers did not participate on the labour market at all, as compared to 12 per cent of the higher educated mothers.<sup>4</sup> In order to be able to examine the effect of mothers' preferences and attitudes on their employment behaviour, the influence of education must be controlled for. For this reason, in each of the four employment categories an approximately equal number of lower (intermediate vocational level and lower) and higher educated respondents (higher vocational level and university) was selected (see appendix 1).

The respondents were found with the snowball method. First, a small group of mothers in the social environment of the researcher, the so-called weak ties (Granovetter 1973), was approached, especially at a primary school in Amsterdam (Old West Quarter). Next, the other respondents were approached on the advice of the first group of respondents. Most respondents agreed immediately with the interview request and showed interest in the subject. A few respondents were initially hesitant, and only a few mothers refused to participate.

For theoretical reasons, the sample of interviewed mothers was drawn largely within one urban area, Amsterdam. Thus, the respondents do not differ with respect to the influence of structural and cultural factors which may diverge between urban and rural areas, such as the availability of childcare provisions and jobs, religiousness, and could interfere with the influence of attitudes and behaviour.

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<sup>3</sup> Two mothers, living in the Randstad (Western, urban part of The Netherlands) volunteered to join the research, we have included in our analysis those interviews as well.

<sup>4</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics, Statline 2011.

Some questions were asked in retrospective, for example about the respondents' ideas of education and work before they started their careers, and about their juvenile wish to become a mother. In general, the mothers were able to answer the questions reasonably quickly without much hesitation. Nevertheless, one should be aware of the possibility of selectiveness of their memories, which may influence their answers. People may adjust their memories to justify their present behaviour. To overcome this problem, one should observe the same phenomenon (at least) at two different points in time, but such data are not available (Risman et al.1999, 326). For this reason, the relationship between attitudes, preferences and behaviour should be interpreted with care, acknowledging the possibility of cognitive dissonance, the reciprocal character of the relationship, and the selectiveness of memories.

## 4.1. Research group

The interviewed mothers were born between 1962 and 1980. Their average age was 39.3 years. Seven interviewees (18 per cent) had a non-Dutch background. Of the total female population of Amsterdam, 50 per cent has a non-Dutch background, so non-native women are underrepresented in the research group.<sup>5</sup> This also holds for single mothers; only four interviewed mothers had been divorced. However, as mentioned, ethnicity and the presence of a spouse were not discriminating factors in selecting the research group.

23 mothers were highly educated (higher vocational education and university), and 16 lower educated (intermediate vocational education and lower) (see appendix 1). Ten mothers were fulltime homemakers<sup>6</sup>, eight mothers had a small part-time job (12 to 24 hours), eleven mothers had a large part-time job (25 to 35 hours) and ten mothers worked fulltime.

## 4.2. Research questions

The questionnaire included questions about the central concepts of the hypotheses: the experience of the actual (work) situation, work preference (preferred number of working hours), gender attitude (How do you perceive the differences between men and women? Do you have ideas about the ideal sexual division of labour? Are you satisfied with your own current division of labour? Do you have an opinion about fulltime working mothers or mothers who are not employed?) and work attitude (Did you have ideas about your

5 Vrouwenemancipatie in Amsterdam. Naar economische zelfstandigheid en zelfbeschikking. Beleidsplan 2011-2014, Amsterdam September 2011.

6 As a consequence of the snowball method, the research does not include mothers who work between 1 and 11 hours.

future profession, and work in general when you finished high school? What are the most important reasons for you to work?). In addition, questions were asked about a mother's wish to become a mother when she was a young adult (Did you picture yourself as a mother before you had children? How many children did you wish then? How do you experience motherhood now?). Full transcriptions of the interviews were made.

