Socialized choices: Labour market behaviour of Dutch mothers

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Chapter 3

*A qualitative typology of Dutch mothers’ employment narratives*

3.1 Introduction

In all western societies, women’s employment levels vary much more than those of the male population. This is particularly clear in the case of Dutch women, specifically of Dutch mothers. In 2010, 32.4 per cent of Dutch mothers with at least one child living at home below 18 years old were not in paid work, 42.5 per cent worked 12 to 24 hours a week, 13.8 per cent worked 25 to 35 hours a week, and 11.3 per cent worked more than 35 hours per week (Central Bureau of Statistics, Statline 2011). This relatively large variation, with mothers predominantly working part-time, makes the Netherlands an interesting case through which to study the different explanations for mothers’ labour market participation. Why do some mothers have a full-time job, while most mothers work part-time or are not employed at all?

3.2 Brief historical overview of Dutch female employment patterns

Historically, Dutch female labour market activity, especially among married women, was particularly low. In 1960, 25 per cent of women (Tijdens, 2006), and 7 per cent of married women were employed, compared to 30 per cent of English and 33 per cent of French married women (Kloek, 2009). Various explanations for the low female participation level after World War II in the Netherlands have been acknowledged, such as the long and strong cultural tradition of housewives (Kloek, 2009), late industrialisation and introduction of wage labour (Pott-Buter, 1993), 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).

In 1985, women’s participation levels increased to 35 per cent (Tijdens, 2006), and this rise continued in the subsequent decades, resulting in one of the highest levels of female participation compared to other western countries - almost 70 per cent in 2011 (OECD, 2013). However, the number of hours women work is lower and more dispersed than in other countries, especially among mothers.

Dutch scholars have pointed out several explanations for the predominantly part-time pattern in The Netherlands. In the period 1990 to 2000, since female

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participation was needed for the sustainability of the social welfare state, the Dutch government used various measures to promote the increase in employment rates of women, and the simultaneous contribution of men to the unpaid tasks at home (Grünnell 2001; Kremer, 2007; Sanders and Beekes, 1993). In the same period, various social arrangements and regulations in the Netherlands started to foster part-time work (Kremer, 2007; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997). Through collective agreements between employer organisations and labour unions, many branches started to offer family-friendly arrangements which benefitted part-time workers (Tijdens, 2006). And, since the Working Hours Adjustment Act of 2000, an employer can only refuse a request of an employee for a part-time contract if he can prove that this would jeopardise the company’s interests (Plantenga, 2002; Van Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2010).

Nonetheless, as opposed to the promotion of part-time work, Dutch institutional care arrangements, such as parental leave systems, tax contributions, the schedule of Dutch primary schools, and the quality, costs and availability of childcare, were not designed to facilitate full-time work for both parents (Kremer, 2007; Plantenga, 2002). There is still a lack of explicit public care policy in the Netherlands (Platenga, 2002, 2008); likewise, tax contributions to childcare have been recently decreased (Budget Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2012).

Subsequently, the political efforts have not been able to break through the daily practices of families, at least not on a large scale (Kremer, 2007; Merens et al. 2011; Van Wel and Knijn, 2001). In 2010, 18 per cent of Dutch couples both worked similar hours, 43 per cent lived the one-and-a-half-breadwinner scenario, 24 per cent followed the traditional breadwinner model, while 15 per cent pursued atypical models (Merens et al., 2011). Compared to other European countries, relatively few Dutch couples agree with the idea that both partners should contribute to the household income (Haas et al., 2006). 63 per cent of Dutch people consider working two days or less as ideal for mothers with children younger than four years old, and only 10 per cent endorse the ideal of such mother working 4 to 5 days per week (Merens et al., 2011, p.130). For fathers of young children, almost all Dutch people consider working 4 or 5 days as ideal. In international comparative studies, Dutch men come out fairly well in their contribution to domestic tasks (Wiesmann et al., 2010, p.342). However, their contributions to the running of the household and upbringing show little progress since 1995 (Bucx, 2011, p.118). In 2005, mothers spent more than 24 hours a week on household tasks, and fathers only 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 less than once a year, discuss their division of unpaid tasks (Merens et al., 2011, p.142).

The above concise overview of Dutch structural and cultural features sheds light on why Dutch mothers are predominantly in part-time work. However, national characteristics have not led to one homogenous labour market pattern.
among women with children; on the contrary, a varied pattern is visible. This study aims to achieve a better understanding of this variety.

### 3.3 Studies of factors of mothers’ labour participation

Most studies explaining the heterogeneous labour market activity among women focus on external structural and cultural factors that shape their behaviour, such as the constraints and opportunities offered by limited or more generous welfare states regarding their childcare services and financial (tax) provisions towards parenting (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Mandel, 2009), as well as those on societies’ normative (gender) standards and culture, such as the definition of appropriate childcare and the valuation of unpaid work, which people use as an orientation for their behaviour (Aboim, 2010; Daly and Lewis, 2000; Hummelsheim and Hirschle, 2010; Kremer, 2007; Pfau-Effinger, 2006;). How the quality and availability of flexible employment opportunities with family-friendly arrangements plays a role in people choosing different employment options has also been examined (Charles and Harris, 2007; Haas et al., 2006; Reynolds, 2003). However, macro approaches cannot explain the variation of mothers’ labour participation within one country. Meso-level approaches can explain why there is still a pattern of gender segregation within sectors and occupations (Merens et al., 2012). Nonetheless within these sectors there is also a large variation in the hours worked by women.

Micro-economic theories usually stem from the standard neoclassical economic assumption that the number of hours a person wants to work is the outcome of a rational choice between income and leisure (Becker, 1965), and argue that if the earning capacity of husband and wife differs, a specialisation in either paid or domestic work is the most efficient balance. This theory has been re-assessed by various other theories, such as the collective model, which holds that a household consists of several individuals with their own personal preferences, and those decisions within a family lead to Pareto-efficient allocations (Garcia-Mainar et al., 2011). In addition, the resource bargaining theory posits that domestic work is unpleasant and that partners will bring their resources to the bargaining table in order to “buy themselves out” of domestic work (Wiesmann et al., 2010, p.343).

Various empirical studies have shown that weighing up the costs and benefits between partners plays a role in women’s labour market choices (Cloïn, 2010; Kan, 2007; Risman et al., 1999; Stähli et al., 2009; Van Wel and Knijn, 2007). However this role is limited, and individual preferences and personal attitudes towards work and gender play a role as well (Beets et al., 1997; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Hakim, 2000; Hoffnung, 2004; Hooghiemstra, 2000; Marks and Houston, 2002a, 200b; Portegijs et al., 2008b; Risman et al., 1999).

