Exploring Work-Life Balance Practices in the United Kingdom and Italy

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the similarities and differences between the United Kingdom and Italy in implementing Work-Life Balance (WLB) practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two operations of the same company focusing on the same business entity, with offices present in both UK and Italy. Even though both countries must comply with the regulations outlined by the European Union (EU), it was interesting to investigate whether the countries' specific national policies and cultures differences affecting the employees' perceptions about work and the weight they attach to various WLB practices. The findings showed that the over-working culture is an issue for the UK employees and most of those responding were women, emphasising the UK reliance on female labour force and the possibility of part-time arrangements. In the Italian case, the working hours were not an issue, but the employees referred to the lack of part-time working arrangements. The traditional "male breadwinner" culture was somewhat persistent in the Italian office. The data revealed that the way the employees of both countries perceived WLB practices had some similarities and differences. This research concludes that the cultural and pre-existing institutions indeed influence the development and implementation of WLB practices.

Keywords: Italy, UK, Work-Life Balance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Work-Life Balance (WLB) practices are intended to make a good balance between one's experiences in the work and in family spheres (Walsh, 2013). WLP not only become an important topic for the employees, as the lack of such practices can have adverse effects on personal relations, such as spouse relations and child-parent relationship (Russel, Connell and McGinnity, 2009). Besides that, employers are also taking increased interest in promoting such practices. Several studies found that those organizations that had in place work-family policies experienced higher perceived organizational performance (Walsh, 2013). Even though juggling between work and family commitments has become a critical issue in the European countries (Russel, Connell and McGinnity, 2009), there is no doubt about the differences between the countries in the manner their public policies and regulations indicating the quality of work and quality of life (Den, Bäck-Wiklund, Lewis and Redai, 2011), and the extent to which the Industrial Relations (IR) are influenced by national cultures and institutions (Biagi, 2003). In every region of the world, males and females have different roles in the society and in the family according to what is approved by gender system that is built on norms, beliefs and practices (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2009). Since women are most likely to be caregivers of children and other dependents, a majority of the policies are mainly designed for and used by women (Harris and Foster, 2008).

This paper focuses on the issues of WLB occurring at a branch level of the same business entity (Company X) studied in the United Kingdom (UK) and in Italy. The aim is to understand how the EU and National Regulations influence the availability of WLB practices in the countries. It is

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worth noting that similar issues may have different meaning in different national settings (Locke, 2013), and one may think that when comparing the same practices across countries, it's like "comparing apples with apples", but instead the differences in starting points of particular practices should be taken into consideration in order to avoid oversimplified and misleading conclusions. Even though WLB discussions originated in the United States and the UK, they quickly spread to other English-speaking countries as well as parts of Europe (Moraes and Perkins, 2007).

In the present research, Company X has been studied. It is a UK based company that has its branches in other countries, including Italy. It is worth noting that there has been a trend towards Europeanization, with companies developing transnational approaches to Human Resource Management (HRM) and IR (Industrial Relations), reflecting not just home country practices (Sisson, 2010). Therefore, it can be assumed that both branches of company X are complying with several similar practices.

There is no doubt that the issues of WLB are of great importance to employers, family dynamics of the working class and governments. The support needed by the public regarding these issues is of increasing relevance as the boundaries between work and family has become more permeable (Den, Bäck-Wiklund, Lewis and Redai, 2011). Indeed, the EU in the last two decades has tried to promote and raise female employment. Females working in the UK constitute one of the highest proportions in Europe, while the Italian women active in the labour force – one of the lowest proportions (Halaskova, 2018), as they are playing a crucial part in caring for young and old members of the family, receiving only a little help from their partners and public services (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2009).

1.2 Problem Statement

This research will fill a gap in the existing literature by exploring WLB practices among employees of the same company in the two branches, one in UK and the other one in Italy. This research will also give a picture of which WLB practices are currently being offered to the employees and to what extent the practices are similar or different from one another in the two operations.

1.3 Research Questions

 i. Which Work-Life Balance Practices are being implemented in the operations of UK and in Italy of the same organization; Company X?
 ii. How does Work-Life Balance Practices of the same organization differ or correlate in the UK and Italy?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Family-friendly practices are important, as they allow employees to have a better balance between personal life and work, and thus diminish the possibilities of stress, as well reduce the effects on psychological and physical well-being (Cortese, Colombo and Ghislieri, 2010). There is an understanding that WLB practices or family-friendly initiatives are mainly directed at women, however, such practices must be designed to shrink rather than heighten differences among employees of the two genders (Lim and Lee, 2011). European women, just like women in other industrialized societies, experience difficulty to break through glass ceilings to attain positions of authority in work organizations (Torres, Haas, Steiberand Brites, 2007). Moreover, if they are situated in countries where there is very little government support, the wage gap between sexes will tend to be greater. There has been an understanding that combining personal life with work could be much easier for those workers who work part-time (Biagi, 2003). However, part-time workers are yet again sacrificing their chances of career advancement, as well as earning less. It

is important to understand that WLB practices may cover a wide range of spheres, such as work organization (flexi-time, part-time, telework), employee development (personal development plans, appraisal, and training), leave provision (employment breaks, study leave, career leave) and employee support (information on local childcare or eldercare). Thus, WLB is simply beyond the provision of good maternity arrangement (Sparrow and Cooper, 2012).

