

A puzzle of slots and mismatches: work-life balance in mothers' real life experience “Fuori tempo” e “fuori luogo”: il vissuto esperienziale delle madri nella conciliazione dei tempi

Alessandra Augelli

Dottoranda di ricerca | Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore | alessandra.augelli@unicatt.it

OPEN ACCESS



DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

In a society characterised by overstimulation, speed and efficiency, where intergenerational support functions become more fragile, mothers struggle to balance work and family time. Work-life balance involves organisations, companies, institutions and, at the same time, it involves every woman whose building her own personal life path: in addition to structural measures within the work environment, there is the need to help mothers to sharpen their ability to feel their *inner time*, which is necessary to face the contradictions and challenges of a *dual presence*. The aim is to shed light on the experience lived by mothers within a phenomenological-existential framework, bringing out implicit needs, training orientations and working paths.

KEYWORDS

**Work-life balance, motherhood penalty, time management, unsuitability, time lived.
Conciliazione dei tempi, motherhood penalty, gestione del tempo, inadeguatezza, tempo vissuto.**

In una società in cui vigono iperstimolazione, velocità, efficientismo e dove le funzioni di supporto intergenerazionale si fanno più fragili, le madri faticano nel conciliare i tempi del lavoro con i ritmi di vita. Ciò chiama in causa le organizzazioni, le aziende, le istituzioni e, al contempo, coinvolge ogni donna nella costruzione del suo percorso personale: accanto alle misure strutturali all'interno delle realtà lavorative, si avverte la necessità di aiutare le madri ad affinare la capacità di sentire il tempo interno, necessario per affrontare le contraddizioni e le sfide della *doppia presenza*. In una cornice fenomenologica-esistenziale, si intende far luce sull'*esperienza vissuta* delle madri, facendo emergere assieme ai bisogni impliciti, orientamenti formativi e piste di lavoro.

Citation: Augelli A. (2023). A puzzle of slots and mismatches: work-life balance in mothers' real life experience . *Women & Education*, 1(2), 62-67.

Corresponding author: Alessandra Augelli | alessandra.augelli@unicatt.it

Copyright: © 2023 Author(s).

License: Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

Conflicts of interest: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-1-02-23_12

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN 2975-0105 (online)

*This day I lost
and I was in exile
in clothes that weren't mine
and shoes that bothered me
and pockets that I couldn't recognise
and I was running on time
without even a gift for anyone.
Only an empty, short breath.
To confirm that in unlove
doing even if you do remains undone.*
(Mariangela Gualtieri)

Background

“Work-life balance” has become a well-known expression in international literature that focuses on a complex dynamism in which each term deserves attention and analysis. The word “life” opens up the familiar issue to which one tends to refer. On the other hand, confining the work sphere to the simple work performance against remuneration remains difficult as well (Guest, 2000, p. 258), especially following the massive introduction of *remote working*. A rigid distinction between the two spheres, where work appears disconnected from life as a whole, not only is it unfounded, but also helpful in structuring the inner balance necessary for maturing and promoting well-being in the subject and the surrounding context. *Balance* – another sensitive term in this analysis – is never definitive and steady, rather constantly shifting and precarious, as related to life experiences that, by nature, are also characterised by unforeseen and unexpected events.

As we will see, many perspectives on time balance rely on the distinction and compartmentalisation of these spheres and highlight how this segmentation acts as a defence and *coping* strategy.

The value of the intimate and personal exercise that each individual carries out and matures in the search for balance within different contexts, also rises in this case. This responds to internal logics that are also very different from each other (Cfr. Simeone, 2014). Noteworthy is indeed the definition given by Brought and Kalliath on work-life balance “the *individual perception* that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with the individual’s current life priorities” (Kalliath, Brought, 2008, p. 324).