This study builds further on the vast body of research concerning the relationship between employment patterns and personal choices, preferences and attitudes. Most studies on the relationship between preference, attitudes and
Socialized Choices - Labour Market Behaviour of Dutch Mothers

behaviour are based on large surveys, and are in that sense deductive: hypotheses are tested within a framework of concepts that are conceptualised beforehand. These large surveys often lack the nuance and subtlety to describe what mothers underline themselves as relevant when describing their labour market choices. With a qualitative, in-depth research, the main contributitional aim of this chapter is to achieve a better understanding of the differences in the dynamics of mothers’ employment decisions while using mothers’ own words. The central question is:

Do mothers with different working patterns also differ in their narratives of choice, preference and attitudes towards work and family?

3.4 Women’s employment preferences: a matter of choice?

Hakim (2000) was one of the first scholars to claim that attitudinal factors, such as work-life preferences, are important in explaining female employment (p.168). According to Hakim, as a result of diverse social economic changes that started in the late 20th century, personal lifestyle preferences are now able to predict labour market behaviour. These changes are labelled as the ‘new scenario’ and the ‘contraceptive revolution’, and are cited alongside the equal-opportunity revolution, the expansion of white collar occupations, the creation of jobs for secondary earners, and the increasing importance of individual attitudes (Hakim, 2000, 2003c). Personal ideas about labour market participation and childcare are decisive in mothers’ decisions about whether to participate in paid work and to make use of childcare arrangements. Personal lifestyle preferences towards work and motherhood are different from general gender values - what people consider to be just for other people - which are generally vague and malleable, and lack the causal powers of personal preferences (Hakim, 2003c). For example, women may believe that mothers should be free to return to work soon after childbirth, but may still be reluctant to return to work so soon themselves. Hakim claims that in highly tolerant societies such as The Netherlands, public opinion surveys reveal apparently contradictory attitudes, “as all behaviours are regarded as acceptable” (Hakim, 2003b, p.341).

According to Hakim, personal lifestyle preferences of women can be categorised into three idealised preferences, which are apparent in most Western societies: home-centred preferences (accounting for about 20% of women), in which children and family are a woman’s main concern in life; work-centred preferences (about 20%), when woman’s priority in life is employment and/or self-development; and adaptive preferences, with no fixed priority other than to try to combine work and family (about 60%). Women with adaptive preferences are the most sensitive to institutions, laws, customs, national policies and cultures.

A prominent element of preference theory is the narrative of choice (Beagan et al., 2008, p.666). Women are freer to choose their own lifestyle as a result of the new economic and social scenario as described by Hakim, and additionally due to the reduction of household tasks on account of technology, childcare
facilities and family friendly policies. This line of reasoning fits into post-modern theories, which claim that within Western societies, individuals are increasingly released from traditional forms and ascribed roles, and freer than ever to choose their own identity (Beck, 1992). People are not only free to choose what they want, but are also forced to make their own decisions because there are no moral certainties about what is supposed to be a good life (Hakim, 2003, p.341). The extent of participation in the labour market can be seen as part of a self-chosen lifestyle. In addition to the narrative of choice, women’s decisions with respect to care and work are regarded as their own individual choices, and therefore can also be held responsible for their achievements and failures (Everingham et al., 2007).

Researchers have disputed post-modern theories, such as Hakim’s, as well as the research methods used (Crompton and Harris, 1998; De Beer, 2007; Kan, 2007; Sullivan, 2002). These critics argued that people come up against a number of barriers in their everyday lives, which limit their options. Women’s educational attainments, their ethnic and social backgrounds (class), their employment records and age, all affect their future employment perspectives (Kangas and Rostgaard, 2007). Various empirical studies have shown that for many women (and men), preferences do not simply translate into behaviour (Tomlinson, 2006), and there is often a mismatch between preferred and actual work hours, because of structural and personal constraints such as the unavailability of jobs, companies’ social policies, financial deficits, the lack of social career networks and work-family conflict (Crompton and Harris, 1998; Reynolds, 2003). In their empirical research, Charles and Harris (2007) found little evidence to support the view that being ‘set free’ from the constraints of traditional society gives people the opportunity to engage in purposive constructions of their own biographies. In addition, they found that individualised living arrangements are more realistic for younger generations than for older ones. These conclusions are in line with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2003), who demonstrated that processes of negotiation and choices are more in evidence amongst younger generations, as well as amongst those who are better educated and well off.

Other scholars have argued that, through the emphasis of choice and the privatisation of its consequences, gender structures and ascribed gender roles underneath these choices have become disguised. Komter argued (1990) that as a consequence of the belief of free choice, the inner obligation and the moral standard of being a good housewife, mother and wife have become “invisible”. Or, as Beagan et al. (2008) described it, societal gender expectations have gone underground. “Experiencing constraints of women such as longer work hours, a double burden of paid and unpaid work, and unstable child care are seen as individual obstacles that have nothing to do with gender” (p.666). Charles and Harris (2007) emphasised that “the individualization thesis is limited in the sense that individuals remain ‘embedded’ in social networks and that tradition – in the

34 Though, they admit that their research was mainly executed among working-class couples.
form of gendered beliefs about ‘the proper thing to do’ – provides the context within which social actors make decisions about their lives” (p.279). Duncan (2005) referred to these limitations as “gendered moral rationalities” - cultural constructions of choices and constraints regarding motherhood and work. This level of contextualisation bridges the gap between individual preferences and personal constraints and societies’ structural and cultural features. It examines how individual preferences or ‘free choices’ are both socially and culturally shaped, reproduced and constrained (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009, p.323).

Last but not least, studies have indicated that the relationship between attitudes and behaviour is rather reciprocal; life experiences (like children, spouses’ attitudes, education and work) change people’s outlooks (Cunningham et al., 2005; Jansen and Kalmijn, 2000; Kan, 2007; Moen et al., 1997; Steiber and Haas, 2009). It has been observed that people easily adjust their attitudes to justify their behaviour, as is argued by interest-based theorists (Kroska and Elman, 2009).

The focus of this study is to reveal what constraints and openings mothers experience themselves while describing their own work activity. Therefore, the study specifically focuses on the themes and concepts that emerge in their stories vis-à-vis choice, preferences, gender and work attitudes about the ideal division of labour between men and women.

3.5 Research method

A first important question of this thesis is whether mothers with different working patterns also differ in their narratives of choice, work preferences and attitudes? In order to answer the central research question, semi-structured face-to-face interviews have been conducted with 39 mothers living in or in the vicinity of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, all of whom have at least one child younger than 12 years old living at home. The age at which most parents deem children to be old enough to be left on their own is 11 (Duncan, 2005). For this reason, mothers with pre-school aged children generally work less than other mothers, and mothers’ work participation increases with the age of the youngest child (Marks and Houston, 2002a; Van Putten et al., 2008). Although the affect that the age of children has on the number of work hours of mothers varies, some studies do find a profound relationship (Haas et al., 2006; Marks and Houston, 2002a; Risman et al., 1999); others have found that the age of children contributes little towards an understanding of varying employment rates among mothers (Cloïn, 2010; Duncan, 2005).