2.1 European Union Influence and Trends in Europe

UK and Italy are different in terms of their Labour Laws and IR mainly due to their historical, cultural and political backgrounds. Nevertheless, as a result of having to comply with the EU rules and regulations, these two countries have some qualities in common. Of course, the EU framework serves mainly as a guide and there a lot of difference between the systems of the member countries (Marginson and Sisson, 2006). The Union has developed social policy competence, including a framework for a European IR system (Marginson and Sisson, 2006). However, pre-existing institutional arrangements still shape the employment where some countries may see part-time as a very common working trend, and in others, it may be rare. For example, some working mothers and fathers could be employed at similar rates, in others; it may be completely opposite (McGinnity and Russell, 2009). Indeed, the importance attached to WLB is not to make it identical across the EU Member States (MS) where all MS would be implementing the same practices (Drobnic and Guillén, 2011). Thus, it is up to each MS to define and implement family policies (Den, Bäck-Wiklund, Lewis and Redai, 2011). However, one trend that is constant throughout Europe and MS is the fact that parental leave and childcare policies are widely discussed and aimed at increasing women's labour market involvement as well as encouraging couples to have children (Torres, Haas, Steiberand Brites, 2007).

The process of Europeanization and trends in IR could be said to have been spurred by the Treaty of Maastricht. However, in 1991, the UK disapproved of policy that supported married mothers' employment, refused to sign it and thus was not bound to adopt a parental leave. European systems of IR were further impacted and influenced by Amsterdam Treaty's Employment Chapter where the treaty was signed by all 15 Member States at that time (Torres, Haas, Steiberand Brites, 2007). Biagi (2003) highlighted that a consistent policy at the European level continues, and also promotes the idea of respecting national prerogatives in the area of labour law and IR, nevertheless obliging the States to act according to the agreement. Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty looked specifically at the "Work-Life Balance" issues. According to this Treaty on EU, all MS were obliged to grant three months of unpaid parental leave to both men and women, changing their national legislations, where UK getting a two year compliance period, and Italy, failing to comply with the leave (Torres, Haas, Steiberand Brites, 2007). Additionally, the agreement in Luxembourg on employment in 1997 was an important starting point agreed-upon coordinated process for implementation (Biagi, 2003), resulting in an EU level coordinated strategy – The European Employment Strategy (EES).

Employment in the EU has been increasing due to a larger pool of female employees. According to the commission of the European Communities (CEC, 2008) between 2000 and 2007, the number of employed people in the EU-27 grew by 14.6 million with 9.2 million being women. This is a great indication, especially taking into consideration that when talking about working arrangements, the traditional male breadwinner model comes to mind where men being primarily responsible for providing for the family and women primarily taking care of the family and children (Russel, Connell and McGinnity, 2009). Now, with the changing patterns, there are more and more dual-earners families, meaning an increase in the number of responsibilities at home in relation to both children and older people (Russel, Connell and McGinnity, 2009). Indeed, EU has been playing an important role in promoting gender equality according to the Framework Strategy for Gender Equality and fed the "gender mainstreaming" into national legislation and collective agreements in the area of WLB (Gregory, Milner and Windebank, 2013).

According to international comparisons, Italy and the UK are very different in their welfare systems and institutions where Italy being among the rigid EU countries, and UK belonging to the deregulated ones (Akca and Caliskan, 2019). What becomes clear is that various international trends such as WLB may not, in fact, be translated into common pressures in all national economies and may instead be mediated by national institutional arrangements and altered into divergent struggles over particular national practices (Locke, 2013). According to Akca and Caliskan (2019), even if the number of flexible work arrangements is relatively higher in UK than in Italy, the two countries differ mainly in the actual flexibility mix mostly adopted at the workplace. Consequently, the flexibility mix of each country "*would depend on the characteristics of firms and markets, but also on the institutional context; such as economic, social and political institutions. When it comes to the "cross-national comparative" research on the level of work-life conflict, it is really in its infancy*" (Russel, Connell and McGinnity, 2009, p.440). However, it should be noted that when comparing the same practices, attention should be paid to the fact that those practices may have different meanings across countries (Locke, 2013).

2.2 UK

Traditionally, UK has been characterized by having a laisser-faire system of regulation with limited state intervention and high salience of collective bargaining (Gregory, Milner and Windebank, 2013). In UK, it seems that the market is the main care provider followed by family, while the state plays a minimal role in distributing resources (Den, Bäck-Wiklund, Lewis and Redai, 2011).

When compared to other countries, UK companies have a strong tradition of an overtime culture (Ruhemann, 2010). Indeed, the UK appears to have the highest proportion of employees working in excess of 45 hours over a week period, in comparison to other EU MS (Walsh, 2013). On top of that, men in UK are said to be working the longest hours in the EU (Gregory, Milner and Windebank, 2013). Lewis et al. (2017) found that in UK family-friendly management was not an integrated phenomenon, and an average British workplace tended not to practice family-friendly flexible management. The UK has been characterized by few mandatory rights to family-friendly working arrangements, leading to poor formal childcare provision, low levels of statutory maternity, paternity and parental leave (Walsh, 2013). A lot could be explained simply by the fact that there has been a decline from the traditional nine to five working weeks, with a proportion of employees working more than 48 hours per week in a variety of industries (Harris and Foster, 2008). Among the 5 countries studied by Crompton and Lyonette (2006), British respondents reported the highest level of work-life conflict. In order to tackle with the long-working hours' culture and help employees to achieve better WLB, the Working Time Regulations outlines workers' rights where there should be a rest for employees who work 10 consecutive hours in every 24 hours (Ruhemann, 2010).

