Chapter 1

Socio-structural developments in the Netherlands 1945-2012 in relation to female employment patterns

1.1 Introduction

In recent decades, especially in the Netherlands, there has been a remarkable shift in perspective from the notion of the worker as household wage earner – the (mostly male) breadwinner – towards that of the worker as an individual, regardless of household and family members. Women are now, like men, expected to spend the majority of their lives simultaneously performing the roles of spouse, worker and parent. Dutch government targets are set to encourage all individuals to work, and to reach an active labour force of 80 per cent in 2020, compared with the current labour market participation of 76 per cent\(^\text{11}\) (Budget Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs, 2012). In 2011, 68 per cent of Dutch women (aged 20-64) belonged to the labour force compared to 85 per cent of men (Merens et al., 2012, p.53). However, society’s normative expectations of men and women remain gender specific, and the occupational, hierarchical and remuneration structure of the labour market is enduringly gender segregated (Merens et al., 2012).

In the second half of the last century, the labour market participation of Dutch women increased enormously. In 1950, approximately 25 per cent of all women were employed, often in nursing, (basic) education, as shop assistants or as secretaries (Tijdens, 2006). Only 10 per cent of married Dutch women were in paid labour in 1947, and in 1960 only 7 per cent, compared with 30 per cent of married English women and 33 per cent of married French women in the same period (Kloek, 2009, p.195). Nowadays the labour market participation of married women is not monitored, as it is no longer considered relevant. Because ‘marriage’ was previously almost synonymous with ‘family’, the corresponding relevant figure now in use is the labour market participation rate of women with children. This participation rate among women aged 20 to 64 years, and with at least one child younger than 18 years, was 72 per cent in 2011 (Merens et al., 2012, p.56).

Working mothers with a partner and children living at home work the fewest hours of all women, approximately 24 hours a week, whereas their partners work more than any other group of men: 40.6 hours a week.\(^\text{12}\) Additionally, men and

\(^{11}\) Percentage of people aged between 20 and 64 that are willing to work at least 12 hours a week.

\(^{12}\) Mothers without a partner work less, but where they do, they work more hours: 27.8 hours. Higher educated women work more compared to lower educated women. In 2011, 74 per cent of
women are not divided equally among sectors; moreover, horizontal segregation has increased in the last few years (Merens et al., 2012).

Particularly interesting in the Dutch labour market is that, compared to other Western countries, the employment pattern of Dutch women is the most differentiated (table 1). The employment pattern of Dutch men is also the most differentiated compared to that of the other countries; the difference with women is that men’s part-time employment is mainly practiced at the periods in the life cycle during which they do not have family responsibilities (age 15-25 & 55-65).

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<th>Table 1. Labour participation patterns of men and women of working age (aged 15 to 64) in selected OECD countries, 2011</th>
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Source: OECD Statistics

This large variation makes the Netherlands a suitable case to study the causes of the variation in labour market participation of mothers. Why do some mothers have a full-time job, while most other work part-time or are not employed at all? Nevertheless, before I investigate this question theoretically and empirically on a micro-level, I will discuss the historical context of cultural and structural characteristics of Dutch society in relation to female employment. Mothers’ actions and interactions on a micro-level are embedded (enabled and constrained) within these ‘impersonal and endurable’ socio-structural and historical characteristics on a macro-level.

university level women had a job of 28 hours or more per week, and 58 per cent of the higher polytechnic educated women. Among women with an intermediate polytechnic educational level or lower, circa 30 per cent worked less than 28 hours, and 20 per cent had a full-time job (Merens et al., 2012).
1.2 1945-1960 Breadwinners and housewives

As mentioned, after World War II, the labour market participation of women was particularly low in the Netherlands when compared to other Western countries. Various explanations are acknowledged for this low female participation level in the Netherlands: the long and strong cultural tradition of housewives (Kloek, 2009, p.194), late industrialisation and the introduction of wage labour (Kremer, 2007, p.91; Pott-Buter, 1993). Furthermore, relatively high productivity rates permitted a lower labour market participation rate among women (Plantenga, 1993). Other reasons cited include Dutch neutrality during the First World War (when women were not needed in the labour market), Dutch religious characteristics, high birth rates and Dutch prosperity (Kremer, 2007, p.60; Smidt, 2005).

