

# "It is an individual choice" : experiences of highly qualified stay-at-home mothers in Dublin

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Simone Tappert and Evelyn Mahon

## **“It is an individual choice”: experiences of highly qualified stay-at-home mothers in Dublin**

### **Abstract**

The following contribution relies on the testimony of women themselves to expose and unpick a uni-dimensional focus on choice – to work or stay at home – to illustrate the multi-layered and complex set of factors that influence women’s decisions relating to work and caring. While based on a small sample that cannot be generalized from, the discussion of the outcomes gives strong evidence to the importance of looking beyond what first appear to be straightforward choices to critiquing the complex inter-play of factors that shape these “choices.” Such are e.g. structural or ideological reasons as decision-making factors for becoming a Stay-at-Home Mother.

### **Introduction**

The female labor force participation in Ireland has gradually increased since the 1970s. The feminisation of the Irish labor force began with the expansion of white collar work in the civil and public sector, and the demands from professionals in the education and health sectors (Mahon 1998). The increase is largely explained by changes in the structure of the labor market including growing labor demand and increasing wages, increased educational attainment of women, the decline in the power of the Catholic Church, Ireland’s EEC membership and policy initiatives (Kennedy 2002; O’Sullivan 2007; Patterson 2001; Russell et al. 2009). The later Celtic Tiger era (2002–2007) led to increased opportunities for women in the financial, legal, retail and technological services.

The labor market is characterised by horizontal and vertical segregation, and gender discrimination persists. While the civil and public sector has introduced some policies which reconcile work and family lives, private companies are not obliged to do so (O’Sullivan 2007). And even though the growth in dual-earner families has generated positive attitudes towards the labor force participation of married women with children (O’Sullivan

2012; Murphy-Lawless 2000), there is still a very high value placed on the family, and men and fathers have not modified their roles to accommodate the changed roles of women, i. e. there is still a gendered division of labor in the family. Additionally, there is no provision of publicly funded childcare to accommodate women's changing lives. Mothers become economically "inactive" in order to take over the care responsibilities.

Research conducted by FLOWS Research in Dublin revealed that mothers' employment rate varied by educational level and by their number of children under the age of 12 (Mahon 2014). Overall, married or cohabiting women with third-level education are the most likely to continue in the workforce (Fortin 2005; Russell et al. 2009). Nonetheless, 38.0 per cent of women in the Dublin area who are on "home duties" (CSO 2011) and out of the labor force are women with third-level education. The lack of high quality and affordable childcare as well as the lack of state support for family-friendly policies has been identified as a key factor in explaining the lower employment levels of mothers (Calvert et al. 2009).

However in addition to these structural issues, some theorists argue that familial ideology shaped by cultural norms play a major role in explaining mothers withdrawal from the labor market. In this context, structural constraints may not sufficiently account for their withdrawal from the labor market and the need to explore circumstances and socially and culturally shaped norms arises (Duncan 2005; Halrynjo/Lyng 2009). There is very little known about highly educated women who decided to stay at home in order to take care of their children (Fahey et al. 2000; Hilliard 2007; Kennedy 2002; McGinnity/Russell 2008; O'Sullivan 2007; Patricia 2000; Russell et al. 2002, 2009). Due to the assumption that married or cohabiting women with third-level education are considered to have the strongest capacities to reconcile family and work life in Ireland (Russell et al. 2009), these women are not among the target group of social work and there is no supply structure for their needs. However, a better understanding of highly-qualified women's decision-making processes to drop out of the labor force is essential in order to allow for a critical-reflexive engagement and sensitisation of the subject in order to address those women's needs in the realm of social work. This qualitative small-scale study aimed at enriching this research area by filling the knowledge gap on this particular group of women by exploring the motives and reasons including circumstances, beliefs and values shaping highly educated and married women's decision-making processes to stay at home in order to take care of their children.

## **Women, employment and childcare responsibilities in Ireland**

Historically women's position in Irish society was embedded within a patriarchal system defining men as the breadwinner and constructing women within the household. This was legally enshrined in Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland which states: "The State recognizes that by her life within the home a woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties in the home." The Constitution served as the legal basis for the unidimensional role of women limited to the private sphere (Kennedy/Einasto 2010).

