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## **Young women's contradictory expectations and their perceived capabilities for future work-family reconciliation in Finland**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores young women's expectations on future work-family reconciliation in Finland, a Nordic country well-known for the promotion of gender equality. Utilising Sen's capabilities approach, we content-analysed thirty individual interviews to identify differences in women's expectations and their perceived capabilities in future work and care. The results showed that irrespective of their employment status and educational attainment, the women's expectations were contradictory, reflecting a current Finnish gender culture that embraces both the ideal of shared parenthood and the primacy of maternal care. Between-group differences were also found. The employed women perceived themselves as having the capability to balance work, family and, personal time in the future. The women who were studying and had higher education- and career-related expectations perceived themselves as capable of combating gender inequality in their future working lives. In contrast, the unemployed women perceived their capabilities in both their future work and care as limited, thereby constraining their agency to realise their choices in work-family reconciliation and family decision-making. These findings indicate that Finnish women's expectations on future work-family reconciliation are shaped by institutional, societal and individual socioeconomic factors.

**Keywords: young women, expectations, work-family reconciliation, capabilities**

## Introduction

Across Europe, young adults are delaying parenthood (Nilsen et al. 2012; Sobotka 2017). At the same time, they are exposed to a precarious labour market characterised by unstable and insecure jobs (e.g., Kalleberg and Vallas 2018) that jeopardises their future employment and care prospects (Mills and Blossfeld 2013; Sobotka, Skirbekk, and Philipov 2011). This scenario means that young adults will face the demands of forming a family while simultaneously experiencing entry into an uncertain labour market (Rotkirch et al. 2017, 73; Sobotka 2017). In Finland, one of the aims of work-family policy, through the provision of family benefits and public early childhood education and care, is to support the reconciliation of full-time work and family for both men and women, thereby enhancing gender equality (Salmi and Närvi 2017, 8). Yet despite Finland's track record of gender equality in education and the economy (e.g., World Economic Forum 2018, 99), the gender division of unpaid work remains unequal. Women continue to assume most of the responsibility for unpaid work and childcare (e.g., Gender Equality Barometer 2018), and hence are more likely to find work-family reconciliation challenging (Rotkirch et al. 2017, 96–97).

Given these uncertainties and gender-unequal practices in the work and family domains, interest has been shown recently in young adults' expectations on future work-family reconciliation. Previous studies have explored how they propose resolving perceived work-family conflict or seek balancing these two life spheres in their future lives (e.g., Fernández-Cornejo et al. 2016; Hill et al. 2019; Rotkirch et al. 2017; Salin, Ylikännö, and Hakovirta 2018; Savela and O'Brien 2016). Other studies have identified associations between socioeconomic background and career/family prospects (e.g., Brauner-Otto and Geist 2018; Miettinen and Jalovaara 2020). However, little is known about how young women's expectations on work-family reconciliation are linked to their perceived options in future work and care within broader institutional and societal contexts. In this qualitative study, we drew on Sen's (1995; 1999) capabilities approach to theorise the relationship between choice and constraint in young women's future work-family behaviour. This approach allows us to move beyond the abstract concept of 'free choice' and to focus more on which options are perceived as feasible or 'genuinely possible' by young women planning their future paid and unpaid work (Norman 2020). Our study contributes to work-family research by exploring the expectations on work-family reconciliation of young women aged 18 to 27 in Finland, and how their expectations

and perceived capabilities are shaped by various institutional, societal, and individual socioeconomic factors.