### **4.3. Data analysis**

To facilitate the analysis, four large matrices of the four groups of mothers (fulltime home-makers, mothers with a small part-time job, mothers with large part-time job, and fulltime working mothers) were filled with the relevant comments, remarks and explanations of each mother regarding the main concepts. The analysis focused on the influence of attitudes on work preferences, and the effect of work preferences on employment behaviour. Yet, the opposite direction of the presumed causal relationships, i.e. the effect of work experiences or its absence on a mother's work preference and attitudes was closely examined as well. Where relevant, differences between the different educational groups are noticed.

In case this study refers to the majority of women, or "in general" or "often" or "most", as a general rule of thumb this means that the observation applies to at least three quarters of the interviewed women within one group. Else, the exact number of women is given. In most cases, one or two mothers revealed patterns that differed from the general findings. These exceptions are only noticed if they are relevant.

In the next section, the results of the interviews and analysis are described according to the three hypotheses. Apparent differences between the four groups are specifically addressed. In cases patterns, such as mechanism of justification, are similar in all groups, this is also noted. By the way the results are described, it might appear that the four groups are equally prevalent in the Netherlands. Yet, the reader should bear in mind that, in reality, fulltime homemakers and mothers with a small part-time job together make up about 75 per cent of Dutch mothers, while only one in four mothers has a large part-time or a full-time job.



## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Are mothers' working hours based on their work preferences?

According to our first hypothesis, the number of working hours of mothers is based on their preferred number of hours in paid work. For mothers who actually do have a paid job, either a (small or large) part-time job or a fulltime job, the findings confirm the hypothesis. Employed mothers generally work the number of hours they prefer, while their preferences clearly differ. For example, most fulltime working mothers deliberately did not choose part-time work. *I'm just not the type for part-time work. I have not the discipline to say, "This is my limit, I do not work more".* Moreover, they often believe it is impossible to perform their job in less hours, and they would have to choose a less interesting job in case of part-time work. Generally, these mothers did not even consider to cut back their working hours after their children were born.

Mothers with a small part-time job also claim that they work the number of hours they prefer. Yet, some of these mothers admit that, if it was not necessary for the money, for example because they have an expensive house, they would rather work two days than three days a week. This shows, that behaviour may also stem from necessity rather than from preference. Yet, the mothers easily give in to the necessity of working more hours than they prefer. This pattern is also perceived among the group of mothers with a large part-time job. These mothers deliberately work four days a week and not five, yet, they often have worked less hours when their children were younger. So, as expected, the number of hours mothers prefer to work is, besides their own work preference, also based on external restrictions, such as family income and the number and age of her children.

Unexpectedly, the first hypothesis cannot be confirmed for fulltime home-makers. The majority of full-time home-makers would actually like to work, often around 20 to 24 hours a week. When asked why they are not in paid work, despite their work preference, many of them refer to unstable and often unsatisfying occupational choices and work experiences. They fell ill, were dismissed (often due to a restructuring of the company), or were so annoyed that they had resigned themselves. A demanding job of their partner was also mentioned as a reason to give up their work. Two mothers who were born in Turkey and Iraq, respectively, had never been in paid work, primarily because of their lack of knowledge of the Dutch language, yet, they would prefer to work. Moreover, fulltime mothers miss work, or at least a life outside their home. They often

consider the possibility of setting up their own business, a book shop, a catering company, a broker agency, a mediation practice. But often they find it difficult to take steps to realise their work preference. Several full-time homemakers regularly do volunteer work, for example at school. Others act as a social ‘safety net’ for mothers who run out of time because of their paid work. Some fulltime mothers are in education in order to be able to obtain the job they desire. Hence, fulltime mothers did not consciously choose to be a fulltime mother beforehand, nor does their experience of a fulltime mother makes them adapt their work preference to correspond with their current lifestyle. We conclude that the majority of interviewed mothers, with the exception of fulltime working mothers, prefer to work in a part-time job. The educational background of mothers does not seem to effect the relationship between preferences and behaviour.

