



The Netherlands Institute
for Social Research

Summary

Is everyone participating?!

Perspectives on 'valuable' participation
Part 1: Parents and childcare



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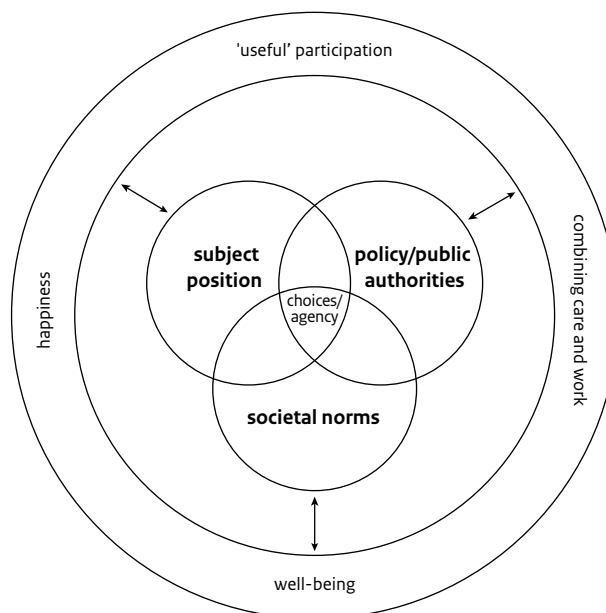
S.1 Summary

This report is the first in the research series entitled *Perspectives on 'valuable' participation*, which focuses on how different parties in Dutch society view the concept of participation. The relevant literature offers three interpretations of the concept: 1) the activities undertaken by people; 2) mostly depoliticised forms of public participation in policy; and 3) the policy discourse surrounding the promotion of participation, appealing to citizens' own responsibility. The research series examines the various perspectives involved –policy, politics, society and the target groups of participation promotion policy. To what extent do the policy assumptions match the experiences and perceptions of the people concerned?

This sub-project is about the parents of young children, and for this report we have studied formal childcare in the 0-4 age group as a participation promotion instrument. By collating an analysis of societal norms, a policy reconstruction and parents' viewpoints we aimed to find out where policy is at odds with the daily lives of the people concerned and where it supports participation, work and care-related choices and efforts to reduce social inequality.

This report uses a theoretical model of the interaction between individual choices and structures in the form of personal circumstances, societal norms and forces, and government policy (Figure S.1). According to the model, in this context people make their choices at the interface of three discourses, which then feed the surrounding circle of normative conceptualisations. This may concern questions regarding the meaning of happiness and 'valuable' participation, how people pursue well-being and how work and care (or paid and unpaid labour) could best be combined. This diagram was then used to unravel the discourses in the various chapters. The specific contribution of the multi-method approach is that it potentially provides a more comprehensive picture of the interaction between the structures that individuals find themselves in, and of *how* and *to what extent* people can move within those structures. In turn, those insights may help to formulate more differentiated policies that are more in tune with the daily-life experiences of the people concerned.

Figure S.1 Circular model for structure and agency



Source: SCP

Chapter 2 describes the various shifting societal norms concerning work, care and labour market participation of women in order to answer our first research question: *How have societal norms concerning work and care for children evolved over the past fifty years?* Generally speaking, views in the Netherlands about paid and unpaid work and women in the labour market have become more progressive since the mid-20th century. Compared to other countries, this trend began relatively late in the Netherlands, which can be attributed to, among other things, the prominence of Christian-democratic principles in Dutch politics. Since the late 1980s, there has been a marked increase in the number of women on the labour market, and partly due to system and legislative reforms the number of people using formal childcare services has grown accordingly. Nonetheless, views on the care for children and the division of unpaid labour have remained relatively traditional. For example, the majority of people in the Netherlands reckon that mothers should not work for more than two or three days a week. This also reflects the popular ‘one-and-a-half-earner’ model.

There are differences within society, too. For example, religious views may influence how people balance paid work and care as well as their conceptions of gender roles. Furthermore, more unequal divisions of paid and unpaid work are common among practically schooled people. Previous studies have also shown that people do not always behave according to the views they claim to have. Even if norms about the division of work and care tasks are shifting, we see that the ways in which people divide their time still reflect traditional gender-specific norms. Indeed, women take on a greater share of the care tasks than men, which, among other things, affects their income. For instance, one-third of women in the Netherlands are financially dependent on their partners, due in part to (small) part-time jobs.

In chapters 3 and 4 we tackle the second research question: *What policy assumptions and (hidden) ideologies underly participation promotion policies targeting parents of young children?* **Chapter 3** maps out the history of childcare policy from the 1960s to the early 21st century, revealing its shifting objectives. Alongside institutional beliefs concerning the division of care and paid work and women’s labour market participation, the policy focus shifted from limited availability of early childhood care facilities in the 1960s to childcare facilities primarily as a labour market instrument in the 1990s and 2000s. Due to the political interest of successive governments in market forces and the growing need to increase women’s participation in the labour force with a view to ensuring the affordability of the welfare state, more provisions were made for mothers. From the 1990s, there was a greater emphasis on childcare facilities and parental leave, and in the 2000s also on care leave. Along with a general trend towards more market parties to facilitate tasks that were previously organised by government, provision was eventually made for market-driven childcare. In addition, parent initiatives and so-called Stimuleringsmaatregelen¹ paved the way for the introduction of the Childcare Act (*Wet kinderopvang*, *Wko*) in 2005. Under this act, parents received an income-dependent subsidy to pay for childcare facilities if they were both working. The standard this set is that women should become more financially independent by doing more paid work. Partly due to persistent societal norms and the continued facilitation of part-time labour arrangements, the one-and-a-half-earner model has remained dominant to this day.

