

## **Providing a Theoretical Foundation for Work-Life Balance – Sen’s Capability Approach**

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### **Abstract**

After reviewing and summarising critical accounts of the Work-Life Balance (WLB) in two special issues in academic journals in 2007, the paper turns to Amartya Sen’s capability approach and feminist economics to address shortcomings and gaps in the WLB concept. In particular, Sen’s capability approach can provide a substantial theoretical foundation for the so far conceptually underdeveloped and one-sided WLB. The aim of the application of Sen’s ideas in this paper is to understand and sort out some of the complexities and biases inherent in the WLB discussion. On the basis of this, further conceptual work might lead to a basic integrated framework for WLB policies in the future.

“I believe that variety is part of human existence and in fact – though this is quite irrelevant – that is a valuable attribute, though that is a very late idea, probably not be met much before the eighteenth century” (Isaiah Berlin in a letter in 1986).

### **Freedom of Choice and Work-Life-Balance**

An organisation promoting Work-Life-Balance (WLB) defines it as:

Work-life balance is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society ... (Employers for Work Life Balance 2006, cited in Fleetwood, 2007a: 351).

Closer to home, the Department of Labour in New Zealand defines WLB as: “effectively managing the juggling act between paid work and the other activities that are important to people” (cited in McPherson and Reed, 2007: 14). Surveys and critical reviews of the WLB approach have recently identified considerable problems with this concept. Eikhof, Warhurst and Haunschild, 2007, provide a concise overview of these criticisms and highlight three major shortcomings of WLB:

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- 1) The premise that work is bad, "... that individuals tend to have too much rather than too little work" (Eikhof et al., 2007: 326) and therefore working time arrangements are the point of intervention;
- 2) The premise that "life" can be equated with caring (mainly childcare) which is seen as a female responsibility and that women are, therefore, the primary target of work-life balance provisions;
- 3) The assumption "... that work and life are separable and in need of being separated" (Eikhof et al., 2007: 326).

If the first premise is true, logically, overall reduction of working hours should be the primary goal. However, Eikhof et al. point out that "... the most common policy prescription is not to shorten working hours but to provide employees with more flexibility in their working hours, for instance by part-time working or flexi-hours" (2007: 326/327). With a particular emphasis on work from home, Felstead, Jewson, Phizacklea and Walter's article (2002) is representative of a narrow flexibility oriented approach to WLB. This focus is even apparent in their definition of WLB: "In short, work-life balance practices are those which, intentionally or not, increase the flexibility and autonomy of the worker in negotiating attention and presence in employment" (ibid. 56). Such flexibility solutions are mainly driven by employers' interests to service a 24/7 economy and does not necessarily lead to an employer-employee win-win situation (Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport, 2007). Though narrowly focussed on the financial sector in Scotland, an article by Hyman and Summers "... indicates the prevalence of management control of the work-life balance agenda and management's discretion in the operation of work-life issues" (2007: 367). Moreover, employees and their representatives seem to accept this control without challenging it. Employers perceiving recruitment and retention problems offer flexibility to draw into work the reserve army of mothers<sup>1</sup>. The government shares this gendered perspective on WLP because its "issue is not having better lives but breeding new lives; more specifically the reproduction of the future labour force" (Eikhof et al, 2007: 328). This is the major concern of governments, particularly in Europe, in times of low fertility rates. In conclusion, state and employers commonly define the WLB problem as one of separating life and work in order to accommodate domestic and occupational responsibilities. Again Felstead et al's article (2002) may serve as a typical example of this "family-friendly" motivation.