The UK government is increasingly valuing the input of women employees and is trying to convince employers to become more actively involved in helping employees handle with their work and family roles (Torres, Haas, Steiberand Brites, 2007). The proportion of mothers working more than 40 hours has increased and workers feel that they are working longer hours and even harder than before (Walsh, 2013). The country has authorized few family-friendly provisions and even policies that are in place may not be fully helpful such as parental leave still remains unpaid (Directgov, 2012). Nevertheless, as women constitute a large proportion of the labour force, part-time work is rather widespread and is used as an adaptive strategy by mothers (Gregory, Milner and Windebank, 2013). A lot of part-time opportunities are typical for the UK labour market, means that there is greater flexibility, and employees have more options for working hours (Bishop, 2013).

In regards to work-time flexibility, the UK's liberal regime placed a few constraints, however, UK has to comply with certain EU regulations such as 1999 Employment Relations Act, 2000 Equal

treatment between part-time and full-time workers, 2002 Employment Act, and 2006 Work and Families Act (Gregory, Milner and Windebank, 2013). Furthermore, the WLB campaign, aimed at raising public awareness about the topic and launched by the UK Government in March 2000 focused on three areas which are "*tackling long-hours culture, targeting sectors with acute WLB problems, and providing support and guidance to both employers and employees*" (Sparrow and Cooper, 2012, p.224).

2.3 Italy

In Italy, the fertility rate is rather low. Childrearing outside of formal marriage is not socially acceptable and when combined with the tight job market, it has impacted the initial years of marriage and further affected childrearing (Blyton, Hassard, Hill and Starkey, 2017). Regarding labour force, Italy along with Spain and Greece has the lowest female participation in EU (Craig and Mullan, 2013).The statistics demonstrate that the use of part-time work is especially limited in southern Europe, and the regulation of part-time work in Italy has been under discussion for more than 30 years (Biagi, 2003). According to Ponzellini (2006), Italy belongs to the "*Mediterranean model of female labour supply*"; a shortfall of care services, scarcity of part-time jobs, weaker participation in the workforce, and higher tendency to leave employed work in middle age (Ponzellini, 2006, p.276).

There is a high level of rigidity in Italian labour with more favourable rules for permanent employment, and minimal protection for temporary employment (Henkens*et al.,* 2012). The social expectation in Italy assumes that men will strongly be oriented towards the labour market, thus leaving the women to deal with the domestic burden (Torres, Haas, Steiberand Brites, 2007). However, certain studies show that Italian fathers have increased their involvement in the last few years (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2009). Traditionally, Italy has been also characterized by low women participation in the labour force; being one of the three European states where participation for women is lowest in the EU where unemployment rates for women doubling those of men (Torres, Haas, Steiberand Brites, 2007). Married women tend to show a decline in their employment levels as opposed to their childless single counterparts (Henkens*et al.,* 2012). Italian fathers' hours spent in labour markets does not depend on their family situation (Henkens*et al.,* 2012). Although around 65% of fathers are aware of the right to take parental leave to help their spouses with childcare, 87% have never taken it, and are not even intending to do so (Mazzucchelli, 2014). This is further reflected by the social and cultural conditioning that persists in Italy, where a lot of fathers face difficulties in requesting and obtaining parental leave as it is assumed that mother will bear full-time responsibility of the child (Mazzucchelli, 2014). The income of husbands tends to play a big role too, thus a reduction of 70% of the income does have a big impact on a family's lives. In fact, "*men's working conditions influence the degree of women's involvement in childrearing*" (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2009, p.1). This makes one believe that the people who may choose such an initiative, are those who can afford it. In the Italian context, the reliance on external help such as babysitters is great. In addition, reliance on family relations to provide social support such as grandparents' help provided that strong family ties in Italy (Henkens*et al.,* 2012).

It is worth noting that maternity leave and pay is quite generous in the EU. The Italian government gives both parents the possibility to take 10 months of parental leave, at any time until the child is 8 years old and the state paying 30% of normal earning during that period (Halaskova, 2018). The Law 53/200, referring to regulations on maternity and paternity leave, attributing to both parents the same right to take care of the children, was an important one for the Italian society, and it appears to be rather innovative. It indicates equality between the position of mother and of father employees and that parenting as a shared job between both parents (Mazzucchelli, 2014). Parenthood in Italy implies an increase of male time for paid work, and increase in the female time devoted to housework and childcare and it seems that the commitment at home of

Italian fathers is rather inelastic, regardless of the family size or the spouse's labour participation (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2009).