The interviews took place between April 2010 and November 2010, and on average took one and a half hours. Full transcriptions of the interviews were taken.

In order to select the interviewees, four categories of mothers were differentiated according to their employment patterns: mothers who work 0 to 11 hours per week, 12 to 24 hours, 25 to 35 hours and 36 hours or more. As is well
known, higher educational levels lead to higher levels of labour participation, especially for mothers (Merens et al., 2011). Sufficient education is then understood as a precondition for labour market participation. For example, higher educated women work more, because their higher wage allows them to pay for child-care facilities (Doorewaard et al., 2004, p.11). Furthermore, it is known that women’s and men’s education is positively associated with exposure to ideas about equality and/or the establishment of career-oriented networks (Cunningham et al., 2005, p.887; Kroska and Elman, 2009, p.373). In 2009, 37 per cent of Dutch higher educated mothers worked more than 35 hours, as opposed to only 18 per cent of lower educated mothers. 52 per cent of the lower educated mothers did not participate in the labour market at all, as compared to 12 per cent of the higher educated mothers (Central Bureau of Statistics, Statline, 2011).

In order to be able to reveal whether choices, preferences and attitudes or mainly educational levels influence labour market behaviour, I tried to include in each of the four employment categories an approximately equal number of lower (intermediate vocational level and lower) and higher educated mothers (higher vocational level and university) (see appendix 1). For theoretical reasons, the sample of interviewed mothers was drawn largely from within one urban area, Amsterdam. In this way, differences in employment behaviour among respondents do not differ with respect to the influence of structural and cultural factors which may diverge between urban and rural areas, such as the availability of childcare provisions and jobs and religiousness, which in turn could interfere with potential differences in attitudes, preferences and choices.

In order to achieve good correspondence between research questions and sampling, a strategy of purpose sampling had to be followed (Bryman, 2008, p.458-459). To be able to fill all eight categories (four along employment patterns and two along educational levels) of mothers within one area equally, the respondents were found using the snowball method. The main virtue of theoretical sampling is that the emphasis is upon using theoretical reflection on data as the guide of whether more data are needed. The collection of material ended when theoretical saturation was reached, when new interviewees did not bring more diversity. Quite clearly this research method cannot produce a statistically representative sample, since it relies upon the social contacts between individuals to trace additional contacts.

Firstly, a small group of mothers in the social environment of the researcher, the so-called weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), was approached, predominantly at a primary school in Amsterdam (Old West Quarter). Subsequently, the other respondents were approached on the advice of the first group of respondents. Most respondents agreed immediately to the interview request and showed interest in the subject. A few respondents were initially hesitant, and only a few mothers refused to participate.
Research group

The interviewed mothers were born between 1962 and 1980. Their average age was 39.3 years. Seven interviewees (18 per cent) had a non-Dutch background. Of the total female population of Amsterdam, 50 per cent has a non-Dutch background, so non-native women are underrepresented in the research group (Vrouwenemancipatie in Amsterdam 2011). This also holds for single mothers: only four of the interviewed mothers had been divorced. However, as mentioned, ethnicity and the presence of a spouse were not discriminating factors in selecting the research group.

23 mothers were highly educated (higher vocational education and university), and 16 lower educated (intermediate vocational education and lower) (see appendix 3). Ten mothers were full-time homemakers, eight mothers had a small part-time job (12 to 24 hours), eleven mothers had a large part-time job (25 to 35 hours) and ten mothers worked full-time.

Interview questions

The interviews can be characterised as oral life history interviews (Bryman, 2008). The interviewees were invited to look back at specific moments throughout the course of their life while focussing on the behavioural steps of social life: finishing high school, choosing a continuation course, starting their first job, giving birth to their first child, continuing through to the present.

Iterative cycles formed the basis of the theoretical framework, centred on Grounded Theory (Bryman, 2008, p.541). Initially, the interview questions were based on a number of concepts that were expected to vary among the four groups of mothers: early adult work aspirations and choices, present preferred number of work hours, gender and work values and attitudes. After the first interviews, and an examination of the mothers’ answers in the light of this study’s central themes, more theory was incorporated, in order to interpret the interview-material more fully. For example, more questions towards early adult expectations of motherhood were included.

The study is built on four core categories or central themes: narrative of choice towards work (including work experience and number of preferred work hours), work attitude, gender general values and personal attitudes, and attitudes towards motherhood. The main concepts within these themes are defined below. The interviewees were asked several open questions in order to discover how and with which words women refer to these themes themselves.

Narrative of choice. In the interviews, specific attention was given to whether choices or decisions were made implicitly or explicitly, and whether this revealed something about mothers’ perceived behavioural control. Perceived self-efficacy corresponds to the extent to which a person feels able to enact the behaviour, which is related to the supposed ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour. A person’s sensitivity may be based on past experiences as well as on expected
hindrances and obstacles (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1991). Implicit decisions can be characterised in a number of ways, including as indirect, non-reflective, retrospective awareness of having made decisions, incremental behaviour, conflict avoidance, agreement without discussion, or as pure impulse. In other words, these contain relatively little perceived behavioural control. Explicit decisions on the other hand are characterised by a prospective awareness of making decisions, proactive planning, explicit agreements, and conflict management steps towards work (Wiesmann et al., 2010, p.343), and are thus highly perceived behavioural controls. Associated questions include the following: How did you end up in the type of work you do or did? Did you have, as a young adult, ideas about your future profession, and work in general? If you had time again, would you choose a different direction? Do you work the number of hours you prefer? What does your ideal working week look like? Why is it not that way?

Work attitudes are defined as personal motivations to pursue paid work: What are the most important reasons for you to work?

Gender attitudes refer to a mother’s personal desired division of labour with her spouse; questions were included on her general ideas about the ideal division of labour between men and women. A traditional gender attitude means a desire to have the main responsibility at home, whereas her partner is in paid work. An egalitarian gender attitude implies a wish to equally share paid and unpaid work. Adaptive attitudes are here defined as the personal desire to combine paid work and family tasks, with consent to the idea that mothers have more responsibilities at home and fathers may work full-time. Related interview questions: Do you have ideas about the ideal division of labour with your spouse? Are you satisfied with your own current division of labour? What would you like to change?

Some questions about mothers’ general gender values were also asked, such as: How do you perceive differences between men and women in general? Do you have an opinion about full-time working mothers or mothers who are not employed?

