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Global work-life balance trailblazing: how to lead the world in work-life balance, with insights from Denmark.

Purpose

The article asks how to lead the world in work-life balance (WLB) societal rankings, identifies the major WLB challenges in contemporary societies, and rethinks how we conceptualise and measure WLB.

Design/methodology/approach

A case-study of Denmark, a world leader in global WLB-rankings. Expert-insider interviews were carried out with twelve experts who work in the field of WLB. The participants were engaged day-to-day in the field of interest, exerting real-world influence.

Findings

We affirm the importance for WLB of battling over-long hours in the workplace. We evidence too that having sufficient hours of work, and being financially secure, are as significant for WLB as is avoiding overwork.

Originality

The article interrogates international WLB-rankings and offers original insights into a global WLB-leader. It makes the case for improving how we conceptualise and measure WLB to also progress policies and practice. Rather than viewing WLB as largely about avoiding a time-squeeze, the article argues that it is fundamentally about the conditions under which people work.

Introduction

The ramifications of a changing world of work, including for the entanglement of paid work with other activities, were foundational for sociology and they endure as major sociological concerns (Pettinger, 2019). The article explores a key concept that links work with the rest of life: work-life balance (WLB). Employing a holistic understanding of WLB as about the conditions under which people work, it asks what factors shape world-leading WLB and what are the major obstacles to be overcome. It draws upon a case-study of Denmark, an under-researched leader in WLB-rankings.

The European Union's 'Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers' recognised the growing importance of WLB for workers, business and societies (de la Porte et al., 2023; EU, 2019). Yet WLB is under intensified pressure in many countries due to the unprecedented disruptions to ways of working caused by a decade plus of fallout from the 2008-9 global recession followed by the Covid-19 pandemic and extensive cost-of-living crises (Eurofound-ETF 2022; Gregory et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2016; Mellner et al., 2015; Pedersen and Lewis, 2012: Rashmi and Kataria, 2022; Vesala and Tuomivaara, 2019).

The WLB framework has garnered widespread attention across sociology and social policy, wider academia, workplaces and policy circles. What began in the 1970s USA as a way to highlight gender in/equalities in paid and unpaid work roles in a new context where women with caring responsibilities were rapidly entering the workforce (Gatrell et al., 2013), WLB has both spread beyond the USA and been challenged to be more holistic in its remit and inclusive in its scope. While there have been efforts in academia to improve the conceptualisation of WLB and ensure that the WLB needs of all groups of workers are

equally recognised and understood (Kelliher et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2007, 2016; Öun, 201), WLB studies, and dedicated policies, are still overly concerned with the needs of working parents and carers, women especially.

Given the importance of the topic and the threats to WLB being faced, the article asks what underpins world-leading WLB, what are the most tenacious risks to WLB, and how valuable is the dominant WLB framework for helping to understand both. Learning from pioneering societal contexts is a well-known strategy in academia and in policy formulation and benchmarking and, while it is accepted that practices are not easily transferable between more and less successful countries, it is enlightening for sociology, social policy and stakeholders to identify what underpins the most notable achievements. Our decision to focus on world-leading WLB led us to the intriguing case of Denmark. Denmark is one of the leaders in international rankings of WLB but, in the extensive sociological and wider academic literature that focuses on WLB, the Danish case is surprisingly overlooked. The knowledge base is dominated by a handful of countries, neglecting WLB-trailblazers like Denmark (Rashmi and Kataria, 2022. Also Lewis and Beauregard, 2018; Wong et al., 2023; Yoon and Park, 2024). We carried out a research project that included qualitative interviews with twelve experts who work in the field of WLB in Denmark. Drawing on insider-expert interview material, we analyse both world-leading WLB features and persistent obstacles, and make a case for improving how we conceptualise and measure WLB to help shape policies and practice that better support WLB for all workers.

Work-life balance and global work-life balance trailblazing

The WLB concept was devised in the USA as an improved, more holistic alternative to its narrower predecessor 'work-family' lives (Kanter, 1977). WLB emerged in a context of increasing levels of female employment, including among women with dependent children, creating new WLB challenges in what previously had been male breadwinner/female carer societies (Gatrell et al., 2013). Decades on, WLB has widespread academic appeal but recognised conceptual limitations.