The issue of *work-life balance* powerfully emerged from the late 1970s, when women began to perform within society not only the private role of generating and caring for the family, but also the public role of working. However, it is equally important to observe that, in recent years, an attempt to surpass gender differences and family duties is being made. This is so that considerations about balance and dialogue between different realities that people experience can benefit everyone, men and women, parents and people without children. In this context, the critical aspect that we intend to shed light on is the means of thought and praxis on the basis of which the search for balance is assessed; i.e. the common *productivist* and *activist* root that leads to the evaluation of the subject’s presence in different contexts. The “dual presence” - brought to attention by Balbo (1978) regarding the dual responsibility of women in the family and at work and the consequent time overlap and commitments in these contexts – is rather a matter of *presence* than *visibility*, more than of care (often immaterial and intangible) – it is a matter of objectives and results that need to be counted and instituted on a par with other products. The current culture often risks interrelating the *productivity* – of work – with that of the *reproductivity* – of the family – risking downplaying the issues to visibility and tangibility measurements that, in any case, belong to an economic, materialistic, efficientist framework. On the other hand, there are elements of *generativity* – complementary to mere reproduction – that women express in their specificity at home, at work and in relationships in general, which have no measure, no voice and, therefore, appear non-existent. If it is true that women’s multiple belongings are gradually undermining the rigid models of the past (Cfr. Bimbi, Pristinger, 1985), then it is also true that there is an emerging need to work on several levels - the institutional-organisational and the informal-relational - so that the experiences of women, and of mothers in particular, can find words to be narrated and spaces and times to be expressed.

According to the data, in fact, one woman out of five is forced to leave her job when her first child is born: women aged between 25 and 49 are employed in 73.9% of cases if they have no children, while they are employed in 53.9% of cases if they have at least one child under the age of 6 (Istat, 2023, Bes report). Furthermore, “the family-work asymmetry index³” – which measures the amount of time dedicated to housework by the spouses, in the case of married women aged between 25 and 44, when both are employed – accounts for 61.8%. (Istat, 2023, BES report). In one of the latest International Labour Organisation (ILO) reports, the time that women and men spend for the family, i.e. caring for children or elderly and weak relatives, was attempted to be quantified: it turns

out that in Italy women spend about five hours on unpaid work, compared to one hour and forty-eight minutes for men. In fact, women shoulder 74% of the unpaid care and assistance work hours.

Therefore, if there is no doubt that mothers are particularly burdened by the difficult time management in finding a balance between work and family, with a significant gap compared to men and childless women, then it is important to give voice and face to these measurements, entering more into the experiences lived and trying to grasp, starting from these, their needs and future perspectives.