Attitudes towards motherhood concern a mother’s early adult ideas and images of motherhood and children, and the way she experiences motherhood and childcare: Did you picture yourself as a mother before you had children? How many children did you want then? How do you experience motherhood now?

Further questions were asked retrospectively, for example enquiring after the respondents’ ideas about education and work before they started their careers, and also to their juvenile desires to become a mother. In general, the mothers were able to answer the questions reasonably quickly without much hesitation. Nevertheless, one should be aware of the possibility of selectiveness of their memories, which may influence their answers. People may adjust their memories to justify their present behaviour, as is argued by interest-based theorists (Kroska and Elman, 2009).
Interview analysis

The answers of each respondent were categorised separately along the core concepts of this study, and bundled along the four groups of mothers with different employment patterns (mothers who work weekly hours of 0 to 11 hours, 12 to 24 hours a week, 25 to 35 hours and 36 hours or more). In this way, four large matrices were created to outline the results. While thematically analysing the matrices, the main focus was firstly whether the similarities within the groups of mothers and the differences between the groups of mothers had enough grounds to maintain the four groups which had initially been based solely on their employment patterns. The narratives proved to be sufficiently similar within, and discerning enough among, the groups, and so therefore it was decided to keep the four groups intact. The research was specifically sensitive to perceiving the lives of the respondents in terms of continuity and process, which is important in order to understand decision-making processes throughout life. Therefore, the interview transcripts of each respondent were not cut in different codes, but kept as close as possible to each story told by the respondents. The second part of the analysis consisted of searching for sensitising concepts that could be uses as pegs to describe the central narratives of, and the similarities within, the different groups. How do mothers within each group make sense of their own world and their own decisions? With what words and characteristics do they describe their lives, situations and decisions? What is not included in their stories, but taken-for-granted or ignored? There were also exceptions within each group, and these are addressed where relevant. There are also similarities among different groups, and even among all groups, which are described as well.

3.6 Findings

1. Stay-at-home mothers: “Child-minded mothers, hesitant workers”: Drifters

Narrative of choice

The narrative of choice regarding work among stay-at-home mothers appears rather weak. Their sense of self-agency, *i.e. the feeling that one causes one’s own actions and their outcome* (Aarts et al., 2009), is hesitant – happenings are experienced as outside their reach of influence and they seem to drift into new situations. Mothers describe diverse circumstances that have led to their decisions to give up their jobs: a hard-working spouse (despite earlier promises to work less), the availability, high costs and poor quality of childcare provisions, job dissatisfaction, illnesses (such as being burnt-out), redundancy, sick relatives in need of care, or their lack of knowledge of the Dutch language or the right diplomas. “If I had enjoyed my work more, I would have kept working” (Astrid).
“I didn’t like my new job, I didn’t have a good child minder, I was very busy with our new house, my partner had an accident and was off: I couldn’t see the forest for the trees. And then I asked myself: for whom am I doing it?” (Nora).

Each mother’s decision to give up work was generally a gradual, sliding process. A conscious individual decision to give up work and a desire to be a full-time homemaker was often absent. Most of the full-time homemakers interviewed missed having work, a life outside their home, and subsequently they felt restless. They would like to work, mostly part-time (20 to 24 hours) and preferably during school hours.

The findings reveal that despite positive work preferences, personal and structural constraints can limit mothers’ options to put their work preference into practice. In addition, stay-at-home mothers do not seem to adjust their preferences to the situation to smoothen feelings of uneasiness, as is argued by interest-based theories. Nevertheless they might still justify their behaviour to the interviewer, because Dutch society expects mothers to work, albeit part-time. Zimmerman (2000) already showed that in Western countries, stay-at-home parenting is not supported. “They have to work harder to feel good about their choice because they receive little validation from society for the work they are doing” (p.349). Stay-at-home mothers sometimes feel guilty or are a bit shameful, because they didn’t develop themselves much, even though they had a lot of potential.

Work attitude

There are some particular features of the working attitudes of stay-at-home mothers, which I will now address. The narratives of full-time homemakers reveal that, as juveniles, they often lacked a clear professional preference: “I didn’t have a clue what I wanted to be” or, “I really couldn’t picture myself at any job when I was young”. Because of this indecisiveness, and sometimes due to a lack of support from their direct environment, they often did not follow (the right) continuation courses. The absence or wrong choice of a continuation course was then repeatedly followed by mismatch jobs, which later pushed them out of the labour market. At present, negative or irrelevant work experiences and the lack of the right diplomas make it difficult for full-time homemakers to put their work preference into practice.

Stay-at-home mothers especially value the intrinsic and social aspects of work. They do not consider having their own salary as essential. They can cope well without their own salary and having less money than before. “I found it really difficult to give up my economic independence, but I could easily cut the tie” (Mieke).

As mentioned, stay-at-home mothers desire something from work – such as having an escape from home, or having something useful to do – and yet they do
not relate to or associate themselves with hard-working mothers. “My friends have already had two burn-outs, and then I think for whom are you doing it? Always in a hurry, and being exhausted all the time. And then those heels... and the bag... and then I think that I am glad I don’t need to do that” (Mireille).

Nevertheless, Mireille doesn’t want to be allies with the mothers hanging around the schoolyard drinking coffee either.

**Gender attitude**

The gender attitudes of the interviewed stay-at-home mothers are less traditional than one would expect, based on their lifestyle. Full-time housewives consider child-care and household tasks as their main responsibility, and in general have no other priorities. However they are not overly satisfied with their current traditional division of labour and so deal with contradictory inner feelings. As described, mothers would like to be in paid work and desire (often receiving) help from their husbands. However where this is not the case, mothers generally tend to withhold from complaining. “Actually, he always does a lot, so I cannot really complain about it. Always when I say, oh, and those children are so... he says, ‘leave the dishes for me’. But you know, sometimes I think, yes, yes, those dishes, I can do those too. You should go and deal with our annoying children... But yes, I also think, well okay, you can do the dishes then...” (Janne).

Stay at-home mothers describe their partners quite often as egalitarian husbands. “He always said, and I believe him: ‘You must do what you want. If you want to work then we can arrange an au pair or bring the children to the day care. If you don’t want to work, it is fine as well’” (Nora).