### **Young women and their expectations on work-family conflict in their future lives**

Sen (1995; 1999) presents *capabilities* as the freedom to choose between feasible alternative ‘functionings’ (i.e., ways of doing things) that are embedded in varying institutional, societal and individual contexts (*conversion factors*) (Hobson 2014; Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018; Yerkes, Hoogenboom, and Javornik 2020). These factors interact (Hobson, 2014, 14), shaping the ways individuals translate their means, understood as the social and economic resources they have at their disposal, into capabilities by enabling or constraining their *valued functionings* (Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018). For example, previous research suggests that gendered expectations around work and care shape women’s future options, and hence, due to their primary caregiving role, women living in different welfare regimes (*institutional conversion factors*) are likely to expect conflict in reconciling work and family. In the US, a country representing a liberal welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990) where the traditional breadwinner-caregiver model continues to be supported, young undergraduate women expected to have both a career and a family (Coyle et al. 2015). They also expected more family-impacting-work conflict than men, suggesting that traditional gender role ideologies were already shaping future expectations about work and family from a fairly young age (see also Savela and O’Brien 2016). Frisé and colleagues (2014) in Sweden, a Nordic country with a social democratic welfare regime, also found that women more often than men wanted to prioritise both work and family while more men than women wanted to prioritise one over the other. Young women also more often proposed hands-on solutions to potential future work-family conflicts (also Coyle et al. 2015). Furthermore, a survey of university students in Kenya, Iceland and Spain, countries with differing welfare regimes, showed that, to achieve a better work-family balance, young women were more disposed than men to compromise their future working careers. However, this inclination was lower among female students with high leadership aspirations and those from egalitarian households whose mothers worked 40 hours or more (Fernández-Cornejo et al. 2016).

It has also been shown in various countries that young women with higher education- and career-related expectations foresee work-family reconciliation to be more difficult than those

with lower expectations (Çopur and Koropeckyj-Cox 2010; Frisé, Carlsson, and Wängqvist 2014; Rotkirch et al. 2017, 72; Savela and O'Brien 2016). In Savela and O'Brien's (2016) US study, young female students predicted that combining family and work would be stressful, especially for women in leadership roles. They felt that being highly engaged at work or holding high leadership aspirations would lead to higher work-family conflict. In contrast, women contemplating a more traditional female career, i.e., female-dominated careers undervalued in terms of earnings, had lower expectations that work would interfere with their family time. Similarly, in the metropolitan area of Ankara in Turkey, which has a familialist Mediterranean welfare regime (Gal 2010), although influenced by Western values, Çopur and Koropeckyj-Cox (2010) found that female university students recognised the difficulties of being a working mother, especially one in a professional position. Students from higher income backgrounds associated motherhood with greater stress, suggesting a greater awareness of work-family conflict.

### **Possibilities and constraints to reconcile work and family in Finland**

A key issue from the capability perspective is the environment that steers young women's plans for their future adjustment between work and family. The Finnish welfare state as an *institutional conversion factor* and the context of this study exemplifies a social democratic welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990), where the dual-earner/dual-carer model is supported by enabling both parents to undertake childcare alongside paid employment (Närvi 2012). In 2020, for example, the employment rate of working age (15-64 years) women and men was 70.8 per cent and 73.9 per cent, respectively (OECD 2021a). To help parents reconcile work and family, Finland offers a broad array of benefits, such as a generous parental leave system comprising 105 days of maternity leave, 54 days of paternity leave, 158 days of shared parental leave and childcare leave up to the child's third birthday (Salmi, Närvi, and Lammi-Taskula 2018). During the 2000s, women's earlier return to work has been politically supported via various possibilities to work part-time while fathers have been encouraged to take up parental leave (Salmi and Närvi 2017, 25). Despite these incentives, women are more likely than men to take up parental leave. In 2020, women accounted for 90 per cent and men for 10 per cent of all parental leave allowances. Nearly one in four fathers took no parental leave (Social Insurance Institution of Finland 2020).

Studies on work-family reconciliation also indicate that *societal conversion factors* such as cultural norms influence the choices of young Finnish women in work and care. According to Repo (2013), maternal primacy in early care is supported by Finnish cultural ideals. Most Finnish mothers tend to be full-time homemakers up to their child's second birthday, returning thereafter to full-time employment (Närvi 2012; Närvi 2017). This inequality in care is perpetuated by a gender wage gap, which motivates women rather than men to exit employment when their children are young. Finland's gender wage gap is wider (18.9%) than the OECD mean (12.8%) and the highest in the Nordic countries (OECD 2021b). A study of young Finnish women and men found that women were expected to interrupt their careers, stay at home for longer and take up parental leave, whereas having children had little impact on men. Hence, young Finnish adults face the consequences of an unfinished gender revolution, as family formation poses a more serious risk to a woman's career and standard of living (Rotkirch et al. 2017, 96–97).