There are shifting policy expectations about women’s participation: from a focus on women as mothers and carers to an additional increasing demand for labour market participation. Societal norms are at odds with reality: part-time arrangements emerge because parents are, as yet, unable to balance childcare with full-time employment: for a variety of reasons, the take-up of childcare facilities remains limited. Men by no means always participate equally in unpaid work, such as care and household tasks.

Chapter 4 provides a *Critical Policy Analysis* of different ideologies and assumptions underlying policies from 2001 to 2021. Four themes emerged. The first of these was *freedom of choice*. The Childcare Act from 2005 introduced a market system that is still valued today. There was a strong movement towards market forces during the 1990s, and introducing childcare legislation required bridging political differences between social democrats (who advocated universal childcare facilities), Christian democrats (who tended to prefer family-friendly policies) and (neo-)liberals (who promoted individual independence for citizens and the free market). The coalition government found a compromise in a

¹ Subsidies paid to local governments to organise and fund childcare facilities –funding supply.

state-subsidised market system in which parents, employers and the state each pay a third of the costs and parents are considered to make their own choices with regard to paid work and childcare. The policy was based on the assumption that parents of young children would make 'responsible choices' about paid work and the use of childcare, and also that their choice for high-quality childcare would have a regulating effect on market quality. Although responsibility for the quality of childcare now rests almost entirely with the government, parents should still take responsibility when it comes to paid work. The risk is that the rhetoric of freedom, and freedom of choice in particular, could result in a distinction between responsible and irresponsible choices by citizens, which would automatically imply a value judgement on the citizens themselves.

The second theme was *equity of opportunity*. Having children participate in childcare is believed to contribute to their opportunities in later life, thanks to the early investment in skills that will serve the children in their school and subsequent careers. Children should learn to participate from a young age, and childcare could contribute to this. The downside is that by deciding to use or not to use childcare, parents can be held accountable for the extent to which their children benefit from those opportunities, and hence for unequal outcomes. In this context, there is a risk of overestimating the potential of childcare in equalising opportunities, and of ignoring the impact (and failure to address the issues) of limiting structural factors such as poverty, residential environment, racism and discrimination, mental and physical health and so on.

Thirdly, there is a certain tension between the two main objectives of childcare policy: labour market participation on the one hand and child development on the other. One or the other gains prominence over time, yet there is always a trade-off between these objectives. This mechanism is reflected in the policy considerations in 2022 and 2023 regarding the plans of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment for revising the financing of childcare, in combination with the labour market shortages in several sectors, including childcare. While the introduction of the Childcare (Innovation and Quality) Act (*Wet innovatie en kwaliteit kinderopvang*, Wet IKK), in 2018, promoted a focus on child development and the quality of care, policymakers are now seriously considering adjusting the quality requirements in order to address staff shortages and promote labour market participation. These considerations have arisen not only because some requirements 'needlessly' increased the workload in the sector, according to an evaluation of the Wet IKK, but also because a relaxation of certain regulations –for example, the so-called familiar-face criterion (*vaste-gezichtencriterium*, VGC) or the professional-child ratio (*beroepskracht-kindratio*, BKR)– could help to reduce staff shortages. Here, the need for greater accessibility (child places) and thus for staff is directly related to the quality offered: the objective in the considerations is labour market participation, rather than the quality of childcare.

The last theme was *gender*. The analysis shows that policy discourse on childcare between 2004 and 2021 always used the neutral term 'parents'. Although one of the reasons for the Wko specifically was the call for increased participation of women on the labour market in the context of the changing welfare state, this was never stated as such in legislative documents. It is important to note that in the same period, emancipation policy did explicitly mention childcare as an instrument to facilitate the combination of care and paid work for mothers in particular, thus increasing women's economic independence. However, emancipation policy failed to identify how this could contribute specifically to the emancipation goals. While it is more inclusive with regard to men, non-cisgender or homosexual couples to refer to 'parents', failure to explicitly name the main target group, mothers, also entails a risk: equal measures in an unequal situation may perpetuate that same inequality.

Chapter 5 explores views on participation among parents of young children, thus answering the third research question: *How do parents of young children view their own participation and what do they perceive as 'valuable'?* Parenthood drastically changed the interlocutors' views of valuable participation. This is reflected in three ways. First, some of the parents interpret participation as an activity they are actually *unable* to do: that little bit of extra on top. At the same time, they sometimes do not interpret activities they *do* engage in, such as paid work and volunteering, as participation. The government's call for more participation translates for many of these parents into 'doing more than what we are doing already'. There are different interpretations of what 'that little bit of extra on top' entails. For some it means

(more) voluntary work, for others it is paid work or study. Almost all parents report that having children is a bigger drain on their time than they expected. As time becomes scarcer and therefore more precious, parents reconsider priorities in terms of the way they spend their time. Irrespective of how parents interpret participation for themselves, anything considered 'extra' is seen as subordinate to their obligations to the young family.

Second, their idea of 'valuable' participation changes with the arrival of children. Becoming a mother or father alters the interlocutors' views of what is important in life. This in turn influences how they prioritise various activities given a limited amount of time. Third, the analysis shows that some women with young children no longer see work as taking on financial and social responsibilities, but as a selfish choice in relation to motherhood. This reflects societal norms according to which mothers should, first and foremost, care for their children and place themselves in a secondary position. In addition, it would imply that for mothers, to work is to be selfish, rather than to contribute to society, as it is viewed in policy. These norms are reflected by the fact that childcare costs were often weighed against the woman's salary, rather than against the parents' collective income or the father's salary. This study offered less insight into views on working fathers, whether they were seen to contribute to the family or as selfish in the context of parenthood.