In other situations, mothers cannot remember explicitly discussing their work decisions with their partners, yet they do remember that they agreed fully with their conclusion to give up work. This marital decision-making process vis-à-vis mothers’ employment activity expresses two rather opposite ideologies. On the one hand, it expresses the modern view that work is something personal to decide upon, but on the other hand, it might also reveal a rather traditional attitude that work for mothers is not a self-evident matter, and that not working is a viable option. Whatever attitude prevails, the partner’s apparent tolerant attitude leads to the situation that how children are taken care of mostly depends on their mother’s decisions in relation to work. Partners’ tolerant attitudes may appear agreeable, but as I have described above, mothers’ decisions to give up work are not always such a pre-planned or positive choice for motherhood. Rather, they are frequently the result of a sequence of unfavourable happenings, for example escaping an otherwise wearisome career. In this light, partners’ liberal or phlegmatic attitudes allow mothers to slip into non-working situations that do not necessarily make their lives easier or happier. In addition, there are examples of husbands or partners who did not comply with earlier plans to work less. However this has not led to an apparent conflict between the partners, rather mothers deal with and adapt to the situation.
Another finding is that stay-at-home mothers are, unexpectedly, not very critical about mothers who work full-time. “If mothers really like their jobs, they should work 40 hours. In that case it’s much less draining than sitting at home. I really think so” (Nienke).

This ‘tolerant’ attitude of full-time homemakers towards full-time working mothers may be a reaction to the fact that they often receive (critical) comments themselves about not being employed. “People ask me: what are you doing all day: And then I say on purpose: Nothing, I do nothing all day” (Mireille).

Early adult attitude towards motherhood

Being a young adult, the mothers remember they had a strong wish to become a mother and have children. They are particularly child-minded, and are somewhat less outspoken about their maternal role; or as Marieke describes it: “As a mother, you have to put yourself aside.”

In their previous jobs, they had difficulties switching off: “When I was at work, I always thought of them sitting on the ground with dirty nappies, neglected by the professional carers” (Nora).

Using the terminology of Duncan (2005), stay-at-home mothers’ gendered moral rationalities about childcare are in particular expressed in relation to how they understand the needs of their children, and less in relation to how they understand their own needs, or the balance between the two (p.57).

Mothers want their children to have the same things that they were used to having themselves when they were younger: a nice, cosy house, where there is ‘simply’ someone there for the children. In particular, after-school day care is not referred to enthusiastically. Mothers want to offer their children the freedom and intimacy of home, instead of being once again in a structured and crowded public environment (see also Portegijs 2006; Portegijs et al., 2008b) and also because it is not ‘good’ for the children to be in professional childcare too often. Children need to bond with their parents, and vice versa. The fact that mothers remain primarily responsible for this bonding process is unquestioned.

Stay-at-home interviewees appeared successful in realising their juvenile wish to have three or more children, a situation which makes the option of being a full-time home-makers acceptable. “Large families tend to push women away from paid work, whereas good jobs draw women into the labour force” (Risman et al., 1999, p.337).
Among this group, the narrative of choice towards motherhood is particularly strong; mothers enjoy combining family tasks with a small job. Other people approve largely with this situation, which is also considered a luxury, as confirmed by the mothers themselves: “I am really happy I can do it like this, it is an ideal situation” (Esmé). Their work preferences are sometimes for fewer hours than the actual number of hours they work. Often financial considerations prevail, when working three days instead of two. Some mothers admit that if it were not out of economic necessity, for example because they bought an expensive house, they would rather work two days than three days a week. One mother in this group, Carien, would rather work more hours, if her partner worked less. However, her spouse just started a new job having been previously made redundant, so for him it was better to show his potential and work five days, while for her it is not a big issue, and so she is happy with the hours she works. Thus, although behaviour may also stem from necessity rather than from preference, mothers easily seem to give in to the necessity of working (somewhat) more or less hours than they prefer.

Work attitude

Mothers in this group often had clear ideas about what they liked to do as a profession when they were younger, and also succeed in doing it. Often they describe how they were stimulated and supported by others, like their parents, people at school, or their peers when choosing a certain profession. However, they also describe how they anticipated early on the fact of becoming a mother, and often they chose the easier professional options because of that. They do not want to make a career now while their children are young. They like their work, but consider motherhood more important than work. Differences in work attitudes are related to educational levels rather than to employment preferences. Lower educated women in particular value the social aspects of work – meeting other people, working together, doing something meaningful for other people, doing something else besides caring and household tasks – and also the salary. Higher educated women value work particularly because of the possibility of self-development, using their brains, having another identity, and self-affirmation. “So I can be proud when people ask me; what are you doing?” (Duke). This quote also reveals the current social norm for mothers to be in paid work, especially higher educated mothers; ‘only’ mothering does not suffice any more.
Chapter 3 - A qualitative typology of Dutch mothers’ employment narratives

Gender attitude

 Mothers with small part-time jobs are generally also very satisfied with the current division of labour within their household, where, on average, they perform the vast majority of their unpaid work. Their satisfaction reveals a rather traditional gender attitude. These mothers perceive their role as mothers and nearly full-time homemakers as natural and self-evident, despite their (part-time) jobs.

 “He always starts early, and I a little later, it works perfectly and automatically. I always collect them from the crèche, because he’s usually gone at night” (Esmé).

 “We have divided the tasks fine, he is the full-time worker. He leaves home in the morning between half past seven and a quarter to eight, and eleven hours later he returns. But Walter doesn’t hit the sofa, as soon as he returns, he keeps working [...] Walter will put the garbage out and Walter manages all the business stuff [...] I do everything with love, although, I need to hear from him, ‘You did that really well,’ or ‘Hey, that’s done - that’s wonderful!’” (Nel).

 The help from their husbands or partners is not taken-for-granted but is appreciated largely. The unpaid tasks are divided along recognisable gender lines, but the inequalities that come with that are unquestioned.

 “I think I do more, it just doesn’t feel like he’s is not the type that hits the sofa. It’s more a consequence of the fact that I am home more than he is” (Carien).

 “I do most household chores and he does his little things as well” (Brigitte).

 Mothers do not think they care better than their husbands, yet they do consider themselves more sensitive, for example buying birthday presents, or putting an extra jacket on when it is cold.

 Mothers with (small) part-time jobs are somewhat judgemental towards full-time working mothers, mirroring their relatively traditional gender attitude: Why do you have a child if you want to work full time? Working five days? I find that absurd. Often, they do not only find it disheartening for the children, but also pitiful for the women themselves, because they miss so much. The mothers in this group have no critical remarks regarding full-time mothering: “Do I need to have an opinion on that? You can’t force anyone to work, can you?” (Willemien).

 Motherhood

 The privileged mothers have strong and positive identifications with their maternal role. They have found a balance between the needs of their children and that of themselves. They often feel like natural mothers, want to be a warm
mother figure, and had an idyllic picture of motherhood when they were young, sitting down with their children while playing with toys. And now they are not disappointed and do not consider motherhood as a burden, although they do admit that having the children around all day often makes them physically more tired than working all day. The mothers always thought they would stop working if they had children, but they like their jobs, and have found that it is not necessary to stop working altogether, because their parents do their share or their husbands help out, together with a few days professional day care. The interviewees would never take their children to the crèche too often, as that would be considered a failure to their children, and is often not something that they were used to themselves when they were young either.