According to Eikhof et al. 2007, these standard WLB assumptions and the policy prescription based on them are too simplistic. The long working hours problem might be over-stated. Roberts (2007) argues that it may be that individual working hours are decreasing whilst the hours worked by households are increasing with more dual income and neo-traditional families as more women participate in the labour market. Further, work can be identified as satisfying, motivating and self-fulfilling. Empirical Research shows, regarding long hours as negative depends on the general attitude towards work and whether work offers, and is desired to have, social relations:

Single men and women are least likely to work long hours and recently singled women as well as widowed men and women most likely, suggesting work as sustenance in times of personal difficulty; providing opportunity for socialisation or distraction and an 'escape from domestic stress'. For men there is no relationship

between having children and working long hours; for women there is, but the evidence is mixed, (Eikhof et al., 2007: 330).

If there is a trend of long working hours becoming desirable for both men and women to fulfil career ambitions and rising consumptive aspirations, this signifies a cultural shift to what is sometimes called “affluenza”. That is, a lifestyle which emphasises material wealth and status, or in other words “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, 1899).

Moreover, the interdependence of fatherhood and the long working hours points toward a traditional gendered definition of child care obligations. Such a gendered view is confirmed in Martin’s (1990) deconstruction of a supposedly “family friendly” statement made by the CEO of a large company. She stresses that: “When work is conceptualized as separate from family concerns, the conflicts encountered by working mothers are defined as private problems that must be solved individually; the corporation is not responsible” (ibid. 344). For her, the ideological public/private dichotomy is the “... linchpin supporting discrimination against women” (ibid. 356). Consequentially, women having to undertake a “second shift” might not see long working hours as the source of their time squeeze but rather blame their male partners who insufficiently contribute to household chores and child care.

Thus, Eikhof et al. conclude: “Better work-life balance might be attained not with flexible working for women but persuading men to finally shoulder equitable domestic responsibility” (2007: 331). Ransome (2007) introduces the idea of a ‘total responsibility burden’ to account for this equity issue as a matter of negotiation between adult partners in a household.

In a nutshell, the implicit assumption that life equals child care and that work tends to be overwork does include a gender bias and does not fit all. Therefore, this specific use of the concept already somewhat limits the choice and self-determination of those who try to use it to achieve a higher degree and autonomy in balancing the demands of different types of activities (that is: paid and unpaid).

Though in practice work and “life” may not always be as separated as suggested in the literature and common ideology, it is still conceptually and analytically useful to think of spheres of life and work as separate. This is, for instance, clearly done by Felstead et al. Because employment may be conceived as the purchase of time and presence, they argue:

Spaces and times of employment have boundaries, therefore, which are juxtaposed to not-work times and places. Structurally complex societies require the negotiation of these boundaries – both in the sense of establishing where they lie and managing the process of crossing from one life activity to another, (Felstead et al., 2002: 55).

On the other hand, even the critical deconstruction of the ideological public/private dichotomy by Martin (1990) and her suggestions for overcoming and re-embedding it are based on an analytical separation of spheres of work and other activities in life on a very basic level. Hence, no matter how much the separation thesis holds empirically, it has its merits analytically and even normatively as in Habermas’s colonisation thesis<sup>2</sup> (1995) and Polanyi’s notion of the *double movement*<sup>3</sup> (Polanyi, 1957; Baum, 1996 and Block, 2003).

Moreover, having questioned the general validity of WLB’s premises, one should not overlook that overwork and the problem of combining child care responsibilities and a career

are certainly prevalent for parents with dependent children in New Zealand (Calister, 2005a and 2005b). However, as Harris and Pringle (2007) highlight, owner-managers of SMEs and Chinese migrants to New Zealand might view work interests as synonymous with their preferred leisure and life passions and hence, the aforementioned premises of WLB do not apply to them. There appears to be a cultural dimension in life style choices and arrangements which needs to be integrated.

Apart from being empirically questionable, WLB premises are mainly ad hoc assumptions and suffer from a lack of theoretical foundation. Guided mainly by state and employer interests to source the labour force pool of mothers with dependent children, it does not include the notion of freedom of choice for all employees to fulfil their specific needs and interests (Fleetwood, 2007b). Though the term suggests more freedom – a wider range of life opportunities and a process to attain and guarantee those is not systematically built into the concept of WLB (Fleetwood, 2007a: 352). What is regarded as a greater chance to enjoy life in all its varieties may differ according to cultural and ethnical background, social status, gender, age and other parameters (Fleetwood, 2007a: 353 and Lewis et al., 2007). A possible theoretical foundation with such an emphasis on having a better quality of life according to one's own particular ambitions and talents is provided by Sen's capability approach: "It represents the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another" (Sen, 1995: 40).