### **Perceived capabilities in relation to the work and family domains**

Identifying the factors that enable or constrain young women's choices in the work and family domains may reveal inequalities in work and care. Educating oneself, access to paid work, a supportive partner, gender equality policies and family friendly work practices are some examples of the social and economic resources that provide young women with opportunities for work-family reconciliation. However, access to resources may not increase capabilities equally for all since individuals are differently embedded in their environmental and social contexts. This means that 'equal access to resources does not guarantee equal capabilities' (Yerkes, Hoogenboom, and Javornik 2020): Women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, i.e., with different *individual conversion factors*, may engage differently with family policy instruments (e.g., see Hobson 2014; Yerkes and Javornik 2019). For example, take up of the home care allowance in Finland is highest among lower-educated and low-income mothers and among those in an unstable labour market position. In contrast, childcare periods are shorter among highly educated mothers who were employed before childbirth (Närvi 2017). Moreover, the paternal leave quota is more commonly taken up by highly educated fathers, especially the spouses of academically educated mothers. Hence, mothers with a permanent job or whose overall employment situation is good are able to return to work sooner and swap places and responsibilities with the father if desired (Närvi 2012) whereas

those in a more vulnerable situation are forced into lengthy leaves (longer than two years) and thus long employment breaks and higher wage penalties, further exacerbating their earnings disadvantage (see Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz 2020). Thus, women's agency in making choices about work and family is constrained or 'situated' (Hobson 2014).

Previous studies on family formation have also shown that individual socioeconomic factors interact with institutional work-family policies, either obstructing or facilitating access to *valued functionings* for young women. Miettinen and Jalovaara (2020) found that unemployment generally delayed Finnish adults' entry into parenthood. For secondary-level or highly educated young adults parenthood was postponed until a more permanent position in the labour market had been secured. In contrast, for young women with a basic level of education, unemployment even accelerated the transition to parenthood (see also Brauner-Otto and Geist 2018), indicating the possible positive effects of parental leave benefits and housing support on family formation. However, having a child may also be an alternative to unemployment or a response to poorer labour market prospects (Fahlén 2013). A life course without children is becoming increasingly common in Finland, particularly among low-educated men and women (Jalovaara et al. 2018; Rotkirch and Miettinen 2017), showing that all young women may not realise their *valued functionings* for their future family. Evidence on the unequal care responsibilities and the constraints young women are likely to face in reconciling work and family described above prompted us to explore work-family expectations among Finnish young women and their perceived capabilities in relation to different institutional, societal and individual socioeconomic factors. The research questions were: 1) What are young women's expectations on future work-family reconciliation, and 2) How do women's expectations and perceived capabilities in work and care differ by employment status and educational attainment?

## **Data and methods**

### ***Participants***

Participants were 30 Finnish young women aged 18 to 27 years (mean 22.3 years) varying in employment status and educational attainment. At time of interview, nine women were employed, 12 were students and nine were unemployed. Twenty-two of the women had an

upper secondary general or vocational qualification, five had a bachelor's degree, and three had completed compulsory, lower secondary education. The women's educational fields comprised education and counselling, social and health care, business and administration, the humanities and culture, and the environment and agriculture. Twenty-one women were in a couple relationship: one was married, eleven had a live-in partner and nine were dating but lived alone. The remaining nine participants were single and lived alone. None of the participants had children.

### *Data collection*

The data collection was conducted in five Finnish municipalities during 2017–2018<sup>1</sup>. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling aimed at reaching young women without children and differing in employment status and educational attainment (Robinson 2014). Flyers were distributed by hand, email, and Facebook to personnel in local early childhood education services, services for older people, and job-seeker services. Early childhood education and older people's services, well-known as female-dominated sectors, were contacted as they were assumed to hire young women with vocational education. Snowballing was also used. Individual interviews were conducted at a location convenient for the participant, such as the university, a café or the local rehabilitative work activities unit. All personnel and participants involved in the study were informed about its aim, implementation and relevant ethical issues. Participation was voluntary and all participants consented to the use of their data for research purposes. The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012) guidelines were followed.