3. Mothers with large part-time jobs (25-35 hours): Balancers

Narrative of choice

The narrative of the mothers with large part-time jobs is that they try to balance their desires to be both good mothers and good workers. They tend to really enjoy their work and motherhood: Work is essential, caring is important. The sense of self-agency among this group towards work is high. There are examples of mothers who are able to change their life paths when things happened that they disliked. Like Sophie who once gave up a job where she had to share an office with a colleague who smoked three packs a day, and then there was a friend who said: “Why don’t you start your own business?” She thought: “Anything’s better than this, I just want to go”. So she left the job and started out on her own. Or Juul who realises, “I have actually often done the things that people advised me against. But I was strong-headed.”

However, their ‘choice’ of work hours (generally 32 hours), which corresponds with their preferred number of work hours, is also characterised by the social expectations to work part-time and not full-time.

“In my work it is an exception to work three days, but also to work five days”
(Medina).

“It seemed fun to be one day alone with your child, yet I also did not quite dare to continue working full-time.”

Have you talked to someone about it?

“Yes. But you don’t have to say much, because everyone assumes automatically that you will work less” (Juul).

“Jan finds it okay that I started working less. I think that for him it was quite nice, he got more leeway then: because he really likes to work a lot” (Alice).
Work attitude

The women in this group, as in the previous groups, have positive attitudes towards work. Actually all these mothers agree that work gives a sense of self-identity and self-dignity. Yet, in this latter group, mothers also mention a motive that was remarkably absent in the previous two groups, namely their economic independence. Although sometimes they work because of financial necessity, they never only work for the money. They also share the conviction that women should be financially independent, otherwise: *What would you do if you ended up alone?* They consider it rather naïve where women do not find this important.

Balancing mothers also narrate that they made early adult choices in relation to their education and profession. “*After a two-hour lecture in philosophy, I felt immediately, I belong there. I actually had it quite worked out, when I think about it*” (Juul). Sometimes the mothers describe how they were encouraged by other people, because of role models of women in the media, family members who had the same profession, stimulating teachers, sometimes supporting friends, but they also refer to bugbears.

“*To work in a shoe shop, the thought of that made me sick, horrible. Yet I had no legs up, no network. I thought it has to work, otherwise my life could fail [...] I thought if I earn my own money with designing, I have succeeded in life*” (Sophie).

However, often it is that case that the occupations they are doing now in one that they fell into, and was not part of a planned career. And some mothers confess that if they had the chance to plan their professional path again, they would make different choices, and given a second chance would want to be a scientist, a doctor, a psychologist, something more artistic, or to have their own company.

“*Somewhere in that period I have been put on a different track, now I think why didn’t I stick to my own one*” (Alice).

Or Cathy, who describes herself as a real entrepreneur, and that’s what she always will be. However, if she could start over a again, she would prefer to be a doctor. Mothers did not follow their ‘real’ dream for a variety of reasons, but two overwhelmingly prevailed: either they fell in love or they needed or wanted money. As a result, their dream careers just didn’t happen.

However most mothers are not unsatisfied with their present occupations, and think they are doing reasonably well. They suppose that if they wanted to climb higher on the professional ladder, they would have to give up a lot, especially in relation to the care of their children, which is something they would dislike. The mothers are often proud of their jobs, and people around them envy them, because of the interesting or attractive work they are doing, or because of the time schedule and flexibility of their work.
**Gender attitude**

The ideal family life of mothers within this group is, without exception, to share paid and unpaid tasks equally with their partners. Furthermore, a large number of mothers within this group seem to practise their ideal, especially if their husbands work four days per week as well. These mothers realise their rather exceptional gender division of labour, and describe their partners as unmacho men, as gentlemen, or as caring fathers. The greatest contrast with the previous two groups is that for mothers in this group, it is certainly not a self-evident matter to take the lion’s share of the household work: “Preferably, I do nothing in the household.” (Cathy).

They often have someone else in to clean the house. However, as in the previous groups, they do not consider men and women equal, and remaining inequalities are justified while referring to their character or else accepted because men and women are just not the same.

“I am a bit ambivalent. I like to do it myself, because I think I give them more attention than he does and I help them more with homework, but I am not always happy with our situation either. He cooks once a week, but I need to say, ‘do you want to cook again today?’” (Alice).

“I was shocked how soon I found myself in those patterns, yet I do think it is a biological thing” (Diana).

Moreover, if gender roles are reversed, these are emphasised and remarked upon. Also within this group, the women have a greater responsibility for thinking about the organisation of the household, especially in relation to the task of care. The following quote from Juul illustrates how mothers perceive themselves and persist in taking on this responsibility.

“And it’s not that I do more, but I feel more responsible. If I can’t care for the children, then I do not saddle him with it, but call a babysitter. If he can’t, I’ll do it as well, I call the babysitter, so I organise it. It is probably my character” (Juul).

Like most mothers, Juul individualises her responsibility for the caring as well as for the household tasks, whereas in fact the large majority of Dutch women bear this responsibility. Wiesmann et al. (2010, p.351) demonstrate that “women generally bear most of the responsibility for the majority of domestic tasks, something which they often found tiring and stressful when combined with paid work.”

Sometimes, balancing mothers discuss their discontent with their partners, but the narratives also reveal acquiescence with the situation.

“For me, it would make a difference if Jan would collect them from school once a week, but he can’t make it” (Yvette).
Chapter 3 - A qualitative typology of Dutch mothers’ employment narratives

“It would be ideal if Eric got home somewhat earlier, but that is not going to happen” (Medina).

Another finding in relation to their gender attitudes is that despite their wish to share paid and unpaid tasks equally with their partners, if mothers do succeed, they start to feel guilty towards their partner, and pursue gender-compensating strategies. Take Sophy, for example, who shares the unpaid tasks equally during the week, but then as a reward gives her partner the whole of Sunday off.

Mothers who prefer a large part-time job are fairly critical about full-time homemakers. However, they also think that working full-time and being a mother at the same time is too demanding, and wonder how these mothers manage. They think they miss a lot of their children, and do not consider that fulfilling. Their remarks reveal a fine demarcation line between mothers with large part-time jobs and full-time working mothers. Although some contradictions in their narratives appear as well, rationalities have been put forward to justify their own choices, even though they are not consistent towards other women. For example, Cathy describes how she gave up her managerial position when her child arrived because, according to her, working less than 5 days a week was not possible at a certain management level. Yet, later she says she does not believe women who say they cannot work less than five days in their jobs.

Early adult attitude towards motherhood

For the mothers in this group, having children was not something that had always been taken for granted, and at least wasn’t a serious consideration before they turned thirty. Often they had children because they felt there was no option not to have them: their husband wanted to have children, people around them had children, or it felt like the last chance before their forties. Sometimes they felt that once they became a mother, their life would end, and this negative sentiment towards motherhood could also prevail into their thirties. Now they are mothers they actually enjoy it, but at the beginning they often had difficulties getting used to their new identity as a mum.