## Capabilities

Sen argues that not all aspects of agency and well-being are captured in the notion of maximising utility. Translated into the world of employment and work this means: the optimal return on investment in human capital utilised on the labour market does not necessarily lead to the greatest degree of freedom of choice and happiness for all employees. WLB policies maximising the use of human capital while minimising the cost for child care provision are the primary goals of employers and government according to their vested interests. However, this might not lead to happiness or well-being of employees. To decide whether WLB policies lead to higher degrees of freedom or autonomy and capacity to enjoy life, employees' happiness and well-being needs to be accounted for. However, such an evaluation is complex. Sen states that well-being may even have nothing to do with momentary happiness or fulfilment of desires: "'Being happy' is not even a valuational activity and 'desiring' is at best a consequence of valuation. The need for valuation in assessing well-being demands a more direct recognition", (Sen, 1992: 46). And: "While being happy may count as an important functioning, it cannot really be taken to be all there is to leading a life ..." (Sen, 1995: 54).

Moreover, cases are imaginable where individuals might value certain acts and their freedom to act very highly, though these acts might have no positive effect upon their well-being or even a negative one: "Indeed, the person himself or herself may have reasons for pursuing goals *other than* personal well-being or individual self-interest" (Sen, 1992: 55). Sen's favourite example to illustrate this distinction is 'fasting':

For example, ‘fasting’ as a functioning is *not* just starving it is *choosing to starve when one does have other options*. In examining a starving person’s achieved well-being, it is of direct interest to know whether he or she is fasting or simply does not have the means to get enough food. Similarly, choosing a life-style is not exactly the same as having that life-style no matter how chosen, and one’s well-being does depend on how that life-style happened to emerge, (Sen, 1995: 52).

This highlights the strong relevance of the capability approach for life-style choice which is very relevant for WLB.

Freedom to choose is a value in itself, despite the utility resulting from an act:

If, for example, all the alternatives other than the one actually chosen, were to be eliminated, this need not affect achievement (since the chosen alternative can be still chosen), but the person clearly has less freedom, and this may be seen as a loss of some importance (Sen, 1992: 60).

To illustrate this loss with an employment related example. Imagine someone is conditioned or channelled to become a highly capable and successful website designer, earning a high salary, and it could be determined that this would optimise his or her income and constitutes the way this person can contribute the most to society. Though this appears to be an optimal choice, still something is lost, if this individual is not allowed (does not have the capability) to try out other aspects (functionalities) of her or his personality (e.g. did not have the chance to become a third rate rock musician, janitor or stay-home-dad/mum).

If the goal of WLB policies is to open up a greater realm of autonomy and life opportunities, then the freedom of process to attain goals is as important as the compatibility of our achievements with our preferences and their optimality in terms of providing utility (Sen, 2002a: 526). Sen points out, that preferences are relevant in judging processes in two different – though interrelated – ways:

“(1) *Personal process concern*: individuals may have preferences over processes that occur in their own lives;

(2) *Systemic process concern*: they may also have preferences over the processes that operate as general rules in the working of the society” (Sen, 2002c: 624).

Point (1) is violated if mothers and fathers, for instance, are obliged and have no choice than to negotiate WLB issues merely at home without any chance to negotiate and make changes in their work place arrangement or vice versa. To understand point (2), think of bargaining between employers and employees on an individual level compared to collective bargaining and/or the legally guaranteed right to a variety of WLB arrangements for employees in comparison to ones based on the goodwill of their employers.