Kloek (2009) describes how in the Netherlands during the 1950s and 1960s, the ideal of women as housewives and men as breadwinners reached its most ‘glorious’ days. The domestic standards for Dutch housewives could not have been higher. Never were the rooms so clean (at a time when houses also became bigger and housemaids disappeared almost entirely), the dinners so nice, fashion followed with such close interest, and the upbringing of children taken so seriously (Kloek, 2009). The figuration ideal13 in this period is referred to, especially within marriage, as harmonious inequality (Komter, 1990b; Stolk and Wouters, 1983). It is deemed ‘unequal’, because women did not have, either formally or informally, the same privileges as men, and ‘harmonious’ because these inequalities within the public and private spheres were not perceived as unfair. The state of affairs was taken for granted and assumed to be the way it should be.

For women, especially for mothers, it was not considered necessary or even desirable to join the labour market. The general tendency was that in a functioning welfare state, families should be able to afford to have their children at home. The family was perceived as the cornerstone of Dutch society, and professional childcare was regarded as immoral (Kremer, 2007). A mother’s natural role was to occupy herself with household chores and raising children. The husband earned the family income and had full rights to wages and social security; for a woman, marriage was her social security. Most girls had only a short educational training, and worked until they got married. In 1970, 90 per cent of girls married, on average at the age of 23 years old (Tijdens, 2006).

In the background of this breadwinner ideology, the typically Dutch social structure of pillarization or columnization also existed: namely, the presence of various kinds of organisations sharing similar goals but with different denominational bases. In the Netherlands, four such pillars existed: Catholic,

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13 Figuration ideals can be described as ideals or moral views (including mechanisms of inequality) that exist within and outside people and function as interdependent chains between people dissolving the micro and macro level (Stolk and Wouters, 1983; Layder, 1994, p.115).
Protestant, social democratic and neutral. Within these pillars, there was strong ideological agreement, and therefore pillarization was above all else a cultural feature of Dutch society. Each pillar had its own communication channels - television, newspapers, political parties, the church and so on – through which attitudes and norms were imposed, especially by the bourgeois, upon the Dutch population. As a result, the existing norms were able to be maintained. Despite the different ideologies and religions, there was a broad consensus about the natural division of labour between spouses in order to guarantee its future. Women’s natural role was to be a mother and a homemaker (Kremer, 2007, p.91; Plantenga, 1993; Pott-Buter, 1993).

1.3 1970-1980 Structural and cultural revolutions

At the end of the 1960s, society started to change rapidly, in terms of both culture and morality, through processes of democratisation, secularisation, individualization and the end of the pillarization system, which all peaked in the 1970s (Kremer, 2007). The period also became known for the end of formal barriers towards female employment, although some legal benefits for breadwinner families still remained (such as the breadwinner bonus), symbolising a double morality towards working mothers starting in this period within Dutch society.

In the 1970s, the traditional self-evident routines and divisions of labour within families became heavily criticised. Although the work of a housewife had become physically much lighter through technical innovations, it became perceived as mentally exhausting, and led to a new condition - the housewife syndrome (Kloek, 2009, p.212). The cliché of the Dutch housewife was viewed differently: she was no longer praiseworthy because of her dedication to the household, but rather her isolation was now seen as sad (Kloek, 2009, p.210; also Brinkgreve, 1988). In 1967, a Dutch sociological journal, De Gids, published Joke Smit’s plea, entitled ‘the discontent of women’, in which the female figure pleaded against the drudgery and seclusion of housewifery, while promoting an equal division of labour and care between men and women. This article is often referred to as the start of the Second Feminist Wave in the Netherlands (Tijdens, 2006).