The bond between the Catholic Church and the State reproduced the gendered roles of men and women and fostered the belief that the family unit was highly important for the development of both the Irish society and economy (Patterson 2001). Kennedy (2002, p. 45) highlights that the "status of the family hinged to a large extent on 'woman' or 'mother' who was also endowed with a particularly 'favoured' status, which she was expected to live out within the home." Hence, motherhood has been ascribed to and functioned as a central identity marker for women in Irish society and legitimated their exclusion from the public sphere (Hoff/Coulter 1995). The construction of motherhood as central marker of women's identity continues to play an important role in (Irish) society legitimating and reproducing inequalities and dichotomies inherent to the patriarchal social order (Cowdery/Knudson 2005).

In 1935 the Conditions of Employment Act was introduced and a public marriage bar was implemented which restricted the number of female employment in any industry (Anketell 2009). "Until Ireland's EC membership in 1973, Church teaching and state policy confined married women to home duties and in this way private patriarchy was legally maintained" (Mahon 1994, p. 1280). In 1973, the marriage ban was abolished as equality legislation was a pre-condition of Ireland's membership in the European Community (Pyle 1990). Since then the female labor force participation has strongly grown, mainly due to the rising participation of married women and mothers. The strong increase is mainly explained by structural changes of the labor market including growing labor demand and increasing wages, policy initiatives such as the individualisation of the tax system and the improvement in maternity leave, as well as women's changing profile (Patterson 2001).

Women's labor force participation and employment rate reached its peak in 2007, with 63.0 per cent and 60.7 per cent respectively but subsequently dropped due to the economic recession. The female labour force participation rate in Dublin for 2011 was at 65.1 per cent, slightly above the national average (CSO 2011). Research shows that education, age, the presence of pre-school children and wage elasticity are important factors in explaining female labor force participation in Ireland (Russell et al. 2009). Though mothers with a university education who are employed before they have a child are more likely to return to work after maternity leave, their decision making needs to be contextualised within the changing structures of the labor market, social policies and socio-cultural attitudes (O'Sullivan 2007).

The presence of pre-school children and long periods spent out of the labor market are important factors in depressing participation (Russell et al. 2009). Hilliard (2007, p. 129) notes that a large gap exists "between stated attitudes to gender roles and the actual enactment of domestic roles." The increasing female labor force participation has not automatically led to the equal distribution of domestic and care responsibilities between men and women. Women continue to play a predominant role in the domestic sphere which leads to higher levels of work-family conflicts experienced by women than by men (McGinnity/Calvert 2009; O'Sullivan 2007). Thus, women's engagement in domestic and care work is a crucial factor in explaining continuity in female labor force participation (Russell et al. 2009, p. 5). Dominant gender roles, the value women place on spending time with pre-school children, and the cost of childcare in relation to the salary gained through paid work, are important factors in explaining women's employment patterns (McGinnity/Russell 2008).

According to Calvert et al. (2009) state support in terms of family-friendly policies ranging from legislation up to the individual employer to implement are of relevance for the reconciliation of work and family life. In 1994, maternity leave of 14 weeks was introduced under the Maternity Protection Act and since then has been increased to 26 weeks.<sup>1</sup> Employers are not required to pay the employee during the maternity leave but women are entitled to a statutory maternity benefit based on their social insurance contributions. Additionally, women can take up to 16 weeks of additional unpaid maternity leave and both, mothers and fathers, are entitled to 14 weeks unpaid parental leave.<sup>2</sup> The FLOWS Research in Dublin found limited provision of pre-school childcare prior to the introduction in 2010 of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE). How-

ever the latter only provides 15 hours per week of free pre-school childcare for 3 year old children and the purpose of this scheme is to provide all children equal access to an appropriate early learning setting rather than fulfilling any childcare purpose (Mahon 2014).<sup>3</sup> Although the State provides free primary and secondary education, post-school childcare has also been a neglected policy area. There exists no state support for after school childcare and a scarcity of provisions (Kennedy 2002; Murphy-Lawless 2000). Consequently, the vast majority of childcare for children under age 12 is provided by parents themselves. A recent OECD Report (2012) notes that Ireland has the highest childcare costs in the EU. While a child costs 24 per cent of a couple's family income in Dublin, it costs almost 40 per cent of a lone mother's family income, ranging from € 730 to € 1 100 a month for a five-day week. Additionally, Ireland has a family based taxation system which (re)produces an understanding of the female salary as secondary to the husband's income and restrains the second earner (the female income is taxed at the higher marginal rate which reduces the female net take home pay) (Mahon/Bailey 2015).