The WLB approach is not alone in disregarding these process freedom issues. According to Sen, this neglect is also apparent in the underlying dominant philosophies of economics and ethics: “Since utilitarianism and libertarianism have been very influential in ethics and welfare economics (in different parts of them), the overall effect has been the neglect of process considerations as a part of any crucial valuational exercise” (Sen, 2002c: 628).

Though in most cases, well-being might be related to agency, sometimes positive well-being might occur without any causal link between the acts of a person and his or her well-being (e.g. a patient in a hospital or the child of a caring parent). Thus, maximising one’s own utility and the freedom to act are not the only welfare criteria either. Sen highlights therefore the distinction “... between ‘the occurrence of A’ and ‘the occurrence of A through our own efforts’” (Sen, 1995: 58).

To defend ones capabilities or freedom to act, not only negative freedom (absence of external coercion and constraints of action) but also positive freedom (autonomy in the sense of absence of inner pressure) has to be guaranteed (Berlin, 1970). The deconstruction of Martin (1990) shows how this positive freedom in terms of WLB is culturally or ideologically framed in setting particular boundaries of the public/private dichotomy. Only in case of given negative *and* positive freedom, agency might lead to self-fulfilment (Sen, 1992: 56-7)<sup>4</sup>:

... I have found it more useful to see “positive freedom” as the person’s ability to do the things in question *taking everything into account*<sup>5</sup> (including external restraints as well as internal limitations). In this interpretation, a violation of negative freedom must also be – unless compensated by some other factor – a violation of positive freedom, but not vice versa, (Sen, 2002b: 586).

These freedoms and distinguishing them from well-being are key for Sen:

Capability is primarily a reflection of the freedom to achieve valuable functionings. It concentrates directly on freedom as such rather than on the means to achieve freedom, and it identifies the real alternatives we have. In this sense, it can be read as a reflection of substantive freedom. In so far as functionings are constitutive of well-being, capability represents a person’s freedom to achieve well-being, (Sen, 1995: 49).

John Davis’s interpretation of Sen’s approach leads to four different combinations of individual advantage:

These two distinctions yield four sometimes overlapping, but relatively distinct, concepts of individual advantage for Sen (see Table 1). They are; (1) well-being achievement, (2) agency achievement, (3) well-being freedom, and (4) agency freedom .... The first represents the traditional concern of mainstream economics with individuals’ satisfying their own preferences. The second ..., concerns individuals’ ability to achieve goals that do not involve their own well-being. The third concerns individuals having the freedom to pursue their own well-being. The fourth concerns individuals simply having the freedom to pursue all their goals, whether or not they are successful in achieving them, (Davis, 2002: 486-487).

**Table 1: Sen’s four concepts of individual advantage**

	<b>Well-being</b>	<b>Other goals</b>
<b>Freedom to achieve</b>	Well-being achievement (e.g. old-age pensions)	Agency achievement (e.g. heroic sacrifices)
<b>Freedom to pursue</b>	Well-being freedom (e.g. occupational choice)	Agency freedom (e.g. fasting)

Source: Davis, (2002: 487)

Davis concedes that such a multi-goal framework might be criticised for its insufficiency in determining social policy, however, its advantage is "... the flexibility it provides in being able to address the great variety of different types of valuation problems that social policy confronts" (Davis, 2002: 487). In regard of our topic: WLB to attain well-being achievement (i.e. optimal use of human capital) or agency achievement (i. e. being able to care for ones' children) is not enough to guarantee a full freedom of choice concerning ones life-style.

The approach of capability (agency) and well-being allows Sen and his colleague Martha Nussbaum to come up with a universal catalogue of core human functional capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000: 78-80), which are indispensable for human well-being and agency. This is the list of headings of those central capabilities: 1. life, 2. bodily health, 3. bodily integrity, 4. senses, imagination and thought, 5. emotions, 6. practical reason, 7. affiliation (A. social interaction and B. self-respect), 8. other species, 9. play, 10. control over one's environment (A. political and B. material). Though such a catalogue lays the ground for interpersonal comparison of well-being, freedom and distributive justice, the concept remains inevitably vague and demands for more detailed criteria that have to be discussed and agreed upon and might be cultural specific in its their concrete form (*Gestalt*) (Nussbaum, 2000).