The fourth research question is: *How do working parents make choices concerning work and care for children, and how do they experience the range of support available from the various institutions? To what extent does this align with the societal and policy norms surrounding work and care for children that these parents perceive?* **Chapter 6** therefore analyses how parents of young children make choices surrounding care and paid work, and looks at the role of formal childcare. It first presents a decision tree, which is illustrated using four case studies. Although all parents in these case studies had similar options, outcomes differed significantly according to the parents' financial situation and the presence or absence of formal and informal childcare. However, the biggest influence on the choices made by parents was their 'baseline position': what ideal image do parents foster about how care and paid work should be divided when they have children? How do they view childcare? What are their views on parenthood? This baseline position is dictated by societal norms and each parent's own upbringing, but also by the attitudes propagated by policy. Next, the available choices were subject to a number of preconditions, such as the availability of formal and informal childcare, financial considerations regarding formal childcare (for all income groups) and how it correlated with the intangible value of care and paid work as well as the perceived quality of childcare, employers' flexibility (or the lack thereof), and mental and physical health.

This chapter shows that the choices of parents of young children are not entirely free, as often assumed by policy, but instead that they are framed by external factors associated with and driven by, among others, gender norms. As a second important finding, previous research has shown that despite heterosexual partners themselves advocating a more equal division of unpaid labour between father and mother, they are not necessarily unhappy if they divide their tasks (temporarily) according to a somewhat more traditional pattern. However, our analysis shows that by doing so they do not conform mindlessly to traditional gender roles: these choices were accompanied by (sometimes intense) emotions of sacrifice, self-development, desires, deferred desires, grief, love, shame and guilt. The final conclusion presented by this chapter is that parents of young children see childcare not so much as an instrument that helps them to possibly work even more, but rather as an absolute prerequisite for them to participate in society.

Chapter 7 focuses on the observations made and interviews held at four different integrated child centres (*integrale kindcentra*, IKCs) to answer the fifth research question: *To what extent do parents of young children experience inclusion and exclusion or social inequalities that may accompany public policies aimed at participation, and the promotion of participation, by parents of young children?* Three broad conclusions emerge in this chapter. First, there is a huge variety of integrated child centres according to the socio-economic status of the neighbourhood, the type of cooperation and the individuals working there. Second, there are discrepancies between the data presented to the researcher by public and private institutions on the one hand, and the somewhat messier realities of integrated child centre activities on the other. For example, despite the desire to accommodate a population of schoolchildren that is representative of the entire

neighbourhood, this appears to remain challenging in practice. Institutions are aware of these challenges, but do not always clearly identify them as such. It was also found that certain forms of privilege and the benefits of financial wealth are not always fully recognised as determinants of the relative success of being able to provide integral education and care. Finally, the various challenges that the integrated child centres face reflect the degree of social inequality in the neighbourhood concerned. That inequality is a result of a variety of factors including complex housing policies, migration flows, and geographical and historical patterns. In the four case studies, dividing lines are visible, especially between pre-school and formal childcare services: between private and public facilities. The distinction between working and non-working parents, as reflected in the segregation of children in different facilities, is visible, therefore, at an early age of the children concerned.

In the final empirical chapter, **chapter 8**, the focus returns to policy, and specifically to policy officers who deal with childcare in their daily work, or with accompanying policies such as early childhood education. A co-creation session was held to answer the final research question: *What scope of action do policy officers have, and how do they formulate perspectives for policy action using the results of this study?* The policymakers who participated in the co-creation session said they experienced a degree of tension between normative policy objectives and the extent to which they want to impose these on citizens. They greatly valued freedom of choice in the context of childcare and the division of care and paid work. This impedes the achievement of certain policy objectives, such as increasing the take-up of formal childcare and combating gender inequality, as freedom of choice is at odds with more coercive measures. Who is responsible for specific policy objectives? Nevertheless, participants looked for opportunities to achieve a more integrated working method. For example, some suggested that in the development of policy theory, structural inequalities could be included in considerations of the effects of proposed policies, also in the context of childcare.

S.2 Perspectives on ‘valuable’ participation

In this section, we combine the answers to the sub-questions to provide a conclusion and answer the main question: *How does the government’s commitment to promoting participation of parents of young children – as seen from the integrated child centres’ perspective – relate to these parents’ own views and behaviours and their perceptions of ‘valuable’ participation?*

In this study, we took the specific instrument of childcare policy to analyse how different ideologies surrounding paid work and care for young children impacted policy on the one hand, and people’s lives on the other. We did so by examining how parents of young children move between their own, societal and policy-transmitted norms and ideals in this particular phase in their lives. The policy analysis showed that freedom of choice plays a prominent role in the policy discourse. The underlying assumption is that citizens should make the ‘right’ choices in line with policy objectives. In the context of childcare, the underlying norm or goal is that people (and especially women) should work more and that childcare can facilitate this. As such, the government has implicitly formulated a norm (to work more) that is accompanied by values (not working is less valuable). The risk of this is that people who make different choices, for various reasons, may be considered by politicians or policymakers to be less responsible citizens.

Decisions about childcare are part of a broader discourse surrounding non-working people. These people can find themselves in the margins of society in many different respects, and are generally treated differently from people who do work –especially if they depend on government support (Van Echtelt et al. 2023). These norms are not arbitrary, despite the supposed neutrality of public authorities and their policies. The risk we observed is precisely this presumed neutrality: failure to recognise normative policies can lead to people structurally ending up on the wrong side of the norm in the sum of other outcomes. This may perpetuate structural inequality. The moment freedom of choice is used to set specific outcomes as goals, the implicit assumption is that people can make ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ choices. People who, due to a variety of circumstances (poor mental or physical health, poverty, gender norms, lack of informal networks, social exclusion etc.) do not make the preferred choice contained in the policy objective will automatically find themselves on the other side of the line and potentially be even further disadvantaged.