1. Being present: organisation issue?

Considering the statistics analysed above, Ivan Illich would say that the need to quantify and make gestures of care and energy investment into an economic factor diminishes the “blessings”, the “value” they play within a community. “In the shadow cone of economic growth, the characteristic gifts of a culture are devalued. Cooking for grandma is redefined as a service to the family, whose contribution to the economy is measured by various methods; alternatively, it is regarded as an unpleasant remnant of the past, which can be eliminated with a further dose of development. [...] Wherever the cultural context is devastated, economic value grows and obscures blessings” (Illich, 1992, p. 43). In this perspective, the greater part of the contribution that women bring to society – whether in the family or at work – is considered in terms of *loss* or *gift*, since it can't be evaluated according to economic categories. The balance need leads to the desire of mothers that these elements should be taken into consideration by others, by society, therefore visible and therefore subject to calculation and quantification: paradoxically, mothers risk instilling good thoughts and practices, just because they don't encounter any different benchmarks for evaluating their presence. Thus they fall into a vicious circle: in order to be recognised they calculate something that is, by its nature, incalculable, and consequently they devalue and impoverish the same experience (*time lived*) in which they find value and meaning. Underlying that there is a separating, divisive logic, made up of oppositions that is not properly part of women's knowledge and feeling and that generally doesn't help anyone who experiences many different realities at the same time. The theoretical work-life balance approaches developed, in fact, around the issue of the boundary, of differentiating spheres, marking fields that in an experience (*time lived*) are intertwined, overlapping, blurred, in a thought that unites (*e-e*) and not opposes (*o-o*). Compensation theories or the “Resources Drain Theory” (Morris, Madsen, 2007) aim to show, for instance, how satisfaction or positive feedback that a person can't find in one context then tends to be found in the other, thus spending more time, energy and attention in the context in which more feedback is provided, effectively moving away from the other. On the other hand, even considering “enrichment” theories (Frone, 2003) – which assess the exchange and enrichment processes between the two contexts – the emphasis is on the more or less fruitful interaction between the two spheres, taking it for granted that they are well-defined and missing the motivations and conditions of such interactions. As if the person had a certain number of resources and had to divide them fairly between both contexts. Those energies spent in one context actually limit the energies of the other and reduce them. Stress, burnout and fatigue occur because the spheres drain each other's energies and the subject is gradually drained. *Anxiety, sense of guilt, remorse, worry, frustration, overload, loneliness, injustice* are the most experienced emotions by mothers in relation to time balance and life management. The feeling of unsuitability often plays a key role: people try to be present on many fronts, aspiring to be fully present in every context, but this is obviously difficult, almost impossible. The most practised skill apparently is that of knowing how to make things *work*, i.e. turning things in the right direction so that everything “fits” together perfectly: here the gears in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) come to mind. Almost a century later, we can still observe the prevalence of a functionalist logic, except that each of life's “gears” follows its own movement, on a distant and different level from the other and, therefore, the overall rhythm can often be disturbed, disharmonious. Mothers' unsuitability evolves as that “the suffering of thinking of oneself as someone who has something wrong, in a world that has no place” for the way one is (Benasayag, 2019, p. 103). Despite so many efforts, the “drama” of *being present* is perceived, which means not only being there physically, being visible, rather listening and grasping the other's needs, sharing crucial moments, dedicating time and 100% attention. So, although mothers are in a hurry, organized and perfectly coordinated in their various duties, they risk being absent, to themselves and to situations, experiencing many things as “obeying orders, following etiquette” (Ivi, p. 94). In the social and organisational contexts, the attention is focused exclusively on organisational issues and the efficiency is translated into reducing waste of time, achieving goals, being punctual, “not leaving things half done”, remembering everything, being prepared and productive, giving their contribution, not letting anyone miss anything. The required benchmarks are equal to those of all other people and the established fairness is expressed in doing everything in the society and in the working world “as if no one should notice one's motherhood”. At the same time, the family requires quality time, emotional stability and the preservation of a peaceful atmosphere, the physical presence of play and care time, listening in moments of need, good cooking, hygiene and tidiness at home, and financial responsibility: all this experienced “as if one should do without work commitments”. Evidently, in this dynamic, the mother is expected to provide a total presence at all times and everywhere.

2. Motherhood penalty: external and internal dimensions

The specific goals related to gender equality in Agenda 2030 (paragraph 5.4) include the importance of promoting greater attention to burden-sharing within families. In addition to physical presence in several areas, mothers are asked for various soft skills, such as understanding, communication, time management, etc. This is translated into a widespread expression such as being “up to the situation”, i.e. living in coherence and in correspondence with the needs and expectations of the people met and cared for. However, on deeper analysis, these “suitability” requests are almost never substantially expressed or regulated, but rather constitute an inner norm, a given structure, that involves the sphere of *feeling*. Many mothers, in fact, recognise that the strongest and highest requests come from themselves and from the desire to feel “perfect” and faultless in any context.

The tendency to “give one’s best” in each situation is very often translated into raising goal standards, without having the opportunity to recognise oneself and rejoice with others for the “good” that has already been achieved and experienced (cfr. Peter, 2004). The perfectionist paradigm, particularly widespread in current contexts, has a strong hold on women and mothers maybe due to the compliance to certain efficiency, productivity and functionalism imperatives it is linked to and the desire to succeed according to fairness and independence principles. By indulging these patterns, we are in fact endorsing a system that doesn’t correspond to the deep feeling of distress and distance.

Feeling “out of time”, always in a hurry and late is a very common emotional experience for mothers. However, it is exactly the disconnection and gap they feel that testifies their difficulty in adapting to a world that asks them to function and not to exist (Benasayag, 2019). Getting a lot of things done and not enjoying anything, being in many places and not feeling present, keeping everything under control and never being peaceful are the ambivalences and contradictions felt by many mothers that often remain unsaid.

Reducing the conflict between the different spheres that women mothers go through means creating interactions within the different fields thanks to the characteristics of *flexibility* and *permeability* (Clark, 2000) that women develop with particular intensity precisely because of the motherhood experience. The greatest difficulty lies in the failure to recognise the ability to create border areas – *borderlands* as Clark defines them: these places of interaction and exchange that mothers competently create and look after, are often taken up in current social schemes as grounds for marginalisation. Mothers risk inhabiting a “no man’s land” just because they inhabit a third space in which they try to make different perspectives interact and relate to each other, rather than simply reconciling them by keeping them at bay, by delimiting them.