We conducted thirty semi-structured individual interviews. To obtain rich data with active narration of the participants' life course and future expectations, semi-structured individual interviews applying the timeline method were used (Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 74). This technique made it possible to capture personal and key life course events that might affect young women's future expectations of work-family reconciliation. The timeline method requires participants to draw a line that starts at the beginning of childhood and continues into emerging adulthood and thereafter (Adriansen 2012; Sugarman 1986). In addition to drawing

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<sup>1</sup> The individual interviews were piloted in the year 2016 with two young women, both included in the present data.



the line, participants could draw pictures or write words or sentences referring to life events important to them at different points on the line. After or during their drawings, topics linked to their current and future life course were discussed, including their education and career, transition to parenthood, gender attitudes and work-family reconciliation. Interviews lasted around 1 to 2 hours and were recorded.

### *Analysis*

After transcribing the individual interview data, inductive content analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti. The purpose of the content analysis was to organise and elicit meaning from the data and draw realistic conclusions from it (see Bengtsson 2016). Therefore, all utterances referring to expectations on work-family reconciliation were extracted from the transcripts, and utterances related to the same central idea were grouped together to form a meaning unit. The meaning units were then condensed and coded into subcategories. Subcategories describing the same phenomenon were then sorted into broader categories and subsequently into main categories. Finally, the authors jointly assessed, defined, and named the categories. The analysis yielded 13 subcategories, four broader categories, and two main categories that described the conflicts the women predicted and the outcomes they desired in reconciling work and family in the future. However, we noticed that within the subcategories expectations differed by employment status and educational attainment. Therefore, in the second phase of the analysis, we analysed differences within the subcategories between the women who were employed, those who were students and those who were unemployed, with special focus on their perceived capabilities in future work-family reconciliation.

### **Results**

Both similarities and differences were identified in the young women's expectations and their perceived capabilities in future work-family reconciliation (see Table 1). While contradictory expectations on future work-family reconciliation were commonly found in the women irrespective of their employment status and educational attainment, the employed women more often perceived themselves as being able to balance work, family, and their personal time in the future, the students more often perceived themselves as being able to combat gender

inequality in their future working lives, and the the unemployed women more often perceived their future work and care capabilities as limited.

*Table 1. Similarities and differences in expectations and perceived capabilities for future work-family reconciliation among the women in the employed, student and unemployed groups*

### ***Young women's contradictory expectations on future work-family reconciliation***

Irrespective of their employment status and educational attainment, the young women reported holding two contradictory ideals, one of sharing daily responsibilities with their spouse and the other of maternal primacy (see Table 1). Although they expressed their desire for the sharing of daily responsibilities, such as housework and childcare with their spouse, they nevertheless emphasised maternal primacy when the discussion turned to parental leave. While shared parenting would offer both parents the opportunity to develop a close relationship with the child and flexibility to reconcile work and family, the women favoured longer maternal at-home childcare periods. The justification for choosing maternal care was the child's needs and wellbeing: *"I think about two years would be quite good because you know it's only mummy the child needs during the two first years of life"* (woman, aged 22). Women also preferred home childcare to institutional care. Breastfeeding was also cited as a reason for maternal primacy. Moreover, having a spouse with a higher income and position at work were further seen as justifying maternal at-home childcare. Thus, parental care would largely devolve on women.

The need for public family services and flexible working practices were also commonly reported irrespective of the women's background characteristics (see Table 1). The women foresaw public family services as facilitating future work-family reconciliation. They underlined the importance of receiving both professional and peer support through maternity and child health clinics: *"If you don't have your own safetynets then society should take responsibility because it's quite a big ask to reconcile those things so that you don't feel you're on your own"* (woman, aged 25). They also highlighted the responsibility of policymakers to promote childcare and other services for mothers and children. No mention was made of services for men. Furthermore, the women expected flexible working practices, such as part-

time work, reduced or flexible working hours, telecommuting and the possibility to receive a partial care allowance, to facilitate more sustainable reconciliation of both life domains. The opportunity to choose these alternatives was perceived as further strengthening women's capabilities in future work and care.

***Employed: Capabilities to balance with work, family, and personal time in the future***

The group of employed women comprised nine young women working in the care and services sectors. Three were permanently employed, five had a temporary contract and one was working part-time. Eight of the nine had an upper secondary general or vocational qualification and the other a bachelor's degree. Most had studied social and health care. The mean age of the employed women was 22.6 (range 18 to 26 years).