The most important aim of the women’s movement in the 1970s and 1980s was equality: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, equal division of power and an equal division of household labour and care between men and women. In some higher educated couples, the existing unequal power relations between men and women became reason for manifest conflict (Komter, 1990a). The following quote from the research of Komter (1990a, p.35), illustrates how young women still had their hopes set on marriage, but how simultaneously it had become permissible to openly express feelings of disappointment:
“Initially I thought it (marriage) would be exciting and romantic, doing things together. Yet, what a disappointment! [...] (laughs). And I had many friends, who married as well in the same period, but after a month we stood crying at each other’s doorsteps, like: oh Lord, what has happened?”

As in most other Western countries, from the 1970s onwards the Dutch labour market patterns of women started to change drastically. In the early 1960s, there had been a slight decline in female employment to 22 per cent; by 1970, women’s participation levels had already increased to 30 per cent (Tijdens, 2006). Important reasons for this growth include changes in the Dutch labour market. As the economy was rebuilt after World War II, and continued to boom throughout subsequent decades, the demand for labour increased. Initially only migrant workers were brought in, but slowly Dutch employers came increasingly to rely upon women, including those who were married. Key occupational features of the labour market changed at this time as well. Through technological developments, the agricultural and industrial sectors shrunk rapidly. The service sector economy of white-collar jobs also grew, especially in the Netherlands. Jobs in this sector could more easily be executed by women, and were also suitable on a part-time basis. This general process can be described as one creating jobs for secondary and part-time work, occupations which are sometimes referred to as ‘dead-end’ jobs, where one’s career is not the primary reason for taking on the work (Hakim, 2000; Sanders and Beekes, 1993). Yet, Tijdens (2006) argued that, on the whole, the creation of part-time work was a positive development, because for large groups of Dutch women it became possible to cross their private-public threshold, and enter the labour market.

Through technological developments, it was not only the demand side of the labour market that changed significantly, as it opened up for women, but also the nature of unpaid work at home. Tijdens (2006) demonstrates how between 1948 and 1973, technology paved the way for women to enter the labour market. Activities that were previously done by housewives at home, such as the production of food and garments, were moved across to the market sector, often produced in less-developed countries where wages were cheaper. In addition, technological developments within household appliances made domestic chores lighter, with the innovations of freezers, central heating, electric mixers, washing machines and dryers. Tijdens (2006) argues that the ensuing time reductions in household work were one of the most important explanations for the increased supply of women in the labour market, as women came to desire paid employment jobs.

During the same period, the overall educational level of women also increased, due among other reasons to the specific financial system of education in the Netherlands, making it possible, at least in principle, for everyone to enter (higher) education. The common pattern was that women with higher education were more inclined to enter paid labour and to work longer hours.
Finally, an important medical development of the 1960s across all Western countries was the contraceptive revolution, which gave women control over their fertility (Hakim, 2000). It is during this period that the caesura between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ towards paid work shifted from marriage to motherhood - a moment that women could now decide for themselves (Tijdens, 2006). The introduction of the pill also decreased family sizes, from an average of 2.3 to 1.75 children per woman (Bucx, 2011). A two-parent family with two children became the cornerstone of Dutch society.

In the same period, almost all formal Dutch employment barriers for women, which had been built in order to protect the breadwinner society, were abolished, and the new policies brought in were especially beneficial for female employment. Already in 1956, married women no longer needed permission from their husbands to sign an employment contract. And in 1957, the ban on married women being active as civil servants came to an end. By 1975 there was the law for equal pay. In 1979 it became forbidden to dismiss women when they got married or became pregnant, and in 1980 the law for equal treatment was introduced (Kloek, 2009, p.213). Further support came from the European Union, obliging that European countries legislate that women and men to have equal access to, and treatment in, the paid labour market. And so although the Dutch government was slow to implement all of the requisite changes, by 1985 most of the formal elements of discrimination between men and women had been terminated (Kremer, 2007, p.127). In 1986, married women also received the same rights as men to social security, including unemployment benefits and entitlement to state pension.