In Italy, the care model is considered to be privatized because the duty to care for young children is mainly done by mothers or extended family members (Torres, Haas, Steiberand Brites, 2007). In fact, there is a rather insignificant part of overall welfare expenditure devoted to family services, where public family services represent only "*3% of total welfare expenditure*" (Ponzellini, 2006, p.274). As a lot of concepts in Italy are based on culture, it is worth noting that within Italy there is a division across territorial regions. The unemployment rate is noticeably different between the Northern-Central and Southern Italy and it becomes even greater when seen in terms of gender (Patimo, 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Philosophical positions

The ontological position taken by this research is social constructionism where social reality is subjective because it is socially constructed (Collis and Hussey, 2009). Therefore, the main findings of this research are based on what the individuals interviewed are thinking and feeling. As a result, this research did not initiate with a defined set of hypotheses and theories to test (Easterby, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012) and only after analysing the data received from the interviews, the researcher aimed to answer to the research questions raised. Thus, the logic of theory in this research is that of inductive; meaning that the theory-building starts from reality and then leads to a theory (Hine and Carson, 2007). The epistemological position taken by this research is interpretivism and through this position, the researcher will engage in an empathic understanding of people's perceptions and actions; the perception of the same practices by different employees from different countries. Based on these philosophical positions, this research has been qualitative in nature (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018).

3.2 Research Design

The design of this research is a case study since it is effective when one tries to understand what concepts mean to individuals and the meaning that they attribute to a particular behaviour and the way behaviours could be related (Squillante, Wise, and Hartey, 2014). The research was conducted in two separate branches and therefore, it comprises of two mini case studies.

3.3 Collection Techniques and Data Analysis

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The sample consists of employees of the same country in two different offices where one is in Rome, Italy and the other one in Midlands, UK. Semi-structured interviews were used as it would help to acquire a deeper understanding of how the employees feel, and what they feel regarding the balance of work and life. This type of interview allows greater flexibility because questions can be modified and new questions might emerge during the conversation (Bourdillon, White and Myers, 2009). As WLB seems to be still a controversial and sensitive topic, initially it was very difficult for the researcher to get access to interview companies. After many trials, the researcher managed to get access to this company (Company X). Company X belongs from the financial sector and they requested to maintain complete anonymity during the research. The interviews were limited to only five employees in each of the offices and were conducted in English language in Midlands and in Rome. Each interview lasted about thirty minutes and interviews were recorded and later transcribed under the consent of the participants.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted according to the ethics stated in Warwick's Research Code of Practice (The University of Warwick, 2009). Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from the participants and the interviewees were ensured that their privacy will not be infringed and that their identity will not be publicized.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 1 and 2 in the appendix represent the sample; employees according to their age, marital status, number of dependents, type of contract, level of hierarchy, and number of years worked for the organization. The data was analysed by using Thematic Analysis.

4.1 Organizational Support

The company analysed is an international one, with a great presence globally. On its' webpage, both the Italian and UK versions, the company outlines a vast number of WLB practices in place, specifically tackling the issues of gender equality and minorities. Company X has been promoting several campaigns, trying to show workers the benefits of achieving a balance between work and non-work time, as well as challenging the belief that working long hours demonstrated commitment. In various training directed at managers, employees were encouraged to work smarter, not necessarily be harder; use time-saving strategies, prioritize, delegate and empower others to act (Sparrow and Cooper, 2012, pp.232).

4.1.1 Organizational Support for the UK Operation

It is worth noting that a number of the provision of WLB programs in the UK has been left to firms, with a great deal of variation between employers in their degree of responsiveness (Walsh, 2013). When asked, whether the organization is supporting the employees enough and providing them enough flexibility, Woman1UK stated "*They have developed policies, but they are not very effective*", later on suggesting that use of WLB practice may be indeed possible, and company might show flexibility but it would not be constant or continuous. Employees felt that even though a lot of policies are in place, much depends on the timing and on the colleagues. All women (except the branch manager), agreed on the fact that requesting certain policies was a chance thing, and depended on the line manager. As the job is a client-facing job, all three women (Woman1UK, Woman2UK and Woman3UK), felt that they had no choice but come into the office even when there are certain family duties on the side, because "*if the manager doesn't come in today, it will not affect the opening of the branch, but if we (cashiers) don't come in, it will affect the level of service of the company*" – (Woman2UK). All three women, as well as Man1UK, when asked if they believe those higher up the rank have more flexibility and greater use of WLB, responded positively. The part-time employee - Woman3UK said that previously she could work part-time, by starting work at 11:00 and finishing around 18:00. This arrangement suited her perfectly, as it gave her the flexibility desired to look after her family. Later, she had to start work at 9.30am and taken into consideration her one-hour commute, this is clashing with her family responsibilities. Woman3UK has even gone on medication ever since her working arrangements changed, due to increased stress, she mentioned:"*They hear me out, but don't do anything about it*". This can be indeed be explained by the increased pressures that the business is facing, therefore doing what suits businesses' needs first. In fact, many employers believe it is up to the employees to balance their work and family responsibilities and the aim of a lot of businesses is just to "*cut costs, extend the operational time and increase productivity*" (EIRO, 2001).