Hence, despite the growing labor force participation of women, their role as primary caregivers is maintained and reproduced in society and state policies: "Childcare is still perceived as a private and in fact a woman's responsibility. [...] while women are no longer expected to remain in the home as dependents of male breadwinners, they are nevertheless not supported in their dual role as mother-worker" (ibid., p. 201). However, the facilitation of childcare provisions through the State and the reduction of the net cost of childcare to enable the reconciliation of family and work life are considered key in raising female labor force participation (OECD 2007).

Previous research in Ireland has shown that married or cohabiting women with third-level education are considered to have the strongest resources to combine work and family life (Barrett et al. 2000; Russell et al. 2009). Hence, structural constraints such as lack of childcare facilities in Dublin or a lack of state support may not sufficiently account for the withdrawal from the labor market of this particular group of women. There is a need to further explore the motives and factors that influence their decisions to become "full time mothers."

### **Theoretical approaches towards women's employment behaviour**

Preference theory (Hakim 1995) claims that women's employment patterns are voluntary choices based on gender-specific preferences. Some mothers prefer to stay at home and prioritise their family rather than their

work. For Hakim, these preferences are not limited by any constraints but are genuine choices according to women's orientation towards work and home. Hence, different labor market outcomes for women result from the heterogeneity of their preferences. Although research has found statistically significant differences between women in terms of their gender attitudes and their employment decisions (Crompton/Lyonette 2005; Glover/Arber 1995), preference theory has been criticised for excluding economic, structural and cultural constraints (Debacker 2008; Kan 2007). According to McRae (2004) every decision is limited by these constraints and involves opportunity costs as well as real costs. However, "*some* women have substantially better chances than others of overcoming constraints, and hence of living as *if* they faced no constraints" (ibid., p. 329). Preference theory does not take into account the problem of differences in power and access to resources between groups (Barry 2002). In addition, women might be multi- rather than single-oriented towards family and career and their commitments may change over the life cycle (Crompton/Harris 1998).

Research has shown that individual characteristics play an important role in explaining women's employment patterns. Higher education is consistently linked to an increased probability of paid work (Fortin 2005). Although an increasing number of children in the household decreases the probability of labor force participation, "for women with higher education presence of children affects participation [...] only when children are very young, but for women with lower education the effect is negative [...] for children of any age" (Del Boca et al. 2009, p. 163). However, as household demands increase due to care responsibilities, the more difficult it becomes to reconcile work and family.

Although individual characteristics play an important role Uunk et al. (2005) found that the population composition provides only limited ground for explaining national differences in women's labor force participation. Institutional conditions such as childcare provisions, leave programmes and flexibility at the work place have a strong impact on women's employment patterns. Strong state support and publicly funded childcare diminish differences in employment rates between women with and without children (Berninger 2009). Hence, social policies such as leave schemes are important factors but "it is only in combination with adequate childcare that other policies such as maternity and parental leave schemes become effective" (De Henau 2006, p. 19) to increase female labor force participation.

Some scholars argue that state support and the level of childcare provisions for pre-school children is strongly linked to the national culture and dominant norms and that it is attitudinal change that had a strong impact on increasing the labor force participation over the last decades in Europe. As women's attitudes and subjective orientations shape their employment decisions during life-cycle, larger competing *cultural schemas* (Blair-Loy 2003) and *ideals of care* (Kremer 2007) need to be taken into account. Although evidence of a causal effect has been found indicating that women with more traditional gender values are less likely to work after childbirth, "many women work or continue working despite their traditional attitudes. Such persisting attitude-behaviour inconsistencies are likely to result from situations in which women continue to be constrained in their care-work options" (Steiber/Haas 2012, p. 347). Hence, structural and institutional as well as cultural and individual factors shape women's employment patterns and need to be considered when explaining their labor market outcomes (Kangas/Rostgaard 2007).