And yet, at the end of the ‘70s, with the backdrop of increasing unemployment rates caused by the second oil crisis, the (legal) emancipation process became characterised by a double standard. For example, in the ‘80s, the ‘double-earner family’ became a swearword and class dilemma in the Netherlands (Kremer, 2007). What was to be done with families with a double income, while families with no-income existed as well? Consequently, a transferable allowance – a bonus for single breadwinners, under which women were compensated indirectly for their work at home, with clear negative consequences for their economic independence – remained in place. It was not until the mid-’90s that the tax system was modernised and the breadwinners-bonus gradually phased out. Notably, in 2007, 1.1 million people (mostly women) still made use of the single-breadwinner support (Merens et al., 2011).

In 1982, the political promotion of part-time work was formally initiated in the so-called Agreement of Wassenaar. In this social pact, labour unions and employer organisations reached a consensus about the renovation of the welfare state – a necessary move given the high unemployment rate during that period. Even though labour unions were initially critical towards part-time work, since

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14 Wet Gelijk Loon.
15 Wet Gelijkbehandeling.
they expected part-time work to compete with full-time work (for example with reduced demands on wages and holiday days, as well as no assurance to pay the minimum income), a consensus was reached on the freezing of wages and the promotion of part-time work, with a view to creating more jobs and stimulating female employment (Kremer, 2007, p.172; Plantenga, 1996, p.61-62; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997). The agreement resulted in several special clauses on part-time work in general sector agreements between labour and employer unions to prevent part-time work from remaining on the margins of the labour market (Tijdens, 2006).

Gradually, throughout the 1980s, part-time employment among married women became generally accepted and, especially among higher educated couples, shook off the perception of being caused by a failure among men to take care of their families (Komter, 1990b, p.57). By 1985, 35 per cent of women were active in the labour market (Tijdens, 2006). Contemporaneous with increasing female employment rates, a modest Dutch political discussion was initiated on the subject of appropriate professional childcare. Women from social democratic and communist backgrounds became strong advocates for public childcare. Nevertheless, female Dutch opponents still argued that childcare was only in the interests of women who wanted to work, and would be contrary to the interests of their children (Kremer, 2007, p.171). Generally, it was viewed it was in society’s best interests that children be raised in a responsible way, which was within the realm of familial responsibility, and within which the government played no role (Janssens, 2003). As a consequence, no institutional provisions for professional childcare were embarked upon, in a period where mothers were starting to significantly increase their activity in the labour market.

In general, despite the post-war developments described above, which clearly boosted employment opportunities for women, Dutch society was still hierarchically engendered through the persistence of the male breadwinner system (Komter, 1990b). The inner obligation to conform to the standard of being a good housewife, mother and wife remained, albeit informal and ‘invisible’, since in the common perceptions of people, formal equality had (almost) been achieved (Komter, 1990b). As in other Western countries, there was a time lag between the application and ideology of egalitarianism in the abstract with its concrete manifestation in everyday domestic life (Haas, 2005; Komter, 1990b, p.61; Van Wel and Knijn, 2006). A further observation is that mothers may well have feared loss of self-respect, identity and the ideology of romantic love (Haas, 2005). According to Kane and Sanchez (1994) this gap – that which exists between freedom to participate in the labour force and the lack of a corresponding

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16 Komter (1990a) distinguished three forms of power: manifest, latent and invisible power. Within manifest power, there are open attempts to change the existing inequalities within power relations, which often result in conflict. Within latent power, there is absence of conflict although the unequal situation is perceived as undesirable. Invisible power is characterised by accepted norms and common-sense ideas, which are seen as natural (self-evident) facts and therefore unquestioned, although unequal power relations are present.
changes in the home – can be understood by the fact that the former seem to be more comfortably received by both men and women than altered roles at home. “Women may feel that criticism of domestic inequality constitutes a personal attack on the men in their lives” (Kane and Sanchez, 1994, p.1081-1082). To criticise inequalities in the labour market seemed more distant and less specific to their men.