## 5.2. Do mothers’ gender attitudes affect their work preferences?

According to the second hypothesis, mothers’ work preferences are based on their gender attitudes. In general, this hypothesis is confirmed by our respondents, with again no clear differences in this relationship along educational lines. Mothers with the highest work preferences have the most egalitarian gender attitude, while mothers with lower work preferences are more traditional or adaptive. Yet, there are subtle differences between the four groups of mothers. The gender attitudes of fulltime home-makers differ slightly from the attitudes of mothers with small part-time jobs, even though they have similar work preferences. Mothers with small part-time jobs and low work preferences, are in general satisfied about the actual division of labour within their household, which means that, on average, they perform 80 per cent of the unpaid work. This satisfaction signifies a rather traditional gender attitude. These mothers perceive their role as almost fulltime home-makers, besides their (small) jobs, as natural and self-evident.

*He always starts early, and me a little later, it works perfectly well and automatically. I always collect them from the crèche, because he’s usually gone at night.* (Esmé)

*We have divided the tasks fine, he is the fulltime worker. He leaves home in the morning between half past seven and a quarter to eight, and eleven hours later he returns... But Walter does not hit the sofa, as soon as he returns, he just works along ...Walter will put the garbage out and Walter governs all the business stuff .... I do everything with love, yet, I need to hear from him “What nicely done” or “Hey, that’s done, how wonderful!”.* (Nel)

Yet, although fulltime mothers consider child-care and household tasks as their main responsibility, as well, and have no other priorities, in general, they seem less satisfied. However, these mothers tend to withhold themselves to complain, primarily, because their partners also execute about 20 percent of the unpaid tasks.

*Actually, he always does a lot, so I cannot really complain about it. Always when I say, oh, and those children are so ..., he says, leave the dishes for me. But you know, sometimes I think, yes, yes, those dishes, I can do those too. You should go and deal with our annoying children ... But yes, I also think, well okay, you can do the dishes then... (Janne)*

As expected, the ideal of mothers who prefer large part-time jobs, is to share the paid and unpaid work equally with their partners. In correspondence with their egalitarian attitude, mothers with fulltime working partners who do not share the unpaid work at home equally (4 of the 10 mothers in this group), are not always satisfied with their situation. Sometimes, these mothers discuss their discontent with their partners, yet, their narratives also reveals acquiescence with the situation.

*For me, it would make a difference as Jan would collect them from school one day a week, but he just can't make it. (Yvette)*

The mothers who prefer to work fulltime have the most egalitarian gender attitude, with a corresponding division of tasks at home with their spouses, in case a partner is present. In other cases, their husbands actually perform the majority of the unpaid tasks. Yet, just like the other groups, fulltime working mothers accept different rearing practises along recognizable gender lines.

*Women interact differently with children than men... I do think that women slightly care better, I mean really taking care of, make sure they get enough vitamins, have taken their bath and things like that. Asking, how was school? ... I can see that my husband can challenge them more. Things of which I say: don't do it. ... I have more responsibility for the organisation of the household, it would be nice if he would also take more responsibility. But it is just more man-like to take it easy in the household..(Annelies)*

Another similarity among most mothers is that – irrespective of their work preference or gender attitude – they pull the strings concerning the organisation of care and household tasks. The next quote of Juul illustrates how mothers perceive and persist in the division of unpaid tasks with their spouse.

*And it's not that I do more, but I feel more responsible. If I can't care for the children, then I do not saddle him with it, but call a babysitter. If he can't, I'll do it as well, I call the babysitter, so I organise it. It is probably my character. (Juul)*

It is interesting that Juul, just as other mothers, individualises her responsibility for the household tasks, whereas, in fact, the large majority of Dutch women carry this responsibility. Wiesmann et al. (2010, 351)

demonstrate that *'women generally bear most of the responsibility for the majority of domestic tasks, something which they often found tiring and stressful when combined with paid work'*.