### Highly educated women between work and family life?

Studies on highly educated stay-at-home mothers emphasise women's difficulties in balancing work and family life, the experience of being "mommy-tracked" and the conflict of trying to be simultaneously an ideal worker and parent (Stone/Lovejoy 2004; Boyd 2002). Their decision to withdraw from the labor market is not an easy one for women whose social identity has emanated from their careers in which they have invested much time and effort. Research has revealed that work-related constraints such as the amount, pace and inflexibility of working hours and schedules coupled with the employers' refusal to reduce working hours often lead mothers to decide to stay at home (Stone 2007).

Many women try to reconcile family and work demands through shifting from full-time to part-time work or job-sharing. This does not always work as women struggle to perform to their own high standards in the job or feel being "mommy-tracked." This means that they were not promoted, felt marginalised or were excluded from the interesting parts of their job (Rubin/Wooten 2007). Mothers are most likely to leave their employment when they have pre-school age children. Some, who have continued to work when their children are very young, find managing school going children more difficult as they have doubts about the paid caregiver's capacities to meet the children's new educational needs (Lovejoy/Stone 2004). Additionally, women's experience of growing up with a stay-



at-home mother and their wish to spend more quantity time with their children may influence the decision-making process (Boyd 2002).

Highly educated women's decision to withdraw from the labor market may be linked to values that are associated with dominant gender constructions reifying women as responsible for care work, while their husbands serve as the main source of income (Vejar et al. 2006; Zimmermann 2000). Women in higher social classes may have greater choice and can more easily overcome constraints. However stay-at-home mothers tend to value pre-given roles and the male-breadwinner/female-carer division with the husband providing the materialistic component and reassurance towards their role, independent of their socio-economic background (Marks/Houston 2002).

Women who decide to stay at home often embrace intensive mothering and view their role as crucial to the child's upbringing (Hays 1996). "Being there" (Boyd 2002) can be an important concept in defining the mother's role and implies constancy and constant availability making motherhood a time-consuming, emotionally involving, self-sacrificing and child centred practice reinforcing a gendered division of labor. Some mothers feel that they can only meet their children's needs by staying at home full-time (Arendell 2000; Dillaway/Paré 2008; Giele 2008). According to Christopher (2012), married women have a greater choice over paid work that could make them feel more liable to the requirements of intensive mothering because their employment might be considered unnecessary for the family's economic well-being. In addition, many women consider their career as secondary to their husband's careers, which is particularly the case for marriages among the upper and upper-middle classes where the husband's exception from the domestic and care responsibilities is justified by his earning power. This pattern, also referred to as *hegemony of the male career* (Pyke 1996), is reproduced culturally and institutionally. In this context, the husbands' attitudes towards care and work can play an important role in the decision-making process as they either directly support the traditional role of women as primary caregivers and/or simply refuse to modify their careers to the childcare needs (Stone 2007).

While for some women intensive mothering is an important driving force, for other women the decision is less associated with intensive mothering but linked to a lack of job fulfilment and the lack of financial need (Johnston/Swanson 2007). Women who struggle with the decision as they oscillate between their professional and parental identity may reinforce their decision to stay at home by embracing intensive mothering

expectations and defining the decision as self-fulfilment with the child's happiness at its core (ibid. 2006). Framing the decision as individual and autonomous choice allows highly educated stay-at-home mothers to cover work dissatisfaction and to leave employment gracefully (Stone 2007; Rubin/Wooten 2007). This study draws on the theoretical approaches outlined previously to generate an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon in the Irish context.

## Methodology

This study is part of an explorative qualitative study conducted within the FLOWS project<sup>4</sup>, a study on the impact of local welfare systems on female labor force participation and social cohesion, funded by the European Commission within the Seventh Framework Programme for Research (FP7). The research findings revealed that in Dublin the overall participation rate of mothers in the labor force was related to their educational levels. Mothers with a degree were much more likely to return to work after maternity leave but this likelihood declined as their number of children increased. Overall, mothers with three or more young children were the least likely to remain in employment (Mahon 2014). This study sought to explore why highly educated mothers, who were not under financial constraints, decided to leave their employment and to become full time mothers. The removal of financial constraint was an important control factor and a necessary part of the research design.