Hochschild (1989) characterised the cultural situation in the ‘80s as a ‘stalled gender revolution’. The fact that mothers had started to do paid work outside the home was revolutionary. Yet the delay in the revolution came from the fact that neither women’s jobs nor their men changed as rapidly or profoundly. Brinkgreve argued that since the division of labour at home only changed with some difficulty, and since the abolishment of the housewife ideal had not led to a new archetype or fresh guidelines for behaviour, by the end of the 1980s, the liberation of women also gradually became viewed as a burden (Brinkgreve, 1988). Mothers with jobs, who were now occupied both as housewives and employees, had actually doubled their workload. A relatively small group of feminists who had managed to ‘break through’ the accepted fabric of social life and escape the trap of becoming a housewife were faced with three possible disillusions: living alone involuntarily, being childless involuntarily, or being a single parent involuntarily (Stacey (1986) in Brinkgreve, 1988, p.11).

With respect to the present study, it is worth mentioning that the women who became mothers during the ‘70s were, almost without exception, daughters of traditional mothers. In other words, they had no parental example of how to combine motherhood and work, and no example of how to share household and childcare tasks with their partners. This led to psychological tensions between old and new life perspectives, since there were discrepancies between the ideals and normative standards of how these women were raised as young girls, and the liberty and claims they could now make as young adults (Brinkgreve, 1988, p.16). It is also noteworthy that it was these very mothers in the ‘60s and ‘70s (who could have been single or working mothers but most likely (65 per cent) were ‘just’ traditional housewives) whose daughters went on to become the mothers with young children being addressed in this present research.

1.4 1990-2010 A new consensus: the modified bread-winner model

In the ‘90s, the emancipation process gradually changed from moral to practical idealism. The liberation of women from their homes and their economic dependence on men was no longer an ideological question, but became above all an economic argument. An important symbolic turning point was the report of the scientific Council for Government Policy entitled ‘A Working Perspective’ (WRR 1990). “The report stated that in the Netherlands a large amount of human capital was wasted because women were largely inactive, and for the sustainable welfare state, particularly in the light of the aging society, it is crucial to invest in female labour market participation” (Kremer, 2007, p.92).
Work was now being seen as the best way both to emancipate and to become financially independent (Kremer, 2007, p.128). In 1990 every Dutch citizen was expected to be financially independent (Kloek, 2009, p.213). In 1996, this also included single mothers. And, as mentioned, the Government introduced several measures to legally protect part-time work, resulting in the Working Hours Adjustment Act of 2000, under which an employer could only refuse a request from an employee for a part-time contract if they could prove that this would jeopardise the company’s interests (Plantenga, 2002; Van Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2010).

The report of the WRR also advised the state to strongly invest in childcare. And in the ‘90s, all political and corporatist parties agreed that childcare was necessary in order to raise women’s productivity, resulting in the commencement of various parental leave schemes and childcare arrangements.

Parental leave was introduced in 1991 and had a typically Dutch design: the leave could only be taken on a part-time basis and was exclusively aimed at those working more than 20 hours a week, thus excluding many women (Kremer, 2007, p.143). The leave was generally unpaid - only about 5 per cent of the collective agreements included paid leave, and state employees were compensated as well (75 per cent of their wage). This measure was also used as a temporary payment for part-time work (Kremer, 2007, p.149). In the present day, the Dutch parental leave scheme (mostly) contains a 26-week unpaid allowance for men and women, which is scarce compared to neighbouring countries (Plantenga, 2008, p.29). Additionally, primary school schedules are not synchronised with work schedules, so parental leave arrangements are often used to fill these time gaps.