It should be noted, though, that the current discussion mainly concerns the objective of working *more*. Women in particular should work *more hours*, and childcare is supposed to facilitate this. However, the likely further effects of childcare on the labour market are limited, as the participation rate in terms of individuals who work is already high (Akgunduz and Plantenga 2018; Bolhaar et al. 2023; Van Elk and Koot 2020).

Using four themes and the findings from this study, we will now illustrate these risks and propose several perspectives for policy action.

S.2.1 Freedom of choice and participation

Policy perspectives

In the policy discourse on childcare, the dominant interpretation of ‘valuable’ participation is to be in paid employment. Promoting young parents’ participation in the labour market is an explicit objective of childcare policies, through the facilitating role of formal childcare in combining paid work and care for young children. This policy has a long history. At the beginning of this century, there was broad political agreement that the welfare state as it was designed post World War II was no longer sustainable. In response, policies were developed that sought to increase the labour market participation rate of women in particular. At the same time, the government retreated, leaving more and more responsibilities to the market and to individual citizens. The so-called participatory society asks citizens to take more responsibility by increasing their participation in a variety of areas, for example in caring for each other (Veldheer et al. 2012). These different trends were united in the Childcare Act, introduced in 2005. One explicit objective of this act was to increase the labour market participation of young parents. At the same time, the supply of childcare facilities was left to the market, and the parents themselves were made responsible for ensuring the quality of childcare by exercising their freedom of choice in this market.

With its childcare policies, the government consistently prioritises participation in terms of paid work. As a result, other forms of participation, such as caring for young children (which parents consider a valuable task also, and especially, as an investment in future society) are deemed to be subordinate to participation in paid work. What we see here, interestingly, is a ranking of various forms of participation. Policy suggests that, in view of social and economic developments, it is more important and, from a normative perspective, more desirable for parents of young children to exploit their paid labour potential than to spend their time caring for those children. The primary purpose of policies to facilitate and subsidise formal childcare is to increase labour market participation. So the preferred choice is for people to perform more paid work.

Parents have to meet a number of requirements in order to qualify for childcare subsidies. Both parents have to perform paid work, study or attend a programme to find paid work. Parents also qualify if they take a mandatory civic integration course at a certified institution, have a permanency indication under the Long-Term Care Act (*Wet langdurige zorg*) or have a partner in detention. While the paid work requirement may not have been formulated as an attempt to define ‘valuable’ participation (that is, more valuable than caring for children), the government does acknowledge a number of activities that have priority, or constitute a situation of force majeure, and warrant a decision to (partially) subsidise childcare. As such, formal childcare subsidies are not universal or available to all.

Parents’ perspectives

This study showed that the choices made by parents of young children in terms of combining paid work and care are linked to a number of preconditions. For example, prompted by their own upbringing and by societal norms, parents have specific conceptions of parenthood and how they would like to arrange it. However, the availability of formal and informal care, as well as perceptions of quality, also play a role. In addition, financial considerations are involved in the context of the intangible value parents place on care and paid work. Mental and physical health determine the extent to which parents are able to combine paid work and care and use childcare facilities. We conclude, therefore, that the supposed freedom granted to parents to make their own choices regarding paid work and care is limited, and framed by several preconditions.

How parents weigh the intangible value of care and paid work merits specific attention in the context of ‘valuable’ participation, as it largely determines whether and how parents make the ‘right’ choice to work more paid hours and use formal childcare facilities. One prominent view expressed by interlocutors is that participation is a more diverse concept than what government or policy understands it to be. According to parents, caring for and raising their children is an important form of valuable participation, especially in the sense of contributing to future society (also known as social reproduction). In contrast, the government sees this as an activity it wants to take over from the parents, in part, as it prioritises labour market participation. On the one hand, this was because parents in this study had internalised participation as doing ‘more’: several parents interviewed did not immediately recognise the many tasks they already performed in caring for their families and participating in paid work as ‘participation’. In fact, participating is what they often believed they were *not* doing; taking on an extra task for which they did not really have time.

On the other hand, parents of young children, especially mothers, did not necessarily see paid work as a contribution to society or to their families –the policy interpretation– but rather as a choice for themselves, sometimes even as a hedonistic indulgence. Interestingly, where policy and politics set the norm that parents should work (more) and use formal childcare facilities, in fact those parents, and especially mothers in early motherhood, regard this as a choice for themselves, as opposed to a choice for their child or children. Some parents are acutely aware of perceived societal norms surrounding motherhood: if you work more hours, you are a bad mother, but if you do not work or work less, you fail to take responsibility. This can cause friction and in some cases lead to mental health problems. So participation in paid labour means more to parents than how the government interprets it; they feel it is just one of many ways they can contribute usefully to society.

As for the definition of ‘valuable’ participation in connection with the work requirement, it is clear that the parents of young children interpret this differently. While parents do recognise some of the government conditions for entitlement to childcare allowance as valuable activities, they believe that ‘valuable’ participation has a broader scope and includes many other activities as well, such as care and volunteering. This study was only able to include the experiences of non-working people to a limited extent, but they felt their daily activities in the form of caring for children or loved ones and volunteering to be very valuable. For now, they felt the need not to work for a time and to resign to that idea, and instead prioritise other tasks or personal circumstances, such as mental or physical health issues. Although these parents did not necessarily want to claim childcare (or childcare allowance), the above-mentioned risk concerning the freedom of choice is obvious: by expecting parents to use formal childcare and participate in the labour market, the government distinguishes between the ‘right’ choice for childcare and work (the policy objective) and a ‘wrong’ choice for parental care at home and no paid work.