Woman4UK, the branch manager, alternatively was very positive about the implementation of WLB, stating that the environment of the organization is very supportive of balancing work with

life, whenever she had problems she was supported 100%, also stating that if calling in on the day, to ask for a day off or take a sick leave, she would be fully supported, however, this was something that was not possible according to the other 4 employees interviewed. The branch manager admitted that she had autonomy over her work but the responses of four cashiers and one branch manager were to some extent controversial. Moreover, Woman2UK, added that requesting any flexible arrangements for them is much more difficult than for a branch manager even though the policies were meant to be the same for all. Woman2UK when talking about her experience at an attempt to request a day off sounded rather frustrated. She would need to notify the manager about the days she prefers to take off a year in advance, and even so she failed to get certain days off. "*We can't have the days off when we want them. I used 10 days off out of 20 only, what's the point to have days off when you can't use them when you want to*?"- Woman2UK.

Overall, the impression received from the branch workers interviews in UK in terms of organizational support is that there is a great number of policies supporting the workers but due to direct-facing nature of work, all the employees (excepting the branch manager) are facing conflicts between personal life and work, and the employees felt obliged to put work obligations above personal life issues. In fact, this is stated by Budd and Mumford (2006), not all employees may use family-friendly policies as some may not be able to find a suitable co-worker to substitute them and taking part-time arrangement cannot be afforded.

4.1.2   *Organizational Support for the Italy Operation*

The branch interviewed was bigger in comparison to the one in the UK, thus employees had more choice in their working arrangements, as there is a bigger number of substitutes. On the day of the interview, Woman2IT brought her 10-year old daughter along to the office for the second half of the day. The Woman was indeed thankful for such an arrangement. Woman2IT mentioned in her interview – "*If I didn't have the support and understanding of my manager and colleagues, it would not be possible for me to bring in my daughter today*". Man3IT would also on a number of occasions take half-days off, he mentioned "*even though I don't have any dependents, I accompany my grandmother to hospital check-ups. There is nobody else to do that*!" Indeed, the perception of a workplace as family-friendly depends not just on the availability of initiatives, but also on a supportive family-friendly culture (Lim & Lee, 2011).

Man2IT thought his organization was supportive in terms of WLB, and he enjoyed paternity leave for a month, having said "*being there to support my wife was important, as well as not missing moments of my baby's growth*". He also stated that "*I had to eventually come back to work because of the salary as well*" - Man2IT. Man3IT showed an interesting case with the fact that when he joined the company he was still finishing his Master's degree, and was allowed 5 days off as a study leave – "*I had to coordinate it well in advance, but I was allowed to do it without losing any days*".

Furthermore, when asked what they like about their work, all employees referred to the early finish – 16:00, and 4 out of 5 employees emphasized the possibility of having the 1:10 hour break for lunch. As mentioned in the interviews; Man1IT and Man2IT would use it to grab lunch and go to the nearby gym, having the evening free for their families. Woman2IT was using this break to pick her daughter at school and drop her at her parents' house. However, Woman2ITstated "*a couple of years ago, I wanted to get part-time arrangements; however, it didn't happen in the end. My line manager was very supportive but we had to wait for approval for a very long time, and nobody knew if it would be possible because they would have to reconsider the budget for our branch and find another part-time worker, so I just decided to stay on full-time. It was difficult at that time, as my mother was not well either, and I had to really choose between work and family. Luckily, now I have the support of my parents in assisting me with my daughter and so, the situation is under control now*". This finding was indeed rather typical for the Italian context, where family ties are significant and grandparents' help plays an important role in supporting the working daughters

or daughters-in-law (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2009). In summary, in the Italian branch, there is great reliance on the colleagues' support and understanding. There was a lot of reliance on the personal relationship within the team.

4.2 The hours of Work and Working Culture

The branches in both countries have different opening hours, reflecting a difference in their working culture. The branch in the UK would open every day at 09:30 and close at 16.30. Having said this, Woman1UK mentioned that they are advised not to leave the branch for lunch, and if so, only for a short time. Lunch is usually eaten at the desk, even when there are not many customers around.

In the Italian case, the branch opens at 08:20 and is open until 13:20, reopening again from 14:30 to 16:00. The reactions about the working patterns were different, some did not consider this an early start and preferred to start this early and be able to have a free hour for lunch and a free afternoon (from 16:00 onwards). This indeed can be explained by the culture, and by the family status. Woman2IT preferred such an early start, so she could take care of her family in the morning, drop the children to school on time, and be ready to pick up the daughter up on time during her lunch break. Man1IT was also responsible for dropping his children off at school and thus was happy with the working arrangements. However, Man2IT had to commute for about an hour, therefore for him, 8.20 was an early start, and he would much rather prefer to start at 9, or 9.30. This was also valid for Woman1IT, who had to take public transport to get to her job, and it would take her around 50 minutes to commute – "*On Fridays very often certain types of transport go on strike, therefore I have to adjust and leave home even earlier every Friday morning*". In the UK case, Woman1UK and Woman2UK said that they don't have a car, and it takes them around one hour to commute to and from work, whereas Woman4UK, had a car and commuting was not a problem. Indeed, it seems that long hour commute can put stress on employees.

In terms of the working culture, clear answers and frustration were seen by the UK women. The issues of not getting paid overtime came across for all the employees, all admitting that they work harder, and stay longer but still don't get compensated for it. Woman3UK said, "*I'm a part-time employee and I work 3 days out of 5, therefore on the days I work, staying overtime was often inevitable*". A lot about working patterns can be explained by the power of money and consumerism where certain employees work long hours because they simply cannot afford to live if they worked less (Harris and Foster, 2008). The working late culture was very persistent in the answers from all five employees. Man1UK, however, states that he did not mind working long hours and that he felt rewarded to be working in the financial industry.