So, what can be learnt from Sen's capability approach for the WLB? Firstly, though there are some universal criteria of what well-being means. These are only broadly and vaguely defined. Well-being and other goals can be pursued either in "life" or in "work" or in both. Therefore, life cannot be, per se, good and work bad. How well-being is defined is individually, socially and culturally specific. If life is equated with (child) care activities and work mainly seen as overwork, our capabilities are unduly limited. Secondly and related, the freedom to achieve and pursue a particular level of WLB has to be considered when implementing WLB policies. In this attention has to be paid to personal as well as systemic process concerns. According to the capability approach, implementing WLB entails a process allowing for the widest possible range of meanings and combinations of WLB and a high degree of liberty and fairness in voicing all those alternative views.

## **The Gendered notion of Care**

Further theoretical foundation for WLB can be gained from alternative economic theory developed by feminist economists and philosophers like Nancy Folbre, Martha Nussbaum and others<sup>6</sup> (Davis, 2002; 2003).

According to Nancy Folbre's arguments, it is mainly caring labour which provides the basic human needs and thus, well-being for children. She defines caring labour as: "... labor undertaken out of affection or a sense of responsibility for other people, with no expectation of immediate pecuniary reward" (Folbre, 2003: 214). To foster caring through social policy is what WLB is mainly concerned about. Folbre points out:

... an emphasis on rewarding caring has somewhat anti-market implications, simply because the market does not elicit caring" (2003: 224). However, something has to be done to provide enough caring labour to sustain a certain society. "If you do not literally "value" caring labor, its supply may decline. But if you start running out, you cannot buy more at the corner store, (Folbre, 2003: 224).

On the other hand, providing positive rewards, such as public remuneration for caring labour, could have the effect of reinforcing the existing sexual division of labour and we should also recognize that debates over public policy often hinge on values that, in the long run, influence both norms and preferences as Folbre explains in detail in her book *The Invisible Heart* (2001: 44 and 99).

Thus, commercialisation of caring labour might undermine its primary non-monetary motivation and WLB practices focussing on work arrangements might cement the gendered division of household chores and childcare.

Davis suggests combining Sen and Nussbaum's *capability approach* with Folbre's *structures of constraint* (i.e. to be embedded in different kinds of social groups and their norms that form identities). From my point of view, such an amalgamation with Sen's liberal ideas about capabilities could lead to well founded concept of WLB. Folbre's structures of constraint analysis, which is primarily concerned with the dilemmas that women face and the unequal division of care giving responsibilities between women and men, offers an especially valuable framework for treating individual identity as a problem of negotiating multiple group identities. Davis's arguments lead to certain evaluative criteria for social policy. The policies should "... place value on having opportunities that are not taken up, a person's capabilities then need to be seen as the range of alternatives they have, even if none of these alternatives would have been preferred" (Davis, 2002: 488). They should, also, allow men and women to freely and successfully negotiate a variety of different often complex group involvements over one's lifetime including care responsibilities. Davis gives an example: "... a woman exercises her reproductive rights by not having children and electing to care for elderly or disabled family members" (Davis, 2002: 493). Social policy according to him, in this example, should not only be evaluated in terms of allowing care successfully and efficiently given to the elderly or disabled person but also in terms of capabilities of the care giver:

In the case above regarding public compensation for family labor devoted to caring for others, public compensation needs to be defended not just in terms of promoting the capabilities of those who provide family labor, where this concerns being able to accomplish all the activities (or functionings) involved in caring for others, but also in terms of promoting such individuals' capabilities to move back and forth between caring and their other social group involvements, (Davis, 2002: 493).