Suggestions for policy action

This study shows that parents are strongly tied to the contexts they find themselves in, despite the assumption in policy and politics that people are free in the choices they make with regard to participation. These contexts include societal and personal gender-based norms surrounding parenthood, the availability of formal and informal childcare, financial preconditions and the weight assigned to the intangible value of different forms of participation, and mental and physical health. In addition, the parents’ diverse perspectives on shaping and valuing ‘valuable’ participation show that those perspectives partly determine the outcomes around paid work and the take-up of childcare.

Under government policy, greater labour market participation and a higher take-up of childcare are desired outcomes. The risk is that people who, for a variety of reasons, do not comply with this policy objective are structurally valued differently from those who do. This is mainly because these people are often unable or unwilling to comply with that norm in other areas as well. We would therefore like to propose the following perspective for policy action in this context:

Recognise the normative nature of policy and include structural inequalities, which may limit people’s freedom of choice, in the development of policy theory.

Policy theory is about how policymakers expect certain interventions to work. However, it does not always take into account *how* those interventions work *for specific groups* and how the outcomes might differ according to the social position of the individuals concerned (Vrooman et al. 2023). As a first step, it is important to recognise that policy sets a certain norm pursued by the policy objective through the supposedly neutral freedom of choice. It can then be monitored how this works out differently for different groups of people according to their circumstances. This may help to reduce the risks of perpetuating those inequalities.

S.2.2 Gender

Policy perspectives

Childcare and labour market choices are gendered. Our research questions were not originally designed for this, so it is an inductive outcome. The most striking discrepancy is the absence of emancipatory goals in current childcare policies and legislation. Following the literature review on societal norms and political and policy developments, we expected that formulated policies would specifically address this objective. However, this proved not to be the case. Some opposition parties did notice this when the Wko came into being and when the Universal Childcare and Early Childhood Development Act (*Wet basisvoorziening kinderopvang en ontwikkelingsstimulering, Wbko*), a private member's bill, was tabled. Despite this, an explicit approach failed to materialise. It is striking that there is hardly any explicit attention to gender in the policies concerned and that on paper, childcare policies seem disconnected from *women's* labour market participation and emancipatory goals.

Parents' perspectives

The disconnect between childcare policies and the participation of women in the labour market is particularly compelling because parents perceive the realities around caring for young children and work (understandably) as highly gendered. Indeed, policymakers themselves acknowledged that many of the choices of heterosexual parent couples in connection with paid work and care, and hence childcare, are gendered. The image among women in particular of (upcoming) parenthood is dictated by their own upbringing and by societal norms.

In negotiating paid work and caring for (future) children, many parents in this study identified a number of issues that endorse the popular one-and-a-half-earner model. First, mothers sometimes saw paid work as almost a hedonistic activity rather than as a contribution to society or their families. Second, this is tied in with negotiations on how childcare costs were often set off against the mother's salary, rather than against the parents' collective income or the father's income. Both observations illustrate the fact that in many parent couples, the mother is seen as the obvious primary carer of the children. This is also confirmed by the popularity of the one-and-a-half-earner model, the pay gap and the financial dependence of many Dutch women. In this context, previous research often assumed an uneven division of tasks at home, but also that the people concerned were not necessarily bothered by this, or chose not to talk about it. In this study, this assumption was not always shared. Indeed, parents said they deployed a variety of techniques, such as deferring desires or giving up expectations, and experienced a range of emotions, such as love, shame, guilt and so on, to achieve a balanced solution when priorities shift with the arrival of children.

So considerations surrounding childcare are directly linked to societal norms about gender roles and the valuation of paid and unpaid work. As a result, childcare policies have a different effect on men than they have on women (also see Yerkes and Den Dulk 2015). Nor can this be separated from discussions about part-time work. In her report, Wil Portegijs (2022) outlines the objectives of emancipatory policies in this area. Part-time work was promoted as an emancipatory measure until 2005, but today the emphasis is on the disadvantages of those arrangements, as women are far more financially vulnerable than men (Van den Brakel et al. 2020a). Childcare policies are also informed by the objective of enabling women to work more. However, this study shows that many of the choices relating to childcare and paid work are associated with gender norms. Hence, the potential of childcare for increasing labour market participation is limited (Akgunduz and Plantenga 2018; Bettendorf et al. 2015; Bolhaar et al. 2023). This is related to the weight people attach to childcare as an alternative to parental care at home; however, fatherhood is also

important and the amount of care that can be distributed among partners should be considered (Norman 2020).

Suggestions for policy action

In this study, we have seen that although people have considerable agency, they are not necessarily able to make free choices in the way the government assumes they are. This presumed freedom of choice is central to the *Wko* and the market system that was introduced. However, people are bound by the societal and personal norms which they internalise (in addition to financial preconditions and their mental and physical health), and allow those norms to inform their choices on how to organise their lives with regard to care and paid work.

One example of how policies affect men differently from women concerns allowances or financial accessibility. Financial dependence or independence also means that couples make gender-related trade-offs: the weight attached to hours worked by men is different from the weight attached to hours worked by women. So the actual measure may work out differently due to gendered perceptions as well as (gendered) income inequality. The one-and-a-half-earner model thus becomes the path of least resistance. Solutions are complex because of the comprehensive nature of the problem: it has to do with income inequality, societal norms, male and female sectors and different leave arrangements for men and women. We therefore recommend a comprehensive approach to tackle the problem and to utilise the broad knowledge of emancipation available in the Netherlands. We would therefore like to propose the following perspective for policy action:

Further explicate the relationship between emancipation and childcare and exploit the broad-based knowledge of emancipation available in childcare policy.