“I hit the roof during my first pregnancy leave, I was bored to death “ (Annemiek).

“I felt trapped, I wanted to give the stroller a huge push: Whaaah leave me alone!” (Sophy).

Sometimes they worked three days for a while when their children were young, but often they found it boring, difficult and exhausting. Motherhood is experienced as fulfilling and great, but also as tiring and difficult. They would like to work less in the evenings, have more time to read a book, or to call friends.
“Sometimes I think, ‘Go away all of you!’ I want to have space for myself. I start screaming at my children when they just ask an innocent question, then I feel guilty about it” (Medina).

Yet, they would feel egoistic as well to take their children to day care more than three days per week. Most interviewed mothers within this group, as with the previous groups, wish to raise their children as much as possible by both parents themselves. They adapt – or try to at least – their working schedules as much as they can, in order to be able to collect their children from school. In other cases, they make use of a child-minder or, preferably, they ask their own parents to pick up their children from school.

4. Full-time working mothers: Ambitious

Narrative of choice

As expected, mothers with full-time work have very strong narratives of choice towards work: “I come from the generation that you just do what you want” (Ingrid). In particular, full-time working mothers seem clear in their choices and often deliberately do not choose part-time work. “I’m just not the type for part-time work. I have not the discipline to say, ‘This is my limit, I do not work more’” (Alisha).

Generally these mothers didn’t even consider cutting back their work hours after their children were born. Some mothers believe it is impossible to perform their jobs in fewer hours, and they would have to choose a less interesting job if it was part-time. For example, a single mother, Michelle, describes that she needs the money, but she would also keep working if she didn’t need to. However, she would slow down her pace. That is to say, she would work the same number of hours, but differently.

Sometimes, mothers work full-time because they want to be paid for the work they are doing, whereas other women might give up pay to be flexible in their work hours, but work an additional number of hours in their own time. Full-time working mothers want the salary they deserve. The narratives of full-time working mothers reveal a strong sense of self-agency.

“And then I only wanted to live in Amsterdam. I first had to find a house and then a job, which was very difficult at that time [...] I would never get stuck somewhere. I would never fall in despair and sit down: I hate it when people do that” (Michelle).

And also Ilse, who went to Hong Kong, after she had already been to New York and Japan, to find a job there, which she achieved and she ended up staying there for five years. Later, when she reached the age of forty, she invited forty friends, and she put several points of discussion on the agenda about the
combination of work and motherhood. She received so many positive reactions to her idea, that it was the beginning of her publishing her own magazine.

**Work attitude**

Remarkably, full-time working mothers recall that even though they are ambitious in their self-development, they have no wish to make a career or climb the social ladder. The mothers are ambitious and have careers, yet they claim not to be too preoccupied with their careers. Mothers rather underline the intrinsic values of work, and distance themselves from (petty) extrinsic values.

“I am ambitious in terms of what I want to achieve, but not in terms of having a career that doesn’t interest me” (Lotte).

Within this group, mothers also underline the importance of their economic independence. They describe how this value already existed before they entered the labour market.

“I’ve always said as a young girl, that at the very least I want to earn my own money. It is one of the main reasons why I work” (Alisha).

And for Annelies, it is horrific to think that because she has no income she couldn’t leave her partner if she wanted to. Ambitious mothers cannot imagine being without work, and do not grasp what full-time mothers do all day. They consider it unwise and highlight the necessity of economic independence.

“Then I think, ‘why did you study?’. I think there must be some payback, and that is what I miss a bit in the Netherlands” (Ebru).

Generally, full-time working mothers have always worked many hours and enjoyed it. They do not mind that work takes up the majority of their time – it is taken-for-granted as part of the game if you want to be taken seriously by male colleagues and want to achieve something. Sometimes they would prefer more flexibility, and would like to work one day per week from home, if this is not yet possible.

There are some exceptions of full-time working mothers who stepped out of the labour market for a (short) period. Some mothers who work in the public sector made use of the financially attractive availability of paid parental leave, when their children were younger. However, most of their experiences were negative. For example Ebru gave up her job overnight, because she was fed up with the “bullshit” at work. However, when she was at home she did not like it at all, “It is really no fun to be at home”, and she could only remember the good things about work. So she started working full-time again and her children went to professional day care five days a week, which is exceptional in the Netherlands and also demonstrates her strong sense of self-agency. Another example is Rosa, who had to stop working after her first pregnancy because of pelvic instability, yet she “missed the whole world”.
Gender attitude

The mothers who work and prefer to work full-time have the most egalitarian gender attitudes, with corresponding divisions of tasks at home with their spouses, if a partner is present. The mothers often emphasise that they would never be able to work that many hours without their partner. In some cases, their husbands perform the majority of the unpaid tasks. However, just like the other groups, full-time working mothers accept differences between men and women and rearing practices along recognisable gender lines.

“Women interact differently with children to men. I do think that women care slightly better. I mean really taking care of them, making sure they get enough vitamins, have had their bath and things like that. Asking, how school was [...] I can see that my husband can challenge them more, at times when I’d say, ‘don’t do that’” (Annelies).

And they all pull the strings in the household organisation: “I have more responsibility for the organisation of the household. It would be nice if he would take on more responsibility. But it is just more man-like to take it easy in the household” (Marlieke).

And they also pursue some gender-compensating strategies, like Sheila and Alisha who have divided the tasks almost equally with their partners. However, on Sundays Alisha is in the kitchen for hours to cook all the meals for the week. And Sheila does exactly the same, and also describes how in the beginning, when her partner stayed at home with their young children, she had prearranged everything for him: “I planned ahead, cooked dinner and put everything in order [...] I called him in the afternoon, however I do trust him now.” She still cooks before she leaves home, and he just needs to warm the food up.

Early adult attitude towards motherhood

Attitudes of full-time working mothers towards mothering are similar to those of balancing mothers. Their early adult attitudes towards motherhood were ambivalent. Before their thirties, motherhood was not self-evident for them.

“Kurt really wanted to be a father. My desire for a child was not as strong as Kurt’s” (Claire).

These mothers generally have fewer children than the mothers without jobs or with small jobs, and gave birth to their children at a comparatively older age. Their overall narrative is that they find work easier than motherhood. Some mothers had children at a young age – occasionally by accident, sometimes planned – but motherhood was more of a burden than they had expected. They find work easier.
As mentioned, mothers in this group appear somewhat less sensitive to the Dutch norm of self-care and of not taking their children to professional day-care too often, or not having an au pair.