## **The New Zealand Context**

Articles by Hyman (2008) and Ravenswood (2008) and our evidence from two case studies suggest that the critical and theoretical arguments put forward concerning gender and WLB are relevant for New Zealand. Whilst Hyman describes the gendered structures of constraints, Ravenswood reviews the nature of recent WLB related law changes.

Though recent legislative changes (parental leave eligibility and the Flexible Employment Arrangement Act, 2007) seem to have led to some WLB improvements according to a study conducted by the Families Commission (2008):



The benefits for families were clear in terms of reduced stress levels and improved quality of time with families. However, substantial numbers reported that they did not have the flexibility they wanted while others experienced a trade off of flexibility for lower pay and status, (Hyman, 2008: 7/8).

Thus, the actual freedom to pursue and achieve for employees is limited and how far it goes seems to rest mainly on the culture of the particular workplace according to Hyman.

The case of a mother trying unsuccessfully to establish time banking to flexibly adjust working time to the particular demands of her life analysed by Simon-Kumar (2008), documents the priority of business interest in employer-employee negotiations concerning WLB issues. This case underlines Sen's process concerns. If the social and economic goals of employer and employee are not compatible, fairness of WLB solution hinges on the bargaining power of each side in the negotiation. Domett rightly argues in her thesis on WLB in New Zealand: "However, the gender-neutral and individualised language of work life balance masks its discriminatory systemic effects" (2006: 1). It is certainly difficult to negotiate flexibility individually for employees as pointed out in the consultation regarding flexible work by the Department of Labour (DoL, n.d.). Moreover, the department lists some of the aforementioned discriminatory effects. Two disadvantaged groups identified are women and shift workers (DoL, 2006: 10). As Ravenswood (2008) points out, the Employment Relations (Flexible Working Arrangements) Amendment Act 2007 grants employees with children under the age of five or with disabled children the right to request flexible work schedules. By limiting the right to flexibility to these particular conditions, the law indicates that the focus of this government initiative amongst others is merely on increasing labour force participation of parents and not to allow for a higher freedom of life style choice in general. The priority of business needs is also apparent in the lists of grounds upon which the employer may refuse the request for change to working conditions according to the act: "detrimental effect on quality, performance and ability to meet customer demand; inability to reorganise work among existing staff; inability to recruit additional staff; planned structural changes and burden of additional costs" (Ravenswood, 2008: 38).

Ravenswood concludes: "These policies, therefore, aim to fit employees' lives around the accepted way of working rather than changing organisational culture" (2008: 37). Hence, the true freedom in terms of Sen's capability approach achievable under the current WLB oriented legislation in New Zealand is fairly limited.

Nevertheless, the case of Switzer Home shows that a supportive workplace culture can have positive whilst limited WLB outcomes for employees. The Claud Switzer Memorial Home has provided relief, welfare and benefit for older people within the Kaitaia region for close to 60 years. Established in 1950, it has grown from 15 beds to currently 72 beds. It has 70 staff with an average age of 45 years old. At Switzer, 95% of the staff are female and 50% are Maori. The remainder of the staff are Pacific Islanders, New Zealand European, or British. The vision at Switzer is to provide leadership in the care of older people, and a range of services for their changing and diverse needs (Harris and Verreynne, 2008).

The nature of the work meant that staff had to conduct work that is physically and emotionally demanding, so the challenge was to determine how they can work smarter rather than harder. Switzer knew it had to find ways of organising their physical environment and workforce structure to respond to the growth in demand for their services. General Manager