The young women in this group perceived themselves as capable of balancing work, family, and personal time in the future (see Table 1). They did not wish for a demanding career but rather for one that was meaningful and enjoyable. Having a job meant, above all, earnings, routines and a steady rhythm in everyday life, and thus security: *“Work is important for me, it's somehow such a fundamental in life as it provides security, financially and so on (...) and maybe somewhat more regular days and a little more routine in life”* (woman, aged 23). Commitment to working life was considered important because it not only secured their livelihood but also gave them confidence in their future employability.

Those who expressed dissatisfaction with their current jobs saw themselves as looking for new career opportunities. Changing one's job or further study were also seen as options making for a more balanced working life in the future: *“I wrote a new occupation in this part about the future. Ever since I graduated and started doing this job, I've thought that I won't be doing it up to retirement - it's physically and mentally so hard”* (woman, aged 26). The job was perceived as too much to cope with. The women also felt that their contribution was not really valued, as manifested by their low pay and public attitudes. Moreover, they felt they were not receiving sufficient support from their supervisors and found the responsibilities and new requirements at work stressful: *“I like my job but somehow all this new legislation and the paperwork and having to do this and that, it just makes me feel stressed at work and causes too much pressure”* (woman, aged 22). Owing to such grievances, these women wanted to change the course of their lives in line with their own values.

Although the employed women did not regard work-family reconciliation as problematic, they were nevertheless aware of the pressures of time if they were to have a child: *“I’ve been thinking about this three-shift job, that it probably wouldn’t fit in well with the family”* (woman, aged 23). They foresaw that shiftwork, for example, would not suit a future family life. They had also noticed that work takes up a large part of the day and wondered how they would have time for different aspects of life: *“Will I have time for the whole family for both children and spouse and work, and whatever else I have in my life, hobbies and everything”* (woman, aged 24). In reflecting on this dilemma, they emphasised the importance of setting aside time for their hobbies and the couple relationship if they were to have children: *“If I had kids, I’d not be afraid to take babysitters or time out (...) it would be good to learn that you don’t always need to take care of everything on your own”* (woman, aged 22). By time out and accepting external help, they would be able to take care of their personal wellbeing and so balance work and care.

### ***Students: Capabilities to combat gender inequality in future working life***

Of the twelve young women who were students, ten were studying for a bachelor’s or master’s degree and two for an upper secondary general qualification. The majority of the women students were engaged in business or education studies. Eight were combining study and work. The mean age of the women students was 22.5 years (range 18 to 26 years).

The students saw themselves as having the capabilities to combat gender inequality in their future working life (see Table 1). They planned a progressive career with increasing responsibility, including a managerial position or demanding international job. However, they expected gender inequalities in working life to constrain their agency in work-family reconciliation. They felt that younger women would be discriminated against when applying for permanent jobs and thus at risk of settling for temporary employment: *“If an employer is afraid to hire you because of maternity leave, even though it’s not talked about, the reality is that your contract will not be renewed in cases of pregnancy”* (woman, aged 23). They foresaw temporary contracts as likely in their future career. They were also aware of how childbirth and staying at home during the child’s infancy could affect their career: *“During infancy, however, the biggest burden is on the mother and the biggest impact will be on mother’s career so that it’s less often the father’s work or career that suffers or changes when you have children”* (woman, aged 22). Owing to career breaks, they foresaw women as bearing the main cost of

having a child in the family, and hence emphasised the responsibility of employers to promote gender equality in working life: *“When the kids are sick it shouldn’t always be mum who takes time off from work. Organisations should accept that either dad or mum can stay at home”* (woman, aged 26). Gender equality should be promoted in organisations by encouraging men to take up family leave and, for example, stay at home to tend a sick child.