In addition, most interviewed mothers wish to raise their children as much as possible by themselves, just as Kremer (2007) showed. Most mothers, including fulltime working mothers, think three days of professional day care is the limit. Especially, after-school day care is not received with enthusiasm. After school, the mothers want to offer their children the freedom and intimacy of home, instead of being again in a structured and organised 'public' environment (see also Portegijs 2006, Portegijs 2008b). Most mothers (even fulltime working mothers) fold – or try to fold – their working schedule as much as they can in order to be able to collect their children from school. In other cases, they make use of a child-minder or they ask their own parents to pick up their children from school.

Moreover, mothers' stories also reveal that their social environment expects them to have part-time work. This applies in particular to occupational groups which only recently have been dominated by women, such as psychologists, prosecutors and policy makers. Scaling back the number of working hours is a conventional option in the Netherlands, since it is both economically possible and culturally accepted (also Wiesmann 2010, 352). This is illustrated by the next quote from Juul.

*It seemed fun to be one day alone with your child, yet, I also did not quite dare to continue working fulltime... Have you talked to someone about it? Yes. But you don't have to say much, because everyone assumes automatically that you will work less.*

One of the other indicators for mothers' gender attitudes is their opinion of other mothers who work fulltime or who are unemployed. We expect that traditional and adaptive women would slightly disagree with mothers who work fulltime. Again, there are subtle differences between fulltime home-makers and mothers with a small part-time job, despite their similar work preference. Mothers with small part-time jobs are somewhat judgemental towards fulltime working mothers, which mirrors their relative traditional gender attitude: *'Why do you have a child if you want to work fulltime? To work five days? I find that absurd.'* Often, they do not only find it disheartening for the children, but also pitiful for the women themselves. The mothers in this group have no critical remarks regarding fulltime mothering: *'Do I need to have an opinion about that? You can't force anyone to work, can you?'*

Unexpectedly, fulltime homemakers are less critical about mothers who work fulltime. *'If mothers really like their jobs, they should work 40 hours. Then it costs much less energy than sitting at home. I really think so...'* (Nienke). This 'tolerant' attitude of fulltime homemakers towards fulltime working mothers may be a reaction to the





### 5.3. Do mothers' work attitudes affect their work preferences?

With respect to the relationship between work attitudes and work preferences, what first catches the eye are (again) the similarities between all groups of mothers. The majority of mothers in our research group have positive feelings about paid work. They value especially the intrinsic and social aspects of work. Differences in work attitudes are related to educational level rather than to employment preference, lower educated women especially value the social aspects of work – to meet other people, to work together, to do something meaningful for other people, to do something else besides caring and household tasks – but also the salary. Higher educated women value work especially because of the possibility for self-development, to use their brains, to have another identity, self-affirmation, deepening of the content. *'So I can be proud when people ask me, what are you doing?'* This quote also reveals the current social norm for mothers to be in paid work, especially higher educated mothers, 'only' mothering does not suffice any more.

Another salient similarity is that most interviewed mothers, irrespective of their work preferences, have no ambition to climb the social ladder. Even mothers with large jobs, who are ambitious and have careers, claim not to be occupied much with their career. Mothers often underline the intrinsic values of work and distance themselves from (petty) extrinsic values. *'I am ambitious in terms of what I want to achieve, but not in terms of having a career, that doesn't interest me.'* (Lotte)

Yet, one kind of work incentive divides the mothers into two groups according to their work preference. Mothers who stress their economic independence, generally prefer large part-time or fulltime jobs. They claim, they already had this specific work motivation before they entered the labour market. *'I've always said as a young girl, at least I want to earn my own money. It is one of the main reasons why I work'* (Alisha). Mothers who do not adhere to economic independence mostly prefer small part-time jobs.

In order to find out to what extent work attitudes already existed before mothers entered the labour market, they were asked about their ideas concerning their future professional life when they were adolescents. In general, earlier expectations about work or profession do not seem to be related to a mother's work preference. Yet, the narratives of fulltime homemakers reveal that, as juveniles, they often lacked a clear professional preference. *'I didn't have a clue of what I wanted to be'*. Because of this indecisiveness, and sometimes lack of support by their direct environment, they often did not follow (the right) continuation courses. The lack or wrong choice of a continuation course was often followed by a mismatch of the job, which later pushed them out the labour market. Consequently, negative or irrelevant work experiences and lack of the right diplomas make it difficult for fulltime homemakers to put their work preference and gender

and work attitudes into practice. In fact, these mothers have not adapted their preferences or attitudes to what is possible or to what they are used to, but their behaviour seems to be influenced by their conception of necessity and by previous work experiences.