## Sampling and recruitment strategy

A small homogenous sample was chosen which allows detailed investigations of social processes in a particular context. The sample consisted of women with third-level education<sup>5</sup> living in Dublin. Dublin city was chosen because of the affiliation to the FLOWS project and the density of the population. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, women needed to have worked before childbearing and given up work due to childcare responsibilities. They *chose* to stop working even though they could have continued to work. The mothers selected had an employed spouse or partner whose income earnings made it financially possible for them to become full-time mothers. In addition, women needed to have at least one child aged between 1 to 13 years as many women take the decision, whether to return to employment or stay-at-home, at the end of their maternity leave (which endures 26 weeks in total and is often prolonged by using paternity leave and holidays). Research participants were mainly accessed through

internet forums frequently used by mothers and fathers in Ireland. In addition, snowball sampling was applied via the introductions and recommendations of participants previously interviewed.

The final sample consisted of eight married women. Six of the mothers (aged between 39–47) had three children, one (aged 37) had two children, while the youngest (aged 32) had one child but was pregnant with a second child. Seven of them had Bachelor or Master Degrees in Arts and Commerce and one was an Engineer. All of them had achieved senior posts – in marketing, advocacy, IT, research – in a variety of corporate institutions, prior to giving up work. All of the women were married. Seven of the husbands were in senior Administrative and Technical positions, while the eighth was a teacher. With the exception of the latter (who earned 50 000€), the husbands' salaries ranged from 80 000€ to 100 000€ per year. Husbands could avail of the family based taxation allowances which allocates double taxation bands and credits to one earner families.

Seven of the women lived in two-floor houses with backyards (property) in residential areas in the South Dublin area and one of the participants lived in a rented apartment in a residential area in the North Dublin area. The ages of the children ranged between two and thirteen years, with most of the children aged over three years. Five of the women gave up work after having their second child or when pregnant with the third one and three of the participants resigned from their jobs after their first child. They had spent on average six years on home duties. The women in this study were drawn from middle or upper-middle class families. With one exception all had grown up in families where their mother had stayed at home and in which the father was the financial provider. This *breadwinner/housewife gender model* was the dominant one in Ireland.

### **Analysis of the collected data**

In total, eight interviews lasting between 80 and 120 minutes were conducted between June and July 2012. In all the cases interviews were conducted during the week and in the interviewees' homes which allowed the researcher to get an impression of the interviewees' places. The data analysis first identified common themes in the transcripts. In the second part of analysis, these themes were further conceptualised and data was interpreted in the context of the theoretical findings outlined in this article. Overall the research question posed was what were the factors that led to these women becoming stay-at-home mothers.

### **Becoming a stay-at-home mother: the decision-making factors**

All of the women strongly emphasised that their decision to stay at home was one of *choice*, and most of them mentioned explicitly that they were grateful for being able to *afford to stay* at home. The sample offered an opportunity to examine a very distinctive group of mothers who did not have to work for financial reasons. Preference Theory (Hakim 1995) has been advanced to explain such mothers' employment decisions – which are linked to their supposedly *unconstrained* preferences. However, their narratives showed that financial need was just one of the factors which played a role in their decision to become stay-at-home mothers. Other macro and micro level factors as will be outlined also played a role, making the decision-making process a multifaceted rather than a uni-dimensional process (Crompton/Lyonette 2005; Halrynjo/Ling 2009; Kangas/Rostgaard 2007).

### **Unresolved reconciliation issues in their previous employment**

Women in this study talked proudly about their work achievements and how much they enjoyed their jobs, giving detailed accounts of their "previous lives"<sup>6</sup> which often involved working 60 hours a week, travelling and a high level of responsibility at work. The institutions they worked in could be characterised as "greedy", demanding long and extended working hours with no opportunities for reduced working hours. The extensive demands of their jobs coupled with those of motherhood generated considerable role conflicts among them. Their internalised pressure to become an ideal worker and responsible mother increased with each child (Stone/Lovejoy 2004; Boyd 2002).