Although work was foreseen as a path to self-development and financial security among the students, it was not considered paramount: *“I don’t want to be that work oriented that I forget what’s most important, I mean close people and family and my spouse. Work and career are important but not the most important things (...) It [work and career] doesn’t lay down next to you and listen to your worries”* (woman, aged 26). Being good and present mothers with time for their child was also foreseen as important. Hence, these women anticipated that high demands in working life such as fierce competition and overwork would limit their dedication to family life: *“You can’t really choose how much you want to work but instead you need to work hard to make sure you keep your job”* (woman, aged 22). Committing oneself to working life was seen as a gamble: if you did not try to advance in your career, you might miss out. While not wanting to lose their opportunities for advancement, these women struggled with the idea of being forced to focus only on their career at the cost of their family: *“Work will take even more time in the future, and because I want to work in a sector where jobs are certainly available, I’ll be bringing work home even though I’d rather not”* (woman, aged 21). They foresaw work as interfering with their family time, making it difficult to separate the boundary between these two domains.

Two of the university students foresaw a childless future. For one, the choice was career-related. She saw family life with children as hindering advancement in her career: *“My own work has after all been more important so that I don’t feel I want to sacrifice what I’ve achieved so far just to be a mother”* (woman, aged 22). For the other, the choice was based on environmental issues and climate change. Instead of biological parenthood, she preferred to satisfy her caring needs through involvement in elderly care. These women’s personal agency and perceived capabilities would enable them to make a choice they valued.

### ***Unemployed: Limited capabilities in future work and care***

The group of unemployed women contained nine young women who were currently outside the labour force. Three were short-term unemployed (i.e., less than one year) and six long-term unemployed (i.e., from one to three years) and hence clients of municipal social services: one was on a work try-out and five were engaged in rehabilitative work activities. One of the unemployed women had no schooling beyond compulsory education, six had an upper secondary general or vocational qualification and two a bachelor's degree. This group showed the widest variety in their educational fields. The mean age of the unemployed women was 21.8 years (range 19 to 27 years).

The unemployed women perceived their future capabilities to reconcile work and care as limited (see Table 1). They were doubtful about their personal abilities, and thus had little faith in their future employability: *"I've realised that after this long spell of unemployment I don't necessarily believe in my own abilities, so I'd need a lot of encouragement and support if I got a job* (woman, aged 27). These women had experienced difficulty and frustration when applying for jobs and felt that they lacked the competences needed in the labour market. They would like to demonstrate their potential by having options in their working life. The long-term unemployed women in particular were worried about their personal wellbeing and uncertain if they would be able to commit to full-time work: *"I don't think it's really my thing to do an eight-hour day with tight schedules and five times a week, so perhaps there would be a more suitable option for me that I could cope with"* (woman, aged 23). These women envisioned a hectic working life where their coping ability and personal choices would be ignored.

Besides expecting problems in their future working lives, the unemployed women were also concerned about their ability to cope with family life in the future. Although motherhood was seen as rewarding, having a child would mean a big responsibility that would tax their physical and mental resources: *"The child may be in the negative age and you may sleep poorly and be wound up so you really need to take care of yourself to deal with all that hassle because, in my opinion, it takes a lot out of a person"* (woman, aged 24). They expected balancing work and care to be stressful and burdensome. They elaborated their concern about their personal wellbeing if they 'lost' themselves in the hustle and bustle of functioning in different life domains, and hence highlighted their need for individual support and guidance in family life and childcare arrangements: *"I'll probably need all the support and help available, and I also*

*believe that I'll want to get all the information available about childcare and things like that, so that I won't need to wonder or guess by myself"* (woman, aged 21). Reliance on social support could help these women to manage work-family reconciliation in the future.

Family life with a child was also perceived as problematic in the face of financial constraints. *"You spend a lot of money on everything, such as diapers and so on, and if you don't have a car, you can go on foot with the child, of course, but it makes it more difficult."* (woman, aged 24). Worries in finance would make everyday life more difficult. Women expected the working spouse in particular would experience financial pressure. Thus, the costs of starting a family could cause additional stress, possibly leading to tension between spouses.