#### 5.4. Do expectations of motherhood in early adulthood affect mothers’ present gender attitudes?

As hypothesised, the narratives of most interviewed mothers with a rather traditional or adaptive gender attitude, reveal that they often already had a clear picture of themselves as “a nice and cosy mom” with many children as juveniles. They describe how they felt like earth-mothers or “natural” mothers. And now, being a mother, they do not perceive motherhood as a heavy task, they are not disappointed. Moreover, fulltime mothers in particular appear to have been successful in realising their juvenile wish. Most of the interviewed fulltime mothers have three or more children. Although these mothers did not deliberately sign in for full-time motherhood, they perceived the option of being a fulltime home-maker as open to them, also because they have many children. *“Large families tend to push women away from paid work, whereas good jobs pull women into the labour force”* (Risman 1999, 337).

As expected, early adult attitudes towards motherhood of mothers with egalitarian gender attitudes appear to be more ambivalent. Before their thirties, motherhood was not self-evident for them. *‘I was anti-motherhood, I found kids annoying... I was strongly focused on work’* (Sophie). *‘Kurt really wanted to be a father. My child wish was less strong than Kurt’s’* (Claire). These mothers generally have less children than the mothers with a traditional or adaptive gender attitude, and gave birth to their children at an older age. Although at present they enjoy motherhood, they often find it rather demanding as well.



## 6. Conclusions and discussion

The present study aims to shed light on how behaviour is shaped by preferences, and how preferences are shaped by attitudes, and, possibly, vice versa, in order to explain the diverse employment pattern of Dutch mothers.

The results reveal that, as expected, most working mothers currently work the number of working hours that they prefer. In addition, the exact number of working hours also depends on the life phase and on external conditions. Yet, contrary to our expectations, fulltime homemakers mostly prefer to be employed, albeit in a small part-time job, as was also found in previous studies (Portegijs 2008b). The “choice” for fulltime motherhood was often made as a result of earlier insecurity about education and occupation as a young adult, and/or a mismatch of jobs and negative work experiences. This finding also corresponds with earlier research. “*When women want to quit work, it is typically because their jobs are not good, not because they want to be full-time homemakers*” (Thompson 1989, 851). “*Women who face blocked mobility or other problems, are “pushed” toward domesticity.*” (Risman, 1999, 323). Frequently, the professional insecurity of fulltime homemakers remains, and explains why they find it difficult to put their work preference into practice.

The findings might, however, not be representative for all fulltime homemakers in the Netherlands. For particular groups of mothers, for example religious mothers, their work preference might correspond with their behaviour (Zimmerman, 2000), but these groups were underrepresented in our research group, as a result of the urban area from which we selected our respondents.

The hypothesis that mothers’ diverse work preferences are based on different gender and work attitude is confirmed. Yet, also the similarities in attitudes among Dutch mothers stand out. Women with lower work preferences mostly perceive it as their natural role to perform most of the unpaid family tasks, which they experience as natural and self-evident. However, unexpectedly and despite similar work preferences, fulltime homemakers appear slightly more egalitarian than mothers with small part-time jobs. The negative experience of running a household fully by themselves, the fact that they miss work, and the often disconcerting comments of their social environment on their ‘choice’ to be fulltime homemakers seem to render the gender attitude of fulltime home-makers more egalitarian. This result demonstrates the dynamic and reciprocal character of attitudes and behavioural experiences.