Jackie Simkins and her team changed the structure of the organisation to focus on residents and caregivers. Previously, trustees and senior management were at the top of the organisational chart. Once this was redesigned residents and caregivers feature at the top and trustees and management are at the bottom of the chart. Introduction of the team structure created more cohesion in the workplace. Empowering people to make decisions for their own teams developed greater pride in the staff themselves and their work areas resulting in a more positive workplace culture. Across the workplace, staff collaborated to develop their own workplace rules including house rules, misconduct and gross misconduct guidelines. The management team measured health and safety performance indicators including sick leave, accidents and injuries, shift patterns, workload monitoring, infection control and number of hours of training. They also have developed their own standards and systems, for example, a workload monitoring system to make sure they have right number of carers in any area. As a result of the focus on measuring what matters in consultation with staff, the areas of financial performance, retention, morale, and participation have definitely improved. Jackie Simkins credits productivity increases to three factors – changed organisational structure emphasising teams, stakeholder collaboration, and creating an environment where everyone contributes to leadership (Harris and Verreynne, 2008). Besides positive productivity outcomes and making employees happier in their work, the discretion given to teams allows for some WLB effects because it addresses the process concerns pointed out by Sen. On the other hand, the Switzer case also illustrates Folbre's structures of constraints and confirms Hyman's account (2008) of the disadvantaged position of a low paid female workforce in care professions in New Zealand. If work is a bare necessity and its value is generally underrated in society as Hyman points out, there is little room for negotiations leading to WLB improvements despite the very favourable company culture and attitude by management in this example.

The second case, Paewai Mullins, underpins the argument that work does not necessarily play the role of a negative influence to be limited to achieve WLB. Instead, it can be turned into an instrument to gain a better life. However, to achieve this, the case also demonstrates that a shift away from the business case for WLB is needed.

Paewai Mullins Shearing Limited is a fourth generation shearing contracting business based in the small rural town of Dannevirke, situated about three hours north of Wellington. The company services more than 150 woolgrower clients, handling in excess of 2 million sheep per annum. Their clients are spread from the Hawkes Bay to Wellington and over to Taihape and Wanganui. They employ close to 40 staff with this number expanding up to 120 for a four month period from December to the end of March (Harris, Mullens, Ravenswood, Laneyrie, and Markey, 2009).

When Mavis and Koro Mullins purchased the business in the mid 1980s from her father, they wanted to operate according to the original philosophy of providing work for Whanau (family) and trying to assist other family members onto the land, and continue growing the business. It is this overlying philosophy and the four supporting Maori values of *Whanaungatanga* (family), *Matauranga* (life-long learning), *Maanakitanga* (unity and respect), and *Tino Rangatiratanga* (self-empowerment and leadership) that have driven productivity growth. Key to the significant growth of their business, predominantly over the last 15 years, has been the development of a strong workplace culture and productivity gains through attention to the four Maori values that they hold key to their lives and therefore business (Harris et al, 2009).

Koro Mullins stated that they recognised shearing as one of the toughest industries and that they wanted to ‘put the gloss on it’. Paewai Mullins have successfully professionalised their workforce through increased rewards for workers and considerable training in both life and job specific skills. They have not only worked with staff to build work specific skills, but continue to demonstrate commitment to assisting younger staff to develop careers and gain wider life skills. Managers start with the premise that everybody has ability and potential. Young people who otherwise have few skills or training are taken on in a Pre-Training programme and/or apprenticeship schemes. The pre-training programme is designed to give people an introduction to the industry and the work. Advice is given on flexibility, core strength and general fitness to avoid the risk of injuries. Completion of the three day programme enables new workers to go into a shed with some base level skills, thereby not slowing down processes. Senior staff also support new staff through a mentoring or coaching role, passing on their skills and knowledge. This builds a sense of unity and team amongst workers and empowers employees through a leadership role. It also provides clear career paths from ‘apprentice’ through to senior staff who have more involvement in the business. Supporting people into a profession with huge potential in terms of remuneration and international travel has provided many unskilled workers with attractive careers. This approach has returned to the company greater loyalty, retention and longevity. “If you are not bringing young people in, you risk dying,” says Mavis Mullins, Director (Harris et al., 2009).