Staying in “vague” territories, going through hybrid spaces creates distress and challenges mothers to exercise a very personal balance that must be made shareable, with fathers, with other mothers, with support networks and the community as a whole.

For years, measures to relieve the motherhood penalty have been reiterated in various studies, such as more flexible working hours, opposing time constraints of socio-educational services, but also more support from partners and other players in childcare management. “Lack of services, prejudice in the workplace, structural difficulties of a social context that insufficiently supports working mothers means that women often find themselves at a painful crossroads” (Save the Children, 2022, p. 15). The search for balance causes women to lean toward giving up work or preferring part-time work: women more frequently and often to a larger extent reduce their working hours for family and personal reasons (Beham, Drobnic, Prag, Baierl, Eckner, 2019).

Promoting the rebalancing of family burdens, rethinking gender differences and taking care of the social protection system can only be based on cultural change that goes through careful education of young men and women.

Along with the unavoidable socio-political work of seeking institutional measures and the provision of concrete choices that can support women in the work-life balance, it is important that educational avenues be set up to challenge some of the junctures of gender issues and empower women by giving them a voice.

Working on oneself, maturing awareness, sharing with other mothers and opposing forms of loneliness also allows mothers to practise redefining one’s personal boundaries, imposing limits, recognising frailties, inwardly reconciling, asking for help when in need, taking personal time and space: all these are personal actions of fundamental importance for managing the “tailor-made” reconciliation, in a personal way, starting from one’s own experiences and not in an abstract and generic way.

3. In(conclusion): Self-time management training

Luigina Mortari says: “We live in time and time is our matter, but we don’t have any authority over it; just the present seems belonging to us [...] We are born with a task: to shape our time” (Mortari, 2019, p. 10). The issue of time management is crucial in the discussion of *work-life balance* and *motherhood penalty*, as we have seen, and it is all oriented by a quantitative interpretation of *Cronos*, a calculable, measurable, quantifiable time that says relatively less, however, about lived, perceived time, which captures inexpressible aspects of life. The days are charac-

terised on the basis of objective time as an eternal struggle, a perpetual conflict between required and available time, between desired and missing time. The formative and cultural commitment aims, then, to consider more *Kairos*, the opportune time in which one feels present to oneself, to others, to realities (Cfr. Iori, 2006, p. 116). Mothers can physically move through some contexts and spend some time in them, but still be “absent”, as they are disconnected from their own feeling and will. “Being present to oneself implies – through a practice made up of infinitesimal steps, as if it were a life exercise – making ourselves present to situations” (Benasayag, 2019, p. 94). Being present to oneself requires daily training and can be promoted in training courses, as the keystone in order to experience the different levels of responsibility in which mothers are more meaningfully involved (Gasparini, 2001; Sue, 2001). First of all, it’s important to start looking at the time one dedicates to oneself, which on average is very limited for mothers, as *time for oneself*, i.e. time that helps to increase one’s feeling and awareness of being there, besides the roles and duties carried out (Balbo, 1995).

Time for oneself is generally devoted to personal care and pleasure, while for mothers, this is culturally interpreted as selfish, misplaced, inappropriate. Mothers have to “carve out” their personal time, as if it were always “taken away”, “stolen” from anything else of greater value and legitimacy. Mothers perceive this and, at the same time, recognise the importance of refocusing, of not losing their own identity in the fulfilment of roles, of rediscovering and giving space to personal interests, of releasing tension and recharging energy to be more serene and balanced with others. Time for oneself enables women to recognise their value as persons: the real “wasted time” for oneself and for others is that lived in clothes that are not one’s own, detached from oneself and one’s feelings.

Mothers should be led to reflect and make concrete choices on this in the birth process, especially in the perinatal phase and in the first years of their children’s lives. Nullifying oneself in order to fully focus on family care, just as living the time spent at work with guilt, helps neither the mother herself, nor the relationships she establishes in her family, with her children, in society. This should, urgently, be culturally legitimised and socially promoted, in organisations and informal social contexts, as one of those relational goods that can’t be translated and can’t be quantified (Bruni, 2007, pp. 150-155): when mothers recognise their origin, they may be truly generative and their *doing* can be an authentic expression of their *being*.