In response to this pressure three women tried to negotiate part-time work or reduced hours but only one of them (Suzanne) was able to reduce her work from five to four days a week. However this did not resolve her pressure as she claimed that she ended up doing five days' work in four. Her work actually intensified and on her day "off" she inevitably still had to do some work. So she left employment.

Anne (39, 3 children) worked in a senior management position in marketing when she gave up her job. She worked full-time and went back to work after her first and her second child who were cared for by a child minder. While working she had to constantly say no to meetings which were regularly scheduled outside her official working hours. She then applied for part-time hours, as it became gradually more stressful managing two children with work, but her request was rejected by the company:

*It basically came to the crux where a whole load of things came together, the fact that I felt I had been badly treated [at work]. And then there was my family life and the fact that I was [...] screaming at them [children] basically. And [...] I felt that I was constantly saying no at work because they were still trying to organise meetings at half four, five and I'm like "I'm finished at five."*

In coherence with previous research in Ireland on female labor force participation, the structures of the labor market in terms of the lack of flexibility at work, the inability to reduce working hours or take career breaks and the pressure of high-demanding jobs constrained women's possibility to combine work with motherhood (Barrett et al. 2000; Russell et al. 2009).

### **Lack of quality affordable childcare**

Although four out of the five women who tried to combine work with motherhood were satisfied with their childcare arrangements, the more children they had the more difficult and expensive it became. Sarah (47, 3 children) worked full-time until she went on maternity leave with her third child. The arrival of a third child incurred further childcare costs. She had planned to go back to work but she was *pushed out* by the high costs of childcare as she explained:

*We basically sat down and did the sums and tried to work out what the best option was having looked at the cost of crèches and cost of childminders [...] and financially it didn't make sense for me to go back to work. I probably would have made a 100€ a month into my pocket.*

As Sarah's account of the calculations exemplifies, childcare costs were usually deducted from the female salary instead of coming from the husband's salary or the total family income. Women perceived their income as additional or secondary, leading to a devaluation of their female labor force participation while enhancing the income earning status and attendant empowerment of the husband and reproducing the male-breadwinner/female-carer model. The joint family based taxation system assists in constructing women's income (which is taxed at the higher marginal rate) as *additional* to the husband's income. The female net take home pay is already reduced. The further deduction of costs or childcare that are deducted from Sarah's income only explains why she, and other women in this study, concluded that financially it did not make sense to go back to work. Recent OECD statistics<sup>7</sup> indicate that Ireland has one of the high-

est childcare costs among EU 17- accounting for about 23.8% of family net income (in case of full time earning couple and full-time care – 5 days a week – in a typical childcare centre). Even if their children were attending school, parents would still incur after-school childcare costs. Long-term implications of the decision on women's careers were not discussed but were reassured by the assumption that women would be able to go back to work at a later stage.

### **Ideology of motherhood**

As shown in other studies, mothers in this study were strongly influenced by their own upbringing in traditional households, their positive childhood experiences and their own mothers staying at home (Boyd 2002; Zimmermann 2000). For these mothers the constant presence of the mother was perceived as essential to successful parenting. They were unhappy using childcare as their children "were being brought up by others" who would in turn have a greater influence on the children's development than the parents. Lucy recalled that experience and emphasised its benefits to the children:

*It was very, very positive having a mum at home. So, I think from the kids perspective there is a huge benefit. [...] I suppose there is a part of me that thinks that they are my kids and having had the experiences of having a child in childcare all day, [...] you're not bringing them up yourself because somebody else is spending more hours with your child than you are and [...] they have a greater influence than you do. (Lucy, 45, 3 children)*

Some mothers had a strong so-called *maternal pull* even before they got pregnant:

*Myself and my husband, we talked about it and we would have always said that if we had kids, it would be nice if I could stay at home to mind them and rear them. (Elaine, 37, 2 children)*

Women elaborated on their role as a full-time mother, saying it had two components: a practical and a developmental side. Being a mother required full dedication and intensity, it was important to teach the child all the basic skills to ensure their physical, psychological and behavioural well-being. The constant presence of the mother and the consistency were seen as key factors to successful parenting and in consequence devalued any

other care arrangement. However, despite the embracement of the various aspects of motherhood by all of the women, there were differences among them in terms of how strong the pull of motherhood was in their decision-making process (Stone 2007).