“It needs to be organised: professional day care is the best thing that has happened to me” (Alisha).

However, ambitious mothers generally also consider three days enough. They are reluctant to admit they make use of an au pair. And although they do give up shared time with their children in favour of work, they sacrifice their own leisure, social and hobby time, to spend as much time as possible with their children. This finding corresponds with the conclusion drawn by Garcia-Mainar et al. (2011) who demonstrates that more hours spent on paid work is associated with more hours spent on childcare by the mother herself (the opposite relationship is found with fathers).

3.7 Conclusions and discussion

The present study aims to shed light on how behaviour is explained by mothers in their narratives of choice, work preference and their attitudes towards work, gender and motherhood, in order to understand the diverse employment pattern of Dutch mothers. For this purpose, 39 mothers living in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, with diverse employment behaviours, were interviewed. They were grouped as: stay-at-home mothers, mothers with small part-time jobs (12-24 hours), mothers with large part-time jobs (25-25 hours) and full-time working mothers. The analysis revealed that the alternative courses of employment action among the interviewees coincides with different mixes of choice, constraints, preferences and attitudes, which form the basis of a typology, as is displayed in table 2.

Table 2. Typology of mothers based on their employment narratives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work hours</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>12-24</th>
<th>25-35</th>
<th>35+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative of choice ‘Self agency’</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred work hours</td>
<td>16-24 hours</td>
<td>16-24 hours</td>
<td>25-35 hours</td>
<td>35+ hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work attitude</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic independence</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender attitude</td>
<td>Traditional/adaptive</td>
<td>Rather traditional</td>
<td>Adaptive/Egalitarian</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction gender division of labour</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>+/-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-=absent, +/-=ambivalent or variable, +=positive, +++= very positive

The typology of mothers in table 2 shows how mothers differ in their rationalities of choice, which are much more concerned with weighing the financial costs and benefits, while explaining their work aspirations and choosing their career paths.
Their “narratives of choice” relate to a sense of self agency, their (young adult) attitudes towards work (especially towards economic independence) and motherhood. These all vary, which can be patterned in relation to their employment activity. More research is needed to shed light on the origins of these differences among the groups of mothers: it might be a result of early socialization patterns, as is shown by previous research (e.g. Barret and White 2002; Cunningham, 2001; Trent and South, 1992), or could be driven by personal traits, since the interviewees all live in one homogenous institutional and social context.

The extent to which choices have been released from society’s ties, freeing mothers to choose their own lifestyles, as is argued to be the case by post-modernist theories, seems open for debate. Stay-at-home mothers describe how for various reasons they are not able to work their preferred number of hours, but rather are led by negative (work) experiences and their partners’ neutral attitudes towards mothers’ work ambitions. This seems to have been decisive in their behavioural steps towards becoming a full-time homemaker. This finding confirms earlier research. “When women want to quit work, it is typically because their jobs are not good, not because they want to be full-time homemakers” (Thompson, 1989, p.851). “Women who face blocked mobility or other problems, are ‘pushed’ toward domesticity” (Risman, 1999, p.323). Stay-at-home mothers experience a tension between their (and others’) acceptance of their decision to give up work on the one hand, and societal expectations that they work part-time on the other. “Stay-at-home parents expressed that they felt society’s disappointment for not doing more challenging and interesting work” (Zimmerman, 2000, p.343).

In addition, how do we value choice, when mothers ‘choose’ a life that fits society’s cultural standards perfectly, by working a small number of hours and being a good and present mother as well, which is the case for the privileged mothers? And how do we perceive choice when mothers try to combine motherhood and full-time work, sacrificing leisure time and sleep, while they still carry the main responsibility for the unpaid tasks? Evidence of movement towards role-sharing in the home is limited to only a small group of mothers. The findings lead to the conclusion that mothers’ employment behaviour can be viewed a result of a dynamic interplay between a mother’s sense of self-agency, work preference and gender and work attitudes on the one hand, and her work-life experiences, her circumcised needs, society’s institutions and gender norms on the other. Put differently, Dutch mothers’ heterogeneous labour market behaviour cannot be understood as simple and varied expressions of free choice, but rather as mostly intentional, but also unintentional, outcomes of mothers’ diverse – though always engendered – perceptions of possibilities and constraints.

The results might help the Dutch Government in their aim to achieve an active labour force of 80 per cent by 2020.35 In particular, this is focussed upon the

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35 Share of the total population (age 15-65) that aspires to work more than 12 hours a week,
preferences of stay-at-home mothers. The study revealed that the current lifestyle of stay-at-home mothers does not correspond to their attitudes or preferred lifestyle, which is not as traditional or home-centred as one would expect. Their stories of how as young adults they missed a helping hand in choosing their profession, or why else they are not able to put their work preferences into practice, opens opportunities for achieving the Dutch political goal.

Despite clear disparities, there are also uniformities among the mothers’ stories. In all narratives, the perception of gender, considerations for society’s norms and values in relation to the appropriate division of labour, and stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, are almost entirely absent. The interviewees are generally satisfied with the division of labour with their husband and are reluctant to make critical remarks, despite obvious inequalities among all groups. Previous research has already demonstrated that women have a discordant interest in seeing the domestic division of labour as unfair (Beagan et al., 2008, p.656). “Women may feel that criticism of domestic inequality constitutes a personal attack on the men in their lives” (Kane and Sanchez, 1994, p.1081).

The findings of this study reveal that many mothers have in the back of their minds vivid pictures of their fathers sitting on the couch with a newspaper, compared to which the contributions of their own husband seem a big improvement. These conclusions concerning the perception of gender demonstrate that societal expectations, which shape gender norms, have indeed, as Beagon (2007) formulates it, “gone underground”. The current upbringing along recognisable gender lines is justified by the expected natural differences, or else tends to be privatised: “it is probably my character”. A remarkable homogenous status quo of harmoniously accepting the differences between the spouses seems present in the Netherlands. There is no manifest conflict (Komter, 1990b), although mothers might tacitly desire more equality (Wiesmann et al., 2010). However, there are subtle differences between mothers, corresponding to their gender attitudes regarding the ‘acceptance’ of these inequalities. Mothers with traditional or adaptive attitudes often do not see inequalities, but perceive the situation as natural (mothers with small part-time jobs), or do not consider it right to complain about it (full-time mothers). Egalitarian mothers find it more or less normal that their husbands take on a large part of the unpaid work, but seem to surrender to the remaining inequalities. The present “narrative of non-complaining” among Dutch mothers, as it may be part of the Dutch gender culture and also apparent in other affluent societies, might be one of the reasons why (Bianchi et al., 2000) the share of Dutch husbands partaking in household tasks and care has shown little progress since 1995 (Bucx, 2011), and why part-time work remains such a popular option for most Dutch mothers.