This study cannot provide a straightforward solution to the current complex situation, nor can it identify specific policy focus areas to eliminate gender inequality. However, we do observe a degree of overlap in the objectives of childcare policy and emancipation policy that is not always made explicit (see also: Yelkes and Den Dulk 2015). We argue that with regard to emancipation, it is at least advisable to make the connections between the two policy areas explicit and look at what different policy instruments, when combined, could contribute to the inequality issue. Indeed, the supposed freedom to make the preferred choice, namely to work more paid hours and use more formal childcare, is also strongly influenced by gender norms and the division of domestic tasks, and outlasts the first few years after the children are born. Although the emancipation of women is not an explicitly stated goal of childcare policy, but is its 'silent' objective, awareness that parents' choices do run along gendered lines should be included in, for example, the development of policy theory: how do policies work out differently for women than for men? And what policies could reduce such differences? For example, policy could begin by promoting broader and fully paid parental leave to support the shift in the division of unpaid work at home between partners.

S.2.3 Equity of opportunity

Policy perspectives

The risks outlined above regarding normative policies that require certain choices from citizens also apply to the equity of opportunity principle. In policy contexts, equity of opportunity is discussed particularly in connection with pre-primary, primary and secondary education. Although equity of opportunity is not a new term (equal opportunities policies have existed in primary education since the late 1970s), it gained popularity with the launch of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science's Equal Opportunities Alliance (*Gelijke Kansen Alliantie*) in 2016. Around the same time, groups in society also argued that equity of opportunity should be considered in combination with childcare. According to our analysis, it was the Social and Economic Council (SER) that explicitly introduced this discourse in 2016. In the documents analysed, the topic was only discussed when the minister reflected on external research, and not as part of a policy vision with regard to formal childcare policies.

The first time that a Dutch government combined childcare and equity of opportunity in a document was in the 2021 coalition agreement. Although childcare policies and the proposed review of the funding system were discussed within an equity of opportunity context, immediately after publication several actors pointed out that the proposed policies could actually undermine equity. The combination is implausible in light of the so-called work requirement, as the facilities are, in principle, not intended for all parents and therefore not for all children. In a way, it is logical that the government has refrained from associating the two terms until recently. To combat disadvantage, successive governments have relied on the provision of early childhood education policy and playgroups for so-called target group children. So, when the government did attempt to combine equity of opportunity and childcare, it was pointed out that if the work requirement remains in place, equity of opportunity through childcare is not really possible (Roeters and Vlieg 2022).

Therefore, the equity discourse is mainly found externally, beyond the governance context. The Social and Economic Council reiterated the message of equal opportunities for all children in 2021, and the Scenario Study on Shaping Child Services (SVK) also identified constructive scenarios in this context. In our analysis, we have shown that there is a certain social engineering philosophy behind all this. For example, it was better to prevent disadvantage than to have to reduce it afterwards. It was also argued that early investment in young children would later pay off in their 'optimal' contribution to society through constant and equal development and stimulation of talent (Heckman and Masterov 2007; SER 2021a). This is also known as the economic investment argument for childcare (Gibson et al. 2015). When children are viewed as 'economic units', we do not know what effects this may have on childcare design, child development and on society at large; but there is also a certain risk involved in uncritically pursuing the equity of opportunity principle when citizens themselves are held accountable for the unequal outcomes.

Parents' perspectives

While we do not argue that broader equity of opportunity policies are undesirable, we do want to highlight the potential impact of such policies on people. The parents in this study did not regard childcare primarily as a facility that contributes to their children's opportunities. The study involved working parents who mainly saw childcare as a labour market tool ('I cannot participate without childcare'), as well as parents who explicitly chose not to use childcare. When childcare is viewed in an equity of opportunity context, the assumption is that, in principle, everybody will always want or be able to use childcare, and that if parents do not use it, they and their children are being deprived of something valuable. There is no doubt that there are parents who would like to use childcare facilities but cannot do so now. This study does not and cannot make any claims about representativeness. But we can point out that there are more preconditions at play that limit parents' choices, such as again financial constraints, the availability of informal and formal care, gender norms, and mental and physical health. Seeing childcare as a band-aid for equity of opportunity again assumes that parents can make 'right' choices and 'wrong' choices, while those choices are actually tied to the context in which those parents find themselves.

Suggestions for policy action

A wide range of social and scientific parties call for equity of opportunity through universal childcare. The reason that the potential of equity of opportunity as a policy goal is viewed with such a degree of uniformity in primary and secondary education is, briefly stated, compulsory education. All children from the age of 5 are required to attend school until at least age 16 and there is a basic qualification requirement. In other words, parents nor their children have any freedom of choice in this regard. The relative freedom of choice offered with childcare, particularly because politicians and parents alike see it as a labour market instrument, also means that the introduction of equity of opportunity will result in a paradox if the work requirement is maintained: the equity of opportunity will only apply to those who make the 'right' choice. We would therefore like to propose the following perspective for policy action:

When pursuing equity of opportunity in childcare policies, beware of individualisation and ignoring structural inequalities.

This is not a plea to stop pursuing equity policies, quite the contrary. Many important steps have been taken to promote equal opportunities in the Netherlands and remove barriers that people experience due to arbitrary demographic characteristics; this process must continue. However, we do argue that a dialogue about the broader context in which *social inequality* arises would be useful (Piketty 2020; Vrooman et al. 2023). Besides addressing the issue of whether childcare should be made universally accessible, that dialogue should also cover the realities of children of parents who choose not to place their children in formal childcare, and that those realities matter and should be treated equally. This is true regardless of whether those parents make the ‘right’ choice for more equal opportunities through childcare. There is a risk that when the government’s norm of more childcare and more labour market participation is accompanied by a value judgement, it may lead to the exclusion of certain groups who make other choices, under pressure or otherwise.