Overtime was not an issue for the Italian branch, however, "*Work gets really busy sometimes, especially after lunch as we are only open for 1.5 hours, but we usually have enough staff in the branch to serve the customers, and ensure we finish on time, the latest we try to close the branch is 16.30*"- (Woman2IT). However, the two senior men also mentioned the possibility of staying at work. When asked about overtime, Man2IT, Man3IT and Woman1IT admitted that they would rather prefer doing the extra work during the lunch break, so they would still leave work around 16:00.

4.3 Socio-Cultural Environment and the Type of Industry

Unsurprisingly, when asked what they would prefer to change in their work arrangements, the UK branch workers referred to the possibility of flexible working hours. According to Woman1UK, it is the government that is showing a lack of support. Woman1UK seemed to face the most issues regarding family-work balance. When asked what changes she would like to see happening in her current working arrangements, she stated "*One thing that could be done is for governments to extend the stay-late programs until later, more in line with people's work. This*

should be available in all schools. The majority of people work 9:00 to 17:00, and my daughter finishing school at 17:00 and me needing to commute for one hour makes it very difficult for me. I think if the government introduced this, more women would be encouraged to work, and it would give me the correct work-life balance".

In the case of Italian employees, the lack of part-time employees in the branch and the unsuccessful attempt of Woman2IT to change her contract indicate the weakness of the Italian system as well as organizational support. She said "*I really wish it was not that complicated to choose whether to be part-time or full-time. I don't know if it is easier to do this in the headquarters but changing something like a contract at a branch level will take a long time*".

In terms of the importance of sectors, according to Marginson and Sisson (2006, p.286), while there continues to be a strong country effect "*reflecting the enduring influence of the institutional factors, the sector appears to be as important in shaping patterns of flexible working time*". UK employees, when asked if they believe they are privileged to work in the financial industry all agreed and had a great pride towards the organization. Woman4UK, the branch manager, however, said that she did not believe working in the financial sector meant less WLB than in other sectors. This also corresponded with the answer of the other 3 employees, which said that their friends or acquaintances working for other industries have just as hard of a time getting time off and balancing life with a career.

In the Italian case, all the employees believed that WLB practices may have less of a presence in other sectors and that the arrangements in their sector were "*probably among the nicest*" as mentioned by Man3IT. Woman2IT referred to the fact that her husband was working in a small consultancy, and every day he would finish work not earlier than 19:00. Therefore, the general idea, when asked what they believe about the financial sector, was that they have a much better WLB than many other workers in Italy, and they were privileged to work specifically for that sector.

4.4 Perception of WLB depending on the Work Status as well as Marital/Child Status

4.4.1 Singles

It was observed that the single interviewees had a very positive attitude towards everything and seemed to be very joyful even about work overload. Man1UK, Woman4UK, Woman1IT and Man3IT – all in their late twenties, single and childless, believed their organization offered them plenty of WLB practices. Indeed Woman4UK, being in her early 30s, gave the stereotype of a typical career-oriented woman – "*It's a fantastic company to work for, I am very focused and driven*". Woman1UK, that has worked for the company when she was young, stated–"*When you are younger, you can live and breathe this company. When you are older – you have other responsibilities*". This seems to be true for the young employees of both countries.

Furthermore, all 4 young employees were happy about the availability of holiday entitlements and talked rather excitingly about going on holiday every year. However, the British employees mentioned that they prefer carrying some days over. Woman1IT, having worked for the company only 2 years, mentioned how she tries to use only half of the days off, leaving the others to carry on, or leaving them to be used in case of emergency.

4.4.2 Married Employees with Dependents

Under this category, in the UK operation, it was three women – two of them full time and one part-time and in the Italian operation, all employees were full time – two men occupying more senior positions, and one woman. When asked if they would like to work fewer hours, all women said they would love to. However, all of them mention the importance of pay. Woman1UK is a divorced

employee, thus for her pay was an extremely important factor. Thus, for her WLB was an issue where she had to juggle between family and work, and they felt that at times due to the nature of the work and lack of staff, she could not leave work on time. Furthermore, only Woman1UK was dealing with young children, therefore she was relying on her mother for a lot of responsibilities related to her children. The other employees did not see WLB policies as solely family-friendly policies, as according to Woman2UK: "*If I had small children maybe I would be worried about certain things. I joined this organization 10 years ago when my children were already grown-up*". In terms of holidays, Woman2UK and Woman3UK, mentioned they only take it for necessities and for only religious festivities.

Man1IT, Man2IT and Woman2IT, are all sharing their houses with spouses and children, and when asked specifically about the how much time they manage to spend with their children, due to the fact that the office hours are until 16:00 all were quite positive about it. Man1IT said, "*I think it is indeed nice to be working in the financial sector, and yet to be spending enough time with my family*". When asked about the children situation and who usually does more responsibilities, the men agreed that their wives take a large part in the children upbringing, but so do their parents and in-laws. Woman2IT leaves her daughter everyday with her mother and admits "*I am glad my mother is in good health and can take care of my child*". In general, both countries show that there are examples of employees relying on grandparents when caring for children. Possibly, if more employees from the UK branch had kids, the analysis would be able to show if they too rely on their parents for help or not.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this paper portray how the branches of "Company X" in Italy and the UK, were affected by institutional and national approaches, cultures and traditions. Moreover, it was possible to see how country-specific regulations affect the implementation of WLB policies, but also observe how gender and family status influence the attitude towards WLB practices.