References

- Balbo L. (1978). *La doppia presenza*. Inchiesta, n. 32, 3-11.
- Balbo L. (1995). Tempo di lavoro, tempo libero, tempo per se. In *Tempo libero e societa di massa nell'Italia del Novecento*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Beham B., Drobní S., Präg P., Baierl A., Eckner J. (2019). Part-time work and gender inequality in Europe: a comparative analysis of satisfaction with work-life balance. *European Societies*, 21, 3, 378-402.
- Benasayag M. (2019). *Funzionare o esistere?* Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Bimbi F., Pristinger F. (1985). *Profili sovrapposti. La doppia presenza delle donne in un'area ad economia diffusa*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Bruni L. (2007). *La ferita dell'altro. Economia e relazioni umane*. Trento: Il Margine.
- Casarico A., Lattanzio S. (2019). *What firms do: gender inequality in linked employer-employee data*. Cambridge-Inet Working Paper Series N. 15.
- Clark S. C. (2000). Work/family border theory: a new theory of work/family balance. *Human relations*, 53(6), 747-770.
- Frone M.R. (2003). Work-family balance. In J.C. Quick, L.E. Tetrick (Eds.), *Handbook of occupational health psychology. American Psychological Association*, 143-162. In <https://doi.org/10.1037/110474-007>
- Gasparini G. (2001). *Tempo e vita quotidiana*. Bari: Laterza.
- Guest D. E. (2002). Perspectives on the study of work-life balance. *Social Science Information*, 41(2), 255-279.
- Illich I. (1992). *Nello specchio del passato. Le radici storiche delle moderne ovvietà: pace, economia, sviluppo, linguaggio, salute, educazione*. Como: Red.
- International Labour Organization (ILO), Report 2022. In <https://www.ilo.org/digitalguides/en-gb/story/weso2023-key-workers#about> (ultima consultazione: 05/12/2023).
- Iori V. (2006). *Nei sentieri dell'esistere. Spazio, tempo, corpo nei processi formativi*. Trento: Erickson.
- Istat (2023). *Rapporto Benessere Equo e Sostenibile, 2022*, Roma. In <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2023/04/Bes-2022.pdf> (ultima consultazione: 05/12/2023).
- Loiodice I. (2012). Ripensare i rapporti tra i generi. Per un nuovo modello relazionale di coppia e di famiglia. In I. Loiodice, P. Plas, N. Rajadell (a cura di), *Percorsi di genere. Società, cultura, formazione*. Pisa: ETS.
- Kalliath T., Brough P., (2008). Work-life balance: A review of the meaning of the balance construct. *Journal of management and organization*, 14(3), 323-327.
- Morris M. L., Madsen S. R. (2007). Advancing work-life integration in individuals, organization and communities. *Advances in developing human resources*, 9(4), 439-454.
- Mortari L. (2019). *Aver cura di sé*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Pati L. (2014). Lavoro e famiglia: un difficile equilibrio. In L. Pati (a cura di), *Pedagogia della famiglia*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Peter R. (2004). *Onora il tuo limite. Fondamenti filosofici della terapia dell'imperfezione*. Assisi: Cittadella.

- Peter R. (2006). *Liberaci dalla perfezione. Come superarla in gruppo con la Terapia dell'imperfezione*. Assisi: Cittadella.
- Save the Children (2023). *Le equilibriste. La maternità in Italia 2022*. Roma. In https://s3.savethechildren.it/public-files/uploads/pubblicazioni/le-equilibriste-la-maternita-italia-nel-2022_1.pdf (ultima consultazione: 05/12/2023).
- Simeone D. (2014). Ruoli coniugali, gestione dei tempi lavorativi e degli impegni educativi. In L. Pati (a cura di), *Quale conciliazione fra tempi lavorativi e impegni educativi? Giovani famiglie, lavoro e riflessione pedagogica*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Sue R. (2001). *Il tempo in frantumi. Sociologia dei tempi sociali*, Bari: Dedalo.