We also see the risk of segregation of very young children. We are observing segregation between different sections of an integrated child centre in terms of parents who work and parents who do not work. The present study as well as other research suggest that the Childcare and Playgroup Sector (Harmonisation) Act (*Wet harmonisatie peuterspeelzaal en kinderopvang*) and early childhood education are not sufficient to counter this. This ties in with the primary school choices parents make, where equity of opportunity does come into play for some parents: some schools allegedly offer better opportunities than others. In contrast, the various integrated child centres welcomed the integration of playgroup and formal childcare and pursued it wherever possible. Promoting equity of opportunity through childcare is only possible if the work requirement is abandoned, because only then will all people have equal access to the system. It should be noted that childcare has different implications depending on the situation of the children concerned. For example, childcare is more beneficial to children at risk of falling behind than to those who already receive a lot of education at home. Incidentally, this does not offer a solution to the assumption that parents would still be held accountable for unequal outcomes.

S.2.4 Friction between labour market instrument and child development

Policy perspectives

The vast majority of policy documents that concern childcare mention the dual objective of current childcare policies: labour market participation by parents and development of the child are pursued simultaneously. There is no explicit prioritisation. However, our analysis has revealed that a shift in emphasis has taken place over time, and that this has not been without consequences. The 2005 Wko was primarily designed as a labour market instrument. Although some minimum quality requirements were mentioned, the government –and the then Minister of Social Affairs and Employment in particular– saw the act mainly as an instrument to facilitate the combination of work and care on behalf of the parents of young children. In 2007, through the Aartsen/Bos motion, pre- and out-of-school care was also regulated by law: primary schools were now also required to offer parents these types of childcare to help them combine paid work and care. Until 2009, therefore, the system was aimed at eliminating the waiting lists that had appeared since the introduction of the Wko, as more and more parents wanted to use formal childcare and allowances, and the financial accessibility of childcare became a priority. There was only a limited focus on the quality of care or child development.

The emphasis on labour market participation increased the need to recruit new employees and enhance the quantitative supply of childcare. In turn, this led to pressure on the quality of supply between 1995 and 2012, according to quality research. In 2010, various quality requirements were introduced through the Development Opportunities through Quality and Education Act (*Wet ontwikkelkansen door kwaliteit en educatie*, Wet OKE), which also covers playgroups and pre-primary education. Although a slight increase in quality was again measured in 2012, it was not yet stable at that time. However, we did see a fall in the number of parents using childcare allowance, which was mainly due to the budget cuts that began in 2011, after the crisis. In this period, the number of children whose parents were entitled to childcare allowance dropped, but the number of child places continued to rise. This was an unfavourable trend from the childcare organisations’ perspective. They eventually countered it by downsizing their operations, letting go of staff and of locations (Portegijs 2014). Government spending on childcare increased slightly in 2014 and entitlement to childcare for middle and high-income earners was widened

again. In addition, there was an increasing demand from parents and from within the sector to intensify the focus on educational quality, besides the focus on the affective quality of childcare.

Via the Van Weyenberg motion and the SER opinion requested in connection with it, this broad social movement eventually led to the introduction of the Childcare (Innovation and Quality) Act (Wet IKK), which laid down the existing quality requirements for all childcare organisations and preschool playgroups. Many organisations and parents were quite enthusiastic about this act. From 2014, the government also structurally increased funding to make childcare financially accessible to a wider group of parents, as eventually laid down in the 2021-2025 coalition agreement. The childcare quality scores were fairly consistent, and average to good compared to those in other European countries. However, as the system was made available to a wider group and became more financially accessible, the number of child places came under pressure again. The sector was also struggling to maintain the desired level of quality, partly due to the reported increased workload among employees. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of absenteeism in this sector, as elsewhere. Although various parties –including parties within the House of Representatives– had already predicted imminent staff shortages for the sector in 2017, today such shortages still pose a substantial challenge looking ahead.

Parents' perspectives

The fieldwork shows and endorses previous research findings that the childcare system is under pressure. This is illustrated by the growing waiting lists and the fact that parents in our study regarded childcare not so much as an instrument to take up employment or to work more hours, but as a prerequisite for continuing their activities once they have children. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment is aware of this, but further efforts should be made to highlight the importance of accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare for parents. Incidentally, the findings also show that while the quality of childcare is considered important, it tends to be seen as a luxury in times of scarcity, when parents are happy to be allocated a place for their children at all.

Notably, the parents in this study, especially those of children in childcare aged 0 to 2 years, hardly mentioned their children's development as a motivation for using formal childcare, if at all. They tended to regard childcare primarily as a labour market instrument that is a precondition for their participation (in the labour market). So the parents of young children did not share the dual objective mentioned above, especially in the early years (see also: Roeters and Bucx 2018). This is partly to do with perceptions surrounding the quality of childcare. However, it is also about the value these parents attach to their own upbringing. This emphasises the importance of maintaining the quality of childcare so as to continue facilitating and ensuring labour market participation.

This is where perceptions of quality and opportunities for children's development come into play. In fact, it is about more than perceptions alone. There is no conclusive scientific evidence that in the current system, and especially in early childhood (0-2 years), childcare is of better quality, in all cases, than parental care given at home. Under the right circumstances, children at risk of being disadvantaged could benefit most from childcare (Leseman et al. 2022). There is a strong correlation between the actual quality of care provided and the number of hours of care used on the one hand, and, on the other, the pedagogical benefit of the care for the children concerned and parents' willingness to exchange their own care for formal childcare and hence, ultimately, to work more.