Three of the long-term unemployed, lower-educated women foresaw themselves as remaining childless. The reasons for this were especially linked to health- and life course-related factors. Having experienced challenges at home and in school from the beginning of childhood, the idea of becoming a parent seemed unlikely: *"I wouldn't want my child to experience the same, it would somehow simply mean too much pressure. I'd rather leave others to have children and have that responsibility – they can anyway handle it better"* (woman, aged 22). These women foresaw family life with children as demanding and felt anxious about taking lifelong responsibility for a child. With already stretched personal resources, dreams of having a child were not realisable.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

In this study, we were interested in young women's expectations and their perceived capabilities to reconcile work and family in the future in the context of the Finnish welfare state, where generous family benefits coexist with highly gender-unequal practices. The contradiction between the ideals of shared daily responsibilities with one's spouse and maternal primacy was common among the women irrespective of their employment status and educational attainment. This dualism reflects the Finnish gender culture which embraces both the ideal of shared parenthood and the primacy of maternal care which is considered important for the psychosocial development of young children (Närvi 2012; Repo 2013). According to Lehto (2020), the increasing trend towards child-centredness in Finnish families is predominantly informed by the discourse of maternal primacy, meaning that mothers are

expected to devote large amounts of time and energy to their children. Hence, while shared parenthood remains a general ideal, women tend to favour maternal over paternal care (Salmi 2006). Moreover, today's young women seem attracted to traditional gender parenting roles (e.g., Salin, Ylikännö, and Hakovirta 2018; Savela and O'Brien 2016). Therefore, from the standpoint of the capabilities approach (e.g., Sen 1995; 1999; Hvinden and Halvorsen 2018; Yerkes, Hoogenboom, and Javornik 2020) it seems that family leave policies and cultural norms in Finland as *institutional* and *societal conversion factors* frame young Finnish women's perceptions of their future capabilities to combine work and care insofar as they continue to cherish expectations for longer at-home childcare periods and traditional gendered parenting roles. The present results also confirm that for young adults in Finland having a family is one of their most important future goals (*valued functionings*) (Myllyniemi 2017, 28–30). Nevertheless, young women, particularly those in a more vulnerable labour market position, who subscribe to the ideal of maternal primacy may expose themselves to lengthy leave periods, and thus to employment breaks and loss of earnings in the future (see Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz 2020; Rotkirch et al. 2017, 96–97).

The women's expectations and perceived capabilities also differed by their employment status and educational attainment. The employed women perceived themselves as having the capability to balance work and family and find time for themselves in the future. They emphasised that they would need time for their hobbies and for the couple relationship if they had children. In highlighting this, they showed a readiness to break with the traditional culture of intensive parenting (see Lee 2014; Lehto 2020). The employed women with a more traditional female career in mind also had lower expectations that work would interfere with their family time compared to the women students, who planned on having a demanding future career. In line with Savela and O'Brien (2016), the women expecting to have more traditional female career may have chosen their career-related *valued functionings* to avoid interference with their family commitments. Moreover, the employed women were confident about their employability and intended to remedy their grievances in their current working life by seeking new career opportunities in the future. Hence, it seems that having a job makes for a confident attitude towards working life (see also Alakärppä et al. 2022), and thus broadens the range of *valued functionings* that young women can choose from when trying to resolve their future work-care dilemma.



The group of students with higher education- and career-related expectations, in turn, felt themselves as capable of combating gender inequality in future working life. To facilitate future work-family reconciliation, these women highlighted the responsibility of employers in building a more family-supportive organisational culture. They were vocal about the need for greater gender equality in working life and fathers' participation in childcare. Thus, our results suggest that these women perceived themselves as able to realise their *valued functionings* at work through maintaining their rights to reconcile work and family and to be better paid at work. However, while underlining the importance of gender equality in working life, they did not call for changes in the distribution of parental care at home. This may partially be explained by the different attitudes prevalent in the public and private spheres: equality is emphasised more in the context of paid work than that of unpaid care (Salin, Ylikännö, and Hakovirta 2018). Thus, women with higher education- and career-related expectations may find themselves struggling to cope with the double burden of a demanding career and an intensive family life in the future (e.g., Frisé, Carlsson, and Wängqvist 2014; Rotkirch et al. 2017, 115). Two of the university students foresaw themselves as remaining childless, thus transgressing the social norm of motherhood as the main female goal. Hence, women with higher education may nevertheless have greater freedom to exercise agency in family decision-making (Sen 1999, 199).