Improving skill levels has lifted productivity levels and addressed issues such as retention. However, Paewai Mullins goes beyond training and support their staff to stay in the profession. Clean, comfortable accommodation is provided along with a gymnasium. To empower staff to take responsibility for their health, sessions were run to give them knowledge on issues such as second cuts and grease boils. A local Maori Health Provider was also used to educate staff on sexual health, substance abuse and gambling issues. The food served to the shearing staff in the accommodation quarters has changed over the years to include more variety and the right type of food to enable staff to perform well. A full time cook has been employed to provide balanced meals. Because the industry is such a physical one, there is now a greater awareness of protein needs, carbohydrate needs, and hydration (Harris et al., 2009).

A productive workplace culture at Paewai Mullins is built through supporting employees and creating opportunities for employees to succeed. Paewai Mullins Shearing Ltd operates under a flat structure where everyone works so it is not unusual for employees to be working next to one of the Directors. “Being a productive worker is about being a good team member, as performing as a team is smart working”, says General Manager Aria Mullins (Harris et al., 2009).

## **Freedom and Work-Life-Balance**

This movement backward and forward from paid work to caring responsibilities on a daily basis and across the life cycle is the explicit aim of WLB arrangements (Felstead et al., 2002: 55), though high levels of capability in this area are not widely achieved in practice. However, an encompassing WLB should allow for a wide variety of combinations of different functionings (for instance work and coaching a boys’ soccer team or other volunteer activities, reduced work load because of illness or particularly intensive or scattered work patterns according to cultural or otherwise individual specific consumption patterns).

According to Sen, the capability to freely choose between different sets of functionings, i.e. to find one's own preferred combination of work and other activities and identities is based on freedom in several respects. It can mean to achieve a high level of well-being (for instance to stay healthy, to earn a living wage), the freedom to define ones level of well-being (e.g. to work like mad though it is not healthy), to achieve non-work related goals (for instance to care for children, the elderly or sick or troubled friends) and the freedom to pursue goals like artistic or religious expression, trying to live off ones veggie garden, travel on a shoestring or jump off the cliff etc..

For a society to guarantee such a high level of capability, it is crucial to understand personal and systemic process concerns, that is, to organise negotiation and bargaining about WLB in a participatory way which allows for cultural diversity and equal voice for employers, employees and other interested parties. So far, policies to attain WLB are designed without much consultation or participation of those who work and other functionings than childcare are largely ignored. Part of negotiation, debate and bargaining about WLB has to be whether work time arrangements adjust to other functionings or family and private time arrangements adjust to work demands (Martin, 1990: 356). Such open and free processes require an equal power balance of all vested interests (employer associations, unions, the government and other interest groups) and an inclusion of all kinds of possible functionings to account for all areas of freedom and well-being.

In our interpretation, whilst Sen's capability approach defines and helps to distinguish between different aspects of freedom and well-being it offers a framework for developing a more open and less biased approach to WLB. Folbre's work on caring labour and structures of constraint enable us to make some of the underlying biases in the use of WLB more explicit. The strength of both theoretical frameworks lies in providing basic criteria to evaluate government interventions and company based WLB policies and strategies not in devising particular solutions as the case evidence from New Zealand shows. In future work they could be used as a screening device to identify international best practice policies to improve WLB.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Though the empirical study by Felstead et al. (2002) does seem to contradict this statement, the authors of the enquiry concede that this might be due to limitations of their quantitative approach (ibid. 66).

<sup>2</sup> Habermas describes the “life-world” as endangered by a total exploitation and dominance of the “system”.

<sup>3</sup> For Polanyi the exchange of labour on a self-regulating market requires work to be no longer embedded in other activities. However, he also claims that such a transformation is never totally complete and faces countervailing tendencies in society. He calls this *double movement*.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor (1985; 1989) supports Sen’s interpretation of Berlin’s philosophy stressing the importance of both freedoms whereas Berlin emphasised the detrimental effects of philosophies based mainly on positive freedom and therefore prioritised negative freedom (Berlin, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> The emphasis is in the original.

<sup>6</sup> Compare e.g. England and Folbre, 2002 and Himmelweit, 2000