Regarding the Branch Managers in both the Italian and the UK cases, it was found that they seemed to have greater access to WLB and believed that their organization is providing them with a great number of policies to be able to balance between work and personal life. Such enthusiasm about the existence of WLB was seen much less down the hierarchy. This was previously found in other studies, being explained by the fact that those on higher incomes are more able to enjoy an advantageous position outside the workplace, in a way safeguarding their WLB as their income permits them to invest in childcare, cleaning, etc. (Blyton, Hassard, Hill and Starkey, 2017). This also goes in line with the fact that those at a senior level might have greater access to WLB, and those at lower levels have less access to provisions such as working time flexibility (Blyton, Hassard, Hill and Starkey, 2017).

The study by Blyton, Hassard, Hill and Starkey (2017) also suggested that the employees that are in greatest need for working time flexibility and WLB provisions might be indeed those at the lower level of the organizations, as they lack the financial resources to fulfil their various work and non-work responsibilities by means other than self-provisioning. However, the findings found out that the perception of those at the lower positions (e.g. cashiers) depended on their family status – some of the employees that had dependents did not feel fully supported by the organization, whereas the single employees were not in such great need for certain WLB practices and, therefore, did not put much weight on it.

Furthermore, there is a similarity between Woman3UK, Man1UK and Man2IT and Woman1IT – none of them perceived working longer hours as an issue and seemed to be satisfied with their working arrangements overall. This can be explained by the absence of dependents, and as summed up by Woman1UK, the younger employees can "*live and breathe*" the company, as

opposed to the older employees, with spouses and dependents. Nevertheless, employees of both countries agreed on the fact that working in the financial sector gives them better WLB than other sectors. In fact, according to previous research "financial sector workers report better working condition than workers from other sectors; fewer nonstandard hours, and high-skilled work". (Präg*et al.,* 2011, pp.81). In addition, the findings of this research also showed that regardless of the country, being a working mother does make it difficult to balance between home and work duties. However, Budd and Mumford (2006) claimed that women in higher-paid managerial and professional positions are more likely to have access to WLB practices than those in lower-paid positions, and this applied to the case of the UK branch manager whom interviewed in this paper who seemed to have access to a number of WLB policies.

In the UK case, the obstacles come from a lack of governmental support and a long working culture. Crompton and Lyonette (2006) found that the absence of state support along with long hours of work can further raise work-life conflict. In the Italian case, even though there are not enough facilities for children, it was not necessarily mentioned as an issue because there is great reliance on other family members. However, the Italian working mother could not change her contract to a part-time one emphasizing a high level of rigidity and bureaucracy that is persistent in Italy, preventing for changes to happen on a quicker basis.

Moreover, even though the employees in the UK branch seemed to have more opportunities for WLB practices, they were short of staff and very often had to work overtime because of this. It was mentioned by the Institute of Employment studies that even though organizations have WLB initiatives, yet there is a take-up gap, as certain employees may be unable to take up the options, it may be due to their perception that there may be an adverse effect on career prospects or even a decline on their earnings (Sparrow and Cooper, 2012). This was mainly seen in the case of UK office employees.

Working hours can also be influenced by culture. As Bishop (2013) proposed that in UK and most other countries, there is a cultural belief that it is more suitable for family care work to be dealt by female family members than by any other arrangement. According to the UK and Italian employees, caring for the children was done either by the wives of the working men, or mothers of the working women.

According to Walsh (2013), the "*overwork culture*" is influenced a lot by managers and particularly first-line managers (Branch managers) – as they can either encourage or discourage such behaviour. This was mentioned by the employees of both countries, stating that the support of the first line manager was vital in their possibility of taking WLB policies. In addition, the overworking culture can be steered by the working attitudes of the colleagues as mentioned by the cashier women in UK, that often they had the sense of guilt and responsibility towards each other. The overtime working was not an issue in the Italian branch due to different and perhaps more flexible opening hours. However, the Italian employees were lacking WLB practices and a lot of flexibility has relied upon the colleagues. Therefore, in the Italian case, the explanation of human behaviour based solely on economic rationality is not enough, demonstrating that the cultural and value factors play an important role (Mazzucchelli, 2014). Furthermore, living close to work or having a car, made the commute easier for employees from both countries. It could be concluded that the opening hours in the morning were not an issue for UK employees, but it was the closing hours or the failure to close when supposed to that frustrated some employees. The opposite was for the Italian branch, where the closing hour was not a problem, but the early opening of the branch seemed to cause some stress for certain employees.