Since the 1990s the Dutch government has invested structurally in childcare, culminating in the implementation of the Childcare Law in 2005 (Bommer, 2010). This law is perceived as a modern law, since its logic is to create a professional and competitive market among day-care centres via the demands and actions of parents, thereby increasing the centres’ overall quality and price. Parents themselves decide on which day-care centre they choose and also the number of hours they purchase, and in return, depending on their income, they receive a tax contribution from the government. However, the view that childcare is primarily parents’ own responsibility is, as we have seen, not so modern. Moreover, there is still a lack of explicit public care and family policy in the Netherlands (Plantenga, 2008). Similarly, tax contributions towards childcare have recently been decreased in the state budget (Budget Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2012).

At the end of the last century, an alternative to the male breadwinner model, known as the ‘combination scenario’ was developed by the ‘Future Scenarios Reallocation of Unpaid Work’ Commission (Onbetaalde zorg gelijk verdeeld, 1995). The idea behind the scenario was that women work more, and men care more: part-time work of four days each, combined with three days of professional care. In the same period, social politics focussed on the role of boys and fathers, who were encouraged and ‘trained’ to do their share of caring responsibilities
through a specific national curriculum at school, as well as government advertisements (Grünell, 2001). However, despite the societal and political support for this parental sharing scenario, the political efforts were not able to break through the daily practice of families, at least not on a significant scale (Grünell, 2012; Kremer, 2007; Van Wel and Knijn, 2001). In line with the definition of Lewis and Daly (2000), childcare in the Netherlands is generally still seen as an unpaid, informal and emotional activity, with a strong sense of obligation and duty for the parents, but also seen as a ‘right’, in the positive sense of the word. To put it more colloquially, parents are more regarded as Snow White than as Cinderella (Kremer, 2007), which itself already symbolises a double morality. But more importantly, in practice the ‘obligation’ towards care applies especially for mothers, and the ‘right’ to care more for fathers. For example, Hooghiemstra (2000) concluded in her empirical research among Dutch couples that the great weight on freedom of choice for women is typically Dutch: women are allowed to work but it is not necessary. Nevertheless, this conviction is accompanied by a strong family ideology: when children are there, they should be her priority (Hooghiemstra, 2000, p.130).

As a consequence, in 2012 only 28 per cent of Dutch parents made use of professional day-care centres as their main childcare provision (including host families) (Merens et al., 2012), and the magical norm of a maximum of three days per week is hardly ever exceeded (Kremer, 2007). Higher-educated parents in particular make use of professional care, while lower-educated parents tend to find solutions for childcare within their own family spheres, such as grandparents and siblings (Merens et al., 2012).

Other examples of Dutch double moral and gender standards include the following illustrations. The ideology of parental-sharing is endorsed by 50 per cent of parents, while 30 per cent prefer the one-and-a-half breadwinner model, and only 8 per cent support the breadwinner model (Merens et al., 2011). In practice, in 2010, 18 per cent of Dutch couples both worked similar hours, 43 per cent lived the one-and-a-half-breadwinner scenario, and 24 per cent followed the traditional breadwinner model; a further 15 per cent pursued different atypical models of parental sharing (Merens et al., 2011). Among Dutch people, 63 per cent considered working two days or fewer to be ideal for mothers with children younger than four years old, and only 10 per cent endorsed the ideal of these young mothers working 4 to 5 days per week (Merens et al., 2011, p.130). For fathers with young children, almost all Dutch people consider working 4 or 5 days to be ideal. And although, in international comparative studies, Dutch men came out fairly well in terms of their contribution to domestic tasks and working part-time (Wiesmann et al., 2010, p.342, and table 1, p.26), their contributions to the running of the household and upbringing of children have shown little progress since 1995 (Bucx, 2011, p.118). In 2005, mothers spent more than 24 hours a week on household tasks, and fathers just 9.4 hours (Bucx, 2011, p.112). This inequality in the division of household tasks remains rather unquestioned.
The majority (55 per cent) of Dutch parents never (or at least less than once a year) discuss their division of unpaid tasks (Merens et al., 2011, p.142).