A salient similarity among the interviewed mothers is, that most of them carry the bulk of the responsibility for the unpaid tasks, especially the caring tasks. This corresponds with earlier research: “*Mothers regardless of whether they are employed, carry 90% of the burden of responsibility for childcare: they plan, organize, delegate supervise and schedule*” (Thompson 1989, 855). In addition, the interviewees are generally satisfied about the division of labour with their husband and are cautious to make critical remarks. Previous research has already demonstrated that women have a discordant interest in seeing the domestic division of labour as unfair (Beagan et al. 2008, 656). “*Women may feel that criticism of domestic inequality constitutes a personal attack on the men in their lives...*” (Kane and Sanchez 1994, 1081). Our findings reveal that many mothers have in the back of their minds vivid pictures of their fathers, sitting on the couch with a newspaper, compared to whom the contributions of their own husband seem a big improvement. Another similarities are the consensus about professional child care: more than three days use of a crèche and two days after-school care are readily considered as ‘cold solutions’ (Kremer 2007). Moreover, most mothers openly deny a desire to climb high on the social ladder, and experience an overall expectation for mothers to work part-time.

However, the findings demonstrate as well that these collective memories and societal expectations, which shape gender norms, have, as Beagon (2007) formulates it, ‘gone underground’. Apparent upbringing matters along recognizable gender lines are justified by the expected sexual differences and/or tend to be made personal and one’s own responsibility: “it is probably my character”. As a result, although mothers might tacitly desire more equality, there is no manifest conflict (Komter 1990), and parents muddle through (Wiesmann 2010). Nevertheless, there are also subtle differences between mothers, corresponding to their gender attitude, regarding the ‘acceptance’ of these inequalities. Mothers with traditional or adaptive attitudes often do not see inequalities but perceive the situation as natural (mothers with small part-time jobs), or do not consider it right to complain about it (fulltime mothers). Egalitarian mothers find it more or less normal that their husbands take up a large part of the unpaid work, but seem to surrender to remaining inequalities. The present “narrative of non-complaining” among Dutch mothers, as it may be part of the gender structure of the Dutch society, might be one of the reasons why the share of Dutch husbands in household tasks and the upbringing show little progress since 1995 (Bucx et al., 2011, 118), and why part-time work remains such a popular option for most Dutch mothers.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Mothers spent in 2005 more than 24 hours a week on household tasks, and fathers 9.4 hours (Bucx et al. 2011, p.112)

Contrary to gender attitudes, the work attitudes of Dutch mothers do not seem to have a distinctive effect on their work preferences. Almost all interviewed mothers have positive, especially intrinsic, work attitudes. Yet, one kind of work attitude specifically holds for mothers with a large work preference: the wish to become economically independent. For these women, it is unlikely that ‘bad’ jobs will push them towards domesticity. Of particular interest in this context is the contingent consistency theory, which suggests that attitudes have a stronger impact on behaviour in the presence of social support for behaviour (Grube and Morgan 1990 in Cunningham et al. 2005, 780). The present study also indicates that fulltime home-makers have missed help to put their work preferences on track. In a forthcoming article, we analyse how significant others influence attitudes and labour market preferences of mothers.

The last hypotheses states that a mother’s juvenile wish to become a mother comes along with a more traditional or adaptive gender attitude. The present study confirms this relationship. In general, mothers who had more ambivalent feelings about motherhood when they were young, have at present a more egalitarian attitude compared to mothers who had a clear wish of becoming a mother in their youth.

We conclude that the current diverse employment pattern of Dutch mothers is largely based on heterogeneous work preferences and prior and present gender and work attitudes. Yet, this is just one side of the decision making process with respect to work and home tasks. The findings also reveal that societal expectations about mothering and fathering (still) affect preferences and actions. And although it is nowadays possible for mothers to diverge from prevailing social norms, they must then withstand – placid and hoarse – comments and questions about their life style. Besides, despite positive work preferences and attitudes, personal, structural and cultural constraints can limit mothers’ options to put their work preference into practice. This leads to the conclusion that mothers’ employment behaviour must be understood as a dynamic result of personal work preferences and attitudes on the one hand, and work experiences and social gender norms on the other hand, instead of individual expressions of free choice.