Lastly, the cultures did play a role in the way employees perceived their work and personal life. As in Italy, the family plays an important role, in the cases of the three employees with dependents, being home early to enjoy a meal and spending time with the children and spouses was very important and it is something they could do due to early work finish (Henkens*et al.,*

2012). The fact that Italian employees rely on their families for looking after the children is rather typical for the Italian context and goes in line with previous findings stating that "in Italy family ties are significant and grandparents' help plays an important role in supporting the working daughters or daughters-in-law" (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2009, p.11). Regarding the atmosphere within the branch, everybody would have a great overall understanding of each other's' family issues. In the UK case, the culture was persistent in the sense that there was a greater diversity within the office, with people coming from different religious and national backgrounds. Out of the 5 people interviewed – 1 person of Hindu Religion, 1 person of the Muslim religion, and 1 person Catholic. The number of women working in the UK branch was higher when compared to the Italian branch – the two employees in the higher positions were females. In the Italian case, the two employees in the higher positions were men - still showing the rather persistent "male breadwinner" model (Ponzellini, 2006), and a rather large gender gap, seen in all stages of life, within and outside the family (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2009).

Even though UK and Italy are so diverse in their cultures and pre-existing institutions, the implementation of WLB initiatives at the two branches showed not just differences, but also similarities. Moreover, what was understood is that context plays an important role, and various practices will tend to have specific relevance when applied to an individual, as individuals attach different weight to initiatives.

5.1 Research Opportunities and Limitations

Possibly this research can help the employers view the expectations and experiences of their employees in using the WLB practices of the company. It may help employers to see which WLB practices work better in the two operations. The employers can even get an insight to which practices need modification. The findings of this research may have practical relevance for the operations, in terms of hiring and retaining their employees and see the needs to restructure the existing HR policies. The employees can gain a perspective on how they are balancing their work and family responsibilities and if there is an imbalance, identify the constraints they face in attaining a decent WLB.

There are some limitations of this research, for instance, the sample size is very small. Such a small sample makes it difficult to construct a complete analysis of the WLB culture. Due to the anonymity of the companies, the researcher cannot present the findings in detail. WLB is known to be a sensitive issue and interviewees could have been hesitant in answering the questions. Furthermore, for the Italian counterparts, English is not their first language, so they are slightly uncomfortable in responding to the interview questions.

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APPENDIX

Table 1 Interviewees of "Company X" in the United Kingdom, Coventry branch

United Kingdom						
Employee	Age	Marital Status	Number of Dependents	Type of Contract	Level of Hierarchy	Number of years in the organization
Woman1uk	52	Divorced	3 Children	Full time	Operations Specialist/ Cashier	18
Woman2uk	51	Married	2 Children	Full time	Cashier	10
Woman3uk	44	Married	3 Children	Part time	Cashier/ Customer Advisor	14
Woman4uk	31	Single	No Dependent	Full time	Branch Manager	8
Man1UK	27	Single	No Dependent	Full time	Cashier/ Customer Advisor	3

Table 2 Interviewees of "Company X" in Italy, Rome branch

Italy						
Employee	Age	Marital Status	Number of Dependents	Type of Contract	Level of Hierarchy	Number of years in the organization
Woman1IT	27	Single	No Dependent	Full time	Cashier	2
Woman2IT	48	Married	2 Children	Full time	Cashier	9
Man1IT	42	Married	2 Children	Full time	Branch Manager	13

Man2IT	35	Married	1 Child	Full time	Personal Banker	14
Man3IT	28	Single	No Dependent	Full time	Cashier/ Receptionist	2

Table 3 Interview guide

	Interview Guide: Semi-Structured questions or themes
1	Employee information: Designation, age, marital status, years of service in the company, number of children and education level.
2	Job description
3	Working hours (Starting and finish hours)
4	What is more important a good WLB or a good salary
5	Types of WLB practices implemented within the organization; for e.g. Flexible working hours, Workplace nursery/ childcare facilities, Part-time work, Incentive and supplementary benefits, transportation, etc.
6	Employees' expectation of WLB practices
7	Perception of WLB from their current status; single/ married/ married with no dependents/ married with dependents
8	Observed any increase in motivation and improvement in employees' performance due to introduction of new WLB practices
9	Issues related to workload and working patterns
10	Do you often get compensated for working longer than the required hours?
11	Problems coping with family and work commitments
12	Is your commute to the office very long and if yes then is it an added stress for you?
13	Employees (i.e. experience of other colleagues) quitting jobs due to the unavailability of desired WLB practices
14	Their provisions on maternity/ paternity leave
15	Supervisor's expectations from the employees regarding the use of WLB practices
16	Are employees allowed to communicate informally at all levels?
17	Do you believe that the company provides a good working environment?
18	Instances when they might not have used WLB practices when offered to them and why?
19	Do the WLB practices favour one gender over the other or have they been specially designed for a specific gender?
20	How supportive are colleagues and peers at work?
21	How satisfied/dissatisfied are employees with job autonomy?
22	Are you able to maintain a good work-life balance?
23	How has your work-life balance changed since you had children, and do you think it has changed for the better or worse?
24	Their belief about "good employees", so work longer/ overtime
25	Their thoughts on the current labour market situation with regards to WLB practices
26	What do employees particularly like about their job?
27	Do you think that the company hesitates to introduce WLB arrangements with the fear of abuse of provisions?

28	Do you believe that work culture is a determining factor in the implementation of WLB
29	In your experience how good in general are people at dealing with change in the workplace?
30	Are any WLB practices different between different branches of this company?
31	How the socio-cultural environment and the type of industry play a role in WLB?
32	Do employees higher up the hierarchy have better WLB than employees in the lower positions?
33	Are the employees able to take days off when they needed? Could they take a day off at a short notice?