### Role of fathers

Within these families, it was apparent that the fathers were not willing to share the parental responsibilities. Their higher incomes enabled them to be excused from the demands of family lives, both when their wives were working and to an even greater extent when they became full-time mothers.

The difficulties of reconciling work with motherhood were reinforced by the internalisation of dominant gender norms constructing women as primary caregivers on the one side, and the lack of availability or willingness by the husbands to adjust their own high-demanding careers to the children's needs on the other side. Women's narratives showed that it was never discussed whether the husband stayed at home which "never came up for those obvious unstated reasons" (Suzanne, 41, 3 children). Hence, husbands played an important role in that they did offer little assistance in the everyday routine and let women deal with it on their own:

*We kind of sat down and I did that "It's such a big decision." He basically talked me down and said "Look, [...] you will always be able to find another job. [...] You've got the opportunity now to do it if you want to do it but I can't make that decision for you, only you can make that decision." (Anne, 39, 3 children)*

Anne's decision was her decision rather than a decision she took together with her husband.

Sarah (47, 3 children) was the only participant who grew up with a working mother who always encouraged her to continue working. She explained that she never allowed herself to get into the "thought process that [...] motherhood was a bigger thing than just getting [...] through the week." Although her husband played an active role in the care responsibilities, when revising their childcare options he told her that:

*"I'd actually feel happier if you look after the kids." He said "If you were happy to do it, I'd be happier knowing that you're minding them than they're in a crèche." And it's just suddenly [...], you're like god, [...] that is an important factor as well.*

While the increasing expense for childcare was an important factor, the decision to stay at home was also shaped and facilitated by the husband's position and attitude towards what was perceived as the best care arrangement. The husbands' help primarily referred to supporting and enabling women to stay at home rather than sharing the care responsibilities. While for women who always wanted to stay at home the husband was an active participant as his salary was required to facilitate staying at home, for other women the absence of their partners increased the pressure of reconciling work and family life and creating a nurturing family unit, which then fed into their decision-making process (Boyd 2002; Stone 2007; Vejar et al. 2006).

## **Conclusion**

While women in this study used the language of choice to explain their decision to stay at home, feeding into the assumptions of Preference Theory (Hakim 1995) that women's employment decisions are linked to unconstrained preferences, their narratives showed that different factors on the macro and micro level such as norms, structures, institutions and their personal experiences played a major role in the decision-making process (Crompton/Lyonette 2005; Halrynjo/Ling 2009; Kangas/Rostgaard 2007).

Firstly, while female labor force participation in Ireland has increased over the last decades, the gendered distribution of responsibilities in the domestic sphere has not automatically adjusted to the changes in the productive sphere (Fahey et al. 2005; Hilliard 2007). Further, women perceived their jobs and careers as secondary to their husbands' careers, constructing their labor force participation as a luxury and reproducing the male-breadwinner/female-carer model (Arendell 2000; Christopher 2012; Pyke 1996). Simultaneously their husbands were high-income earners and showed no willingness to make adjustments to their careers feeding into women's decision to resign from work. For women who always wanted to stay at home, the husband's salary was a prerequisite for this decision (Vejar et al. 2006).

Secondly, mothers had sought alternative reconciliation strategies. All had wanted to reduce the number of days or the number of hours of work but employers did not permit them to do so. The structures of the labor market in terms of lack of flexibility at work, the inability to reduce working hours or to take career breaks and the pressure of high-demanding jobs constrained women's possibility to combine work with motherhood (Barrett et al. 2000; Russell et al. 2009). This is also due to the lack of



employers' legal obligation in Ireland to facilitate employees' reconciliation of work and family life.