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## Appendix 1: Overview of respondents

Name	Age	Working hours	Working hours partner	Number of children	Educational level	(former) profession
<i>Fulltime mothers</i>						
Janne	38	0	40+	3	Higher polytechnic	Physiotherapist
Leontien	42	0	40+	4	University	Shop employee
Nora	40	0	50	4	University	Judge
Barbara	39	0	40	4	University	Recruiter
Astrid	43	0	36	3	Higher polytechnic	Controller
Marieke	42	0		4	Intermediate polytechnic	Cashier
Mireille	35	0	40	3	Secondary school	Personal assistant
Nienke	47	0	40	1	Secondary school	Manager
Meriam	48	0	Unemployed because of disability	3	Primary school	None
Saida	33	0	30	3	Primary school	None
<i>Mothers with a part time job (12-24 hours a week)</i>						
Heleen	34	24	40	3	University	Teacher
Nel	32	16	40	1	University	Psychologist
Tineke	38	24	32	2	Intermediate polytechnic	Professional child care
Youssra	35	18	unemployed	3	Primary school	Cleaner at private houses
Brigitte	35	24	40	2	Intermediate polytechnic	Professional child carer
Carien	35	24	40	1	Intermediate polytechnic	Project assistant
Willemien	47	24	Unemployed because of disability	1	Intermediate polytechnic	Cook
Esmé	34	24	40	2	Secondary school	Personal assistant