Suggestions for policy action

Apart from the fact that the sector and parents generally consider these policy fluctuations ('flip-flop policies') to be undesirable, the current focus on labour market participation is a departure from the earlier trend towards a focus on child development and, from societal and scientific quarters, on the potential of childcare to promote equity of opportunity. Our analysis suggests that currently, childcare is seen primarily as a labour market instrument, and only secondarily as a development tool for children. This is at odds with a stable focus on quality, an absolute prerequisite for the take-up of childcare. The political and social realities since COVID-19 and the shortages on the labour market are major challenges. We recommend politicians and policymakers to be mindful of the effects that focusing on one objective (labour market participation by parents) has on the other (quality and child development).

These objectives are closely intertwined and they are not necessarily complementary. We would therefore like to propose the following perspective for policy action:

Acknowledge the tension between the various objectives and clearly show the effects of adjustments to those objectives.

Today, the policy focus on the labour market prevails. By this we mean that there are concerns about staff shortages in the childcare sector itself, but also that childcare is seen as a tool to reduce shortages across all sectors of the labour market. These staff shortages have led to plans to make jobs in childcare more attractive. This involves a review of the Childcare (Innovation and Quality) Act (IKK) and relaxation of requirements regarding the number of pedagogical staff, staff training and the familiar-face criterion. So what we see is a fluctuating trend: when parents' access to childcare decreases, this results, after a while, in a tendency among childcare organisations to reduce the number of child places, which in turn increases the focus on financial accessibility and pressure on the sector to facilitate the increased growth. Waiting lists and employee workload put pressure on quality (Press et al. 2015; Slot et al. 2021). The response of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, namely to reduce quality requirements due to staff shortages hampering childcare as a labour market instrument, is expected to have a further impact on the affective and educational quality of formal childcare provided (Bolhaar et al. 2023; Press et al. 2015). While it cannot be ruled out that some regulations could be relaxed or adjusted, it makes a difference whether this is done from the perspective of childcare as a labour market instrument or with a view to promoting consistent quality and child development.

S.3 In conclusion

We began this study by identifying the various perspectives on participation of, specifically, parents of young children. What are the government's expectations? What are the parents' own expectations? What are the prevalent views in society? And what is the role of participation-promoting instruments such as formal childcare? We have shown that policies mainly assume extensive freedom of choice among parents. Parents (and in practice, mothers in particular) are also expected to assume a certain responsibility for making the 'right' choice, i.e. to work more and use childcare facilities to enable that. It turned out, however, that in reality people are bound by all kinds of structures –in terms of, for example, norms, education, gender, mental or physical health, availability of formal and informal resources, employers and financial means. This does not simply result in either compliance or resistance; people deal with these structures in different ways, involving deferred desires, sadness, love, shame, or guilt.

From a policy perspective, this means that there are several options for using participation and its possible promotion, and in particular for using the instruments available. For example, if the goal is to maximise labour market participation, there may still be some (very limited and expensive) choices to be made when it comes to childcare. There are several controls that policymakers can use to facilitate and encourage this, especially as regards affordability. However, research has shown that since the participation rate of women is already high (even if they work relatively few hours), only a modest increase in labour market participation can be expected (see also Bettendorf et al. 2015; Bolhaar et al. 2023).

One scenario where there may still be (limited) opportunities to maximise labour market participation and thus promote the financial independence of women is abandoning the work requirement, combined with a placement guarantee and high-quality childcare. In this scenario, social reproduction is valued for its societal and economic value for the future, and parents are invited to exchange the unpaid work they do at home for paid work elsewhere, as an alternative that is acceptable to them. The idea behind this is that non-working people have more scope to apply for jobs and, thanks to the availability of high-quality childcare, actually have the opportunity to accept a job when they are hired. Quality is an absolute prerequisite: if it is perceived to be sub-standard, parents will prefer to take care of their children themselves. Since the work requirement already includes many exceptions for double-income households, this also brings the benefit of simplifications in the administration and implementation of the policy.

As an alternative to the production maximisation scenario, childcare could also be regarded as an instrument that facilitates combinations of tasks. This alternative scenario recognises that people are not always able or willing to take on more paid work, but that they have already maximised their own capacities by engaging in a variety of different activities. In this case, childcare can make a valuable contribution and there is potential for those who combine a variety of tasks, other than paid work. This approach may involve a reappraisal of broad participation by including tasks such as volunteering, informal care, paying off debts and raising children within the scope of 'valuable' participation. In such a scenario, opening up childcare to children of *all* parents can help to relieve combination pressure: not only in the context of paid work but also, and particularly, in the appreciation of broad participation in relation to broad prosperity (Van Gool et al. 2022).

Parents in this study, and especially mothers, mentioned the guilt and shame they felt when combining paid and unpaid work. Given the focus of this study, this particularly concerned the first years of motherhood (with children between 0-4 years old). Mothers felt criticism of how they balanced work and childcare, or felt they were bad mothers or 'part-time princesses'. For some, the pressure was so high that they developed mental health problems. It is important to stress that many of the mechanisms at play here are beyond the influence of government policy. This includes social and societal norms, the emotional significance of care and paid work, and the interconnectedness of the various domains of life. However, the question does arise whether maximisation (more paid work, more childcare) is feasible or desirable in this particular phase.

Childcare is a participation-enhancing instrument in a very specific phase of people's working lives, namely when they have (very) young children. If the objective is to maximise production, childcare is no longer the obvious policy instrument. However, if that objective is abandoned, other purposes for childcare will present themselves: childcare policy can serve child development, emancipation and equity of opportunity.

In light of the desire to reform the funding system, especially in the wake of the childcare allowance system scandal, these possible visions may serve as dots on the horizon. Whatever objectives and policy reforms future cabinets may choose, our recommendation, based on this study, is as follows:

Include structural inequalities in the development of policy theory. To that end, strengthen and use the integral perspective, recognising the tensions and risks involved in not consistently pursuing a range of objectives.

This is a publication of:

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Cover photo: ANP | Hollandse Hoogte | Ramon van Flymen