Thirdly, the lack of state support to provide affordable and high quality childcare facilities in Dublin also impacted on women's decision. Especially for those who had three children, childcare was extremely expensive and made going to work in terms of finances *not worthwhile*, indicating that the likelihood of labor force participation decreases with the increasing number of children and in turn the increasing cost of childcare (Kennedy 2002; McGinnity/Russell 2008; Russell et al. 2009). The decision to stay at home did not take into account any long term disadvantages for women themselves.

Regarding childcare arrangements, women also questioned whether full-time work and using childcare facilities were the best option for their children's development and upbringing. They all felt that maternal care by the mother – who were all highly educated – would be better for their children in the long run as childcare staff in Ireland do not have to have high educational levels. As shown in other studies this doubt was also strongly influenced by women's positive childhood experiences and their own mothers staying at home (Reid Boyd 2002; Zimmermann 2000). The constant presence of the mother and the consistency were seen as key factors to successful parenting and in consequence devalued any other care arrangement (Stone 2007).

To conclude, women's decisions to withdraw from the labor market and to become stay-at-home mothers in order to take care of their children were multi-layered and complex rather than uni-dimensional. Different factors such as women's work situation and constrained possibilities of combining motherhood with work, the husbands' role in the family setting and their support, women's childhood experiences and their perceptions of motherhood and childcare as well as the high expense of childcare facilities in Dublin emerged as factors shaping the decision-making process.

Based on the findings of this study it is highly recommended to publicly support and provide affordable and high quality full-time childcare facilities. In addition, it is required to increase the flexibility at work, the introduction of sabbaticals or career breaks in the private economy, increasing availability of flexi-hours and job sharing for both, men and women. In this regard, the implementation of paid paternal leave is also of high importance to allow both, mothers and fathers, to share the care responsibilities. It is also necessary to improve working conditions in part-time work arrangements in terms of salaries, social security, promotions

and career opportunities. The state actively needs to promote and support the reconciliation of work and family life for both, men and women, firstly by implementing family-friendly policies and structures; secondly by publicly campaigning towards gender equality at the work place and at home in order to promote awareness. Currently, there is a lack of counselling or support programmes for this particular group of women (i. e. support through in-house social services provided by employers/companies; or through community work to build resources, structures and networks supporting the reconciliation of family and work life) and the issue is hardly addressed by the field of social work due to low awareness of the complexity of women's decision making process and previous research, indicating that they have the strongest resources to privately solve the reconciliation of work and family life. As shown in this study, women's decisions are complex and multi-faceted and a differentiated understanding of the dilemma of working (full-time) or staying at home is needed in order to enhance sensitivity of the issue and to develop a social infrastructure and services that cater for the needs of those women.

### **Limitations**

Although the research has produced a rich data set which allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lives and experiences, there are several limits to the study. Firstly, due to the small sample size, the results cannot be generalised to a larger population. Secondly, the study does not allow for any comparison with other stay-at-home mothers from a different background or with different reasons for staying at home. Consequently, it was not possible to determine whether different aspects were specific to this particular group of women or applicable to other stay-at-home mothers. Thirdly, the research does not include information from other actors relevant in the field, such as family members, friends or support networks, in order to provide a holistic understanding of the individual's contexts and the research subject.

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### Annotations

- 1 This has been a direct result of directives by the European Union on maternity protection (Kennedy and Einasto, 2010).
- 2 There is no statutory right to paternity leave in Ireland.
- 3 Throughout the 1990s a number of government initiatives began to address

childcare and in 2000 the National Children's Strategy was launched. It was then replaced by the National Childcare Investment Programme (2006–2010) which introduced the Community Childcare Subvention in 2008 aiming to support community based childcare services and providing reduced rates to dis-

advantaged parents. The government's lack of direct provision was offset by a substantial increase in the universal child benefit payment, from € 53.96 to € 166 per month for first and second children. Due to the economic recession, it has dropped to € 140 (OECD, 2004).

4 <http://www.flows-eu.eu/> (03.12.2014).

5 Third-level education was defined according to the National Framework of Qualifications and included levels 6–10

in the framework which ranges from post-secondary courses, vocational and technical training, to full degree and the highest post-graduate levels.

6 Some of the research participants referred to their life history prior to the decision of staying at home as their "previous life."

7 <http://www.oecd.org/els/benefitsandwagesstatistics.htm> (11.12.2014).