<i>Mothers with a large part-time job (24-32 hours a week)</i>						
Juul	40	32	32	2	University	Publisher
Medina	38	32	32	3	University	Prosecutor
Alice	47	30	40	2	Higher polytechnic	Journalist
Marloes	43	30	40	2	University	Translator
Cathy	44	32	32	1	University	Manager
Diana	42	30		2	University	Psychologist
Sietske	43	32	40	3	University	Commercial director
Olga	30	28	32	2	University	Social worker
Yvette	42	30	40	2	Intermediate poly-technic	Cabinet
Sophie	48	30	36	1	Intermediate poly-technic	Copy writer
Annemiek	37	34	34	2	University	Policy maker
<i>Fulltime working mothers</i>						
Lotte	47	40	40	2	University	Manager
Michelle	47	40		2	University	Managing director
Ilse	43	40+	40	3	University	Publisher
Marlieke	47	36	Variable	2	University	Policy maker
Claire	47	36	36	2	University	Managing director
Ebru	40	40	40	2	Higher polytechnic	Bank employee
Annelies	42	36	32	3	University	Bank employee
Alisha	43	36	40	1	Secondary school	Project assistant
Sheila	37	36	30	2	Intermediate poly-technic	Personal assistant
Rosa	32	36		2	Intermediate poly-technic	Personal assistant
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June 2001 - Maarten van Klaveren & Kea Tijdens
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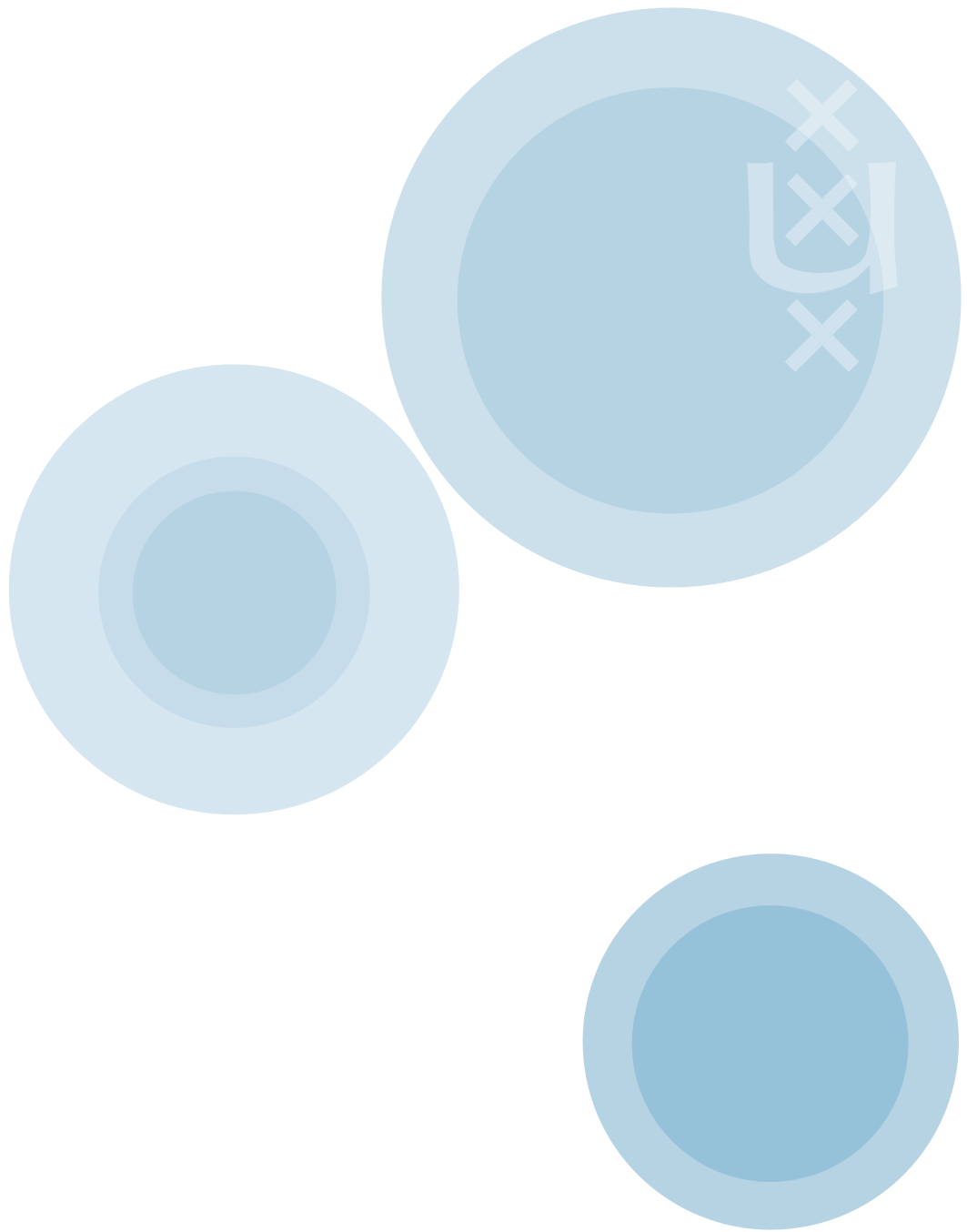
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AIAS is a young interdisciplinary institute, established in 1998, aiming to become the leading expert centre in the Netherlands for research on industrial relations, organisation of work, wage formation and labour market inequalities. As a network organisation, AIAS brings together high-level expertise at the University of Amsterdam from five disciplines:

- Law
- Economics
- Sociology
- Psychology
- Health and safety studies

AIAS provides both teaching and research. On the teaching side it offers a Masters in Comparative Labour and Organisation Studies and one in Human Resource Management. In addition, it organizes special courses in co-operation with other organisations such as the Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation (NCSI), the Netherlands Institute for Small and Medium-sized Companies (MKB-Nederland), the National Centre for Industrial Relations 'De Burcht', the National Institute for Co-determination (GBIO), and the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'. AIAS has an extensive research program (2004-2008) on Institutions, Inequalities and Internationalisation, building on the research performed by its member scholars. Current research themes effectively include:

- Wage formation, social policy and industrial relations
- The cycles of policy learning and mimicking in labour market reforms in Europe
- The distribution of responsibility between the state and the market in social security
- The wage-indicator and world-wide comparison of employment conditions
- The projects of the LoWER network



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