To summarise, institutional care arrangements, such as parental leave systems, the schedule of Dutch primary schools and the quality, costs and availability of childcare, together with further binding moral standards outlined above, fail to facilitate full-time work for mothers (Kremer, 2007; Plantenga, 2002), which remains a strenuous option for Dutch women. However, social and institutional limitations in relation to women’s full-time work (as well as to full-time mothering) remain relatively unquestioned in the public and political domains. The conflict between the genders in the ‘70s and ‘80s, despite being a debate that only really took place between higher-educated couples (Brinkgreve, 1988; Komter, 1990b), seems to have been more or less resolved by the modified breadwinner model. Women, including mothers in particular, are now greater enabled (as they both wish and are expected to be) to take up paid employment. And yet while working part-time, they are also still required to take charge of the bulk of the unpaid care work, just as their own mothers provided back in their own day (Haas, 2005, p.496). Nowadays, no strong structural or cultural pressures, nor contradictory messages or alternative lifestyles have been presented to change this newly established status quo (Van Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2010).

1.5 Conclusion

The above concise overview of Dutch structural and cultural features sheds light on why Dutch mothers are predominantly in part-time work. In summary, in examining the Dutch part-time perspective in cultural and structural terms, the impression arises that the Netherlands is (still) characterised by a double gender standard for mothers (Komter, 1990b).

Since the 1990s, mothers and fathers have been able to combine (part-time) work and motherhood in a relatively sophisticated way, especially when compared to mothers in other affluent societies. On the surface, the Netherlands appears to be a society that embraces equal gender roles, particularly since a comparatively higher proportion of men engage in part-time labour contracts (OECD Statistics, 2013). Nevertheless, the Netherlands lags behind in terms of its (erratic) social policies towards childcare and parental leave systems (Plantenga, 2008), as well as its primary school timetables which are seen as impractical for working schedules. Combined with relatively traditional moral expectations towards mothering and fathering, all these issues affect the engendered daily practices of Dutch parents (Wiesmann et al., 2010). In addition, the special privilege of the availability of relatively ‘sophisticated’ part-time work (Tijdens, 2006) seems only to withhold Dutch mothers from complaining (Van Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2010; Wiesmann et al., 2010), since it is generally assumed that part-time work enhances the work-life balance when compared to full-time work and full-time mothering. And yet the negative consequences of
part-time work, such as reduced career and salary prospects, are as prevalent in the Netherlands as in other affluent countries (Keuzenkamp et al., 2008, p.10). The duality of the moral part-time standard for mothers leads to the following situation: on the surface, society portrays a ‘free choice’ towards work part-time, but underneath there lies a moral expectation to only work part-time and moderately outsource childcare. This moral standard might constrain mothers’ career options, but also enforces restrictions on the stay-at-home alternative.

Thus the question arises as to whether the solution of drawing mothers into the labour market has itself now become a problem for their further emancipation, under which mothers have genuine choices. Put differently, has the initial liberation of housewives through the possibility of part-time work unintentionally turned into a moral obligation to only work part-time? Have ascribed gender roles become more rigid (again) just through the possibility of part-time work?

In this light, what is especially interesting is why Dutch social institutions have not led to one homogenous labour market pattern among women with children. Although clearly part-time work is the most popular option, a varied pattern remains visible. The supposed binding morality does not lead to the same attitudes and behaviours for every mother. Apparently alternative and competing cultural subsystems do exist, since women have different responses to similar institutional and cultural settings. This study aims to explore the social origins of this variety of choices.