The unemployed women's expectations on future work-family reconciliation differed most clearly from those of the other groups. These women perceived themselves as having limited capabilities in future work and care. They had little faith in their future employability. Those experiencing long-term unemployment were also worried about their personal wellbeing in what they regarded as hectic working life. The unemployed women also foresaw financial constraints and were concerned about their ability to cope with family life in the future. Thus, their perceived limited capabilities seem to constrain their agency in realising their *valued functionings* in future work-family reconciliation and family decision-making. Three of the long-term unemployed, lower-educated women envisaged a future life course without children. Previous research has shown that young adults in a weaker economic or employment situation face increasing social and economic disadvantages that are reflected not only in their employment options but also in family formation (Brauner-Otto and Geist 2018; Miettinen and Jalovaara 2020). Thus, in line with the capabilities approach (e.g., Sen 1995; 1999; Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018; Yerkes, Hoogenboom, and Javornik 2020), employment status and educational attainment as *individual socioeconomic conversion factors* seem to shape young

women's options in work and care - either through giving them confidence and greater freedom or causing them concern when faced with making future work-family choices.

This study has its limitations. The first relates to the link between the women's expectations and their educational backgrounds. Owing to the high proportion of women in tertiary education, the findings for students may not represent women in upper secondary general or vocational education. Similarly, the employed women were all in blue- or pink-collar jobs; thus, the expectations of women in for example professional or leadership may differ. Moreover, these women's educational and career paths may be still in process, and thus the expectations found in this study are based on their current life situation. Second, the fact that the young women came from rural and urban areas of Finland but not from the metropolitan area, where expectations might be less traditional, should be also considered when interpreting the results (Kulu 2013). A third limitation concerns the association between women's expectations and their socioeconomic characteristics. Although the study revealed that socioeconomic factors in general shape women's future work and family expectations, a broader quantitative comparison is needed to determine specifically whether age, level of education, work, marital status, or financial situation influence work-family expectations, and how these background characteristics are associated with expectations on combining work and family life. However, we were able to provide the richness for a more in-depth analysis by recruiting young women from a broad range of backgrounds. Finally, this study focused on women's future expectations in work and childcare. It would, therefore, be useful in further studies to compare gender expectations by utilising a comparison group of male participants.

### **Policy implications**

Actions on the societal level are needed to support the agency of young women with different backgrounds and related capabilities in their efforts to balance work and care in their future life course. First, as young women continue to subscribe to the ideal of maternal primacy, men's take-up of family leave, family-friendly arrangements in organisations, and gender wage equality should be promoted to remedy the disadvantages experienced by women, particularly the more vulnerable, in their career and wage development (see also Hill et al. 2019). The family leave reform planned to be introduced later this year in Finland should encourage future parents to share family leave more equally as it extends fathers' individual leave entitlement

and raises the level of compensation. Employers will also have a key role in enabling and supporting men to take family leave, thereby also improving the position of women in the labour market. In addition, mutually agreed flexibility policies in organisations such as telecommuting, flexitime and reduced hours arrangements could improve young women's coordination of work and family. Second, as labour shortages increase with demographic aging, it will become increasingly necessary to integrate all individuals, irrespective of their life situation, into the labour market and society (Buchholz and Blossfeld 2012). Work and family will only be compatible if labour market institutions reduce the uncertainties connected with childbearing and allow young adults to better plan ahead (Adsera 2011). Therefore, the future expectations and perceived capabilities of currently unemployed women on family formation and working life participation require attention. There is a need to support the agency of these women who encounter problems in constructing their educational and working life paths. Personalised guidance, disseminating information about career opportunities, and structured labour market entry, including training and rehabilitation, could help unemployed women to realise their choices in work and care. Removing the obstacles to reconciling employment with a family depends on the ability of welfare states to promote more gender-equal practices in work and care, not to mention securing the availability of work, and thus strengthen the agency of young women.

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Table 1. Similarities and differences in expectations and perceived capabilities for future work-family reconciliation among the women in the employed, student and unemployed groups

<b>Groups of young women</b>	<b>Employed</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Unemployed</b>
<b>Similarities in work-family expectations</b>	The ideal of daily responsibilities shared with spouse		
	The ideal of maternal primacy		
	The need for public family services		
	Wish for flexible working practices		
<b>Differences in work-family expectations</b>	Looking for new career opportunities	Gender inequality in working life	Little faith in their employability
	Pressures of time	Promotion of gender equality in working life	Worry about personal wellbeing
	Taking care of personal wellbeing	High demands of working life	Financial constraints