WLB has been criticised for setting up an undifferentiated notion of 'work' both as against and inferior to 'life' when in reality there are many forms of work, paid and unpaid, all of which are part of life and they may be rewarding (Kelliher et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2007; Lewis and Beauregard 2018). Critics also contend that WLB over focuses on certain types of workers: women, parents of dependent children, managers/professionals (De Micheli and Smilari, 2024; Filippi et al., 2023; Ozbilgin et al., 2011). WLB is critiqued too for a discourse that prioritises personal choice and responsibility, neglecting how work-life decisions are heavily constrained by, for example, gendered household and workplace contexts (Gambles et al., 2006). In addition, an understanding of WLB as largely about the ramifications of over-long hours in a job is prevalent but increasingly viewed as limiting amid growing recognition of work-life imbalances rooted in having too little paid work, insecure jobs and financial precariousness (Hughes and Silver, 2020; Lewis et al, 2017; Pedersen and Lewis, 2012; Lewis et al., 2007; Warren, 2015). Shaped by these latter conceptual advances, this article similarly views WLB as fundamentally about the conditions under which people work.

The literature increasingly acknowledges WLB as a complicated and holistic concept, but the oversimplified time-squeezed version has traction, replicated in how WLB is routinely measured in academic studies (Wong et al., 2023). This time-squeezed understanding has also transitioned into the metrics of major international organizations. The *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD, 2020, 2024), for example, calculates national-level WLB via how many people are spending very long hours at work and the typical time they spend on leisure and personal care (plus a measure based on how many women with children are in employment). The EU's *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions* (Eurofound, 2017) measurement includes time-squeeze elements (are workers experiencing difficulties fulfilling family responsibilities because of time spent at work; are they too tired from work to do household jobs). WLB in the *European Trade Union Institute's* 'European Job Quality Index' (JQI) is linked directly to time (its dimension is termed 'working time and work-life balance') and with an emphasis again on too much paid work, although it usefully adds shift work and unsocial hours (Piasna, 2023). As one of six dimensions of job quality, WLB is conceptualised here as separate from the other five (income quality; employment contract and security; working conditions; skills and career development; and collective interest representation and voice). The alternative approach taken in this article is that WLB is indeed about worktime (including avoiding a time squeeze for workers) but it also about (not separate to) broader issues of quality work that include having sufficient hours and earnings from paid work to sustain a non-precarious work-life.

Work-life balance in Denmark

Denmark is one of the global trailblazers in each of the international WLB rankings cited above. It regularly tops or is placed among the OECD ranking front-runners. It is a WLB leader, along with the Netherlands, for Eurofound (2017. And see Ferent-Pipas and Lazar, 2023) and leads, with Sweden, the European JQI. Scattered national studies add encouraging findings on Denmark to these international classifications (e.g., Adamson et al., 2022; Byrne, 2018; Familie og Arbejdslivskommissionen, 2007; Thiessen, 2020; Walde and Madsen, 2010). Given its leading position, however, there is surprisingly little engagement with the Danish case in the WLB-focused international literature and modest direct attention to WLB in the literature on working lives in Denmark. This article aims to learn from this neglected trailblazer. Here, we recap on the Danish context for WLB.

The societal context is crucial for WLB because the trajectories of work-lives and WLB-related initiatives have developed in very different ways in different cultures (Crompton and Lyonette 2006). Both relatively unique and generic aspects of the policy and industrial relations contexts are pertinent for an analysis of Danish WLB, argue Pedersen and Lewis (2012). The two main Danish-specific aspects that they identify are the Danish models of the universalistic social-democratic approach to welfare and employment relations. The social-democratic model in Denmark sees work-lives as a shared social responsibility (Esping-Anderson, 1990): this has led, for example, to state support in the form of paid parental leave and quality universal childcare for working parents so that they can remain in employment (Greve, 2014; Rostgaard, 2014). Meanwhile, the Danish model of employment relations is characterised by high union density, a centralised bargaining system, and low wage dispersion. Negotiated agreements between the state, employers and labour set a strong organizational stage for all matters of employment (Rasmussen and Høgedahl, 2020)

and Denmark is also subject to EU laws, regulations and directives including the WLB directive.

These aspects would appear to readily explain strong WLB, but other national features do raise questions about Danish work-lives. One potential threat to WLB that not all societies face, for example, is a culture in which all citizens of working age are expected to undertake paid work: the welfare system requires high levels of labour market participation (Bakkær Simonsen, 2022; Bonke and Christensen, 2018). The Danish worktime regime (Anttila et al., 2015) is also intriguing because it possibly strengthens within-society inequalities. On the one hand, WLB is likely supported because worktime extremes are combatted via a collectively agreed full-time working week of 37 hours. On the other hand, there is widespread part-time employment, that is female dominated (connected to a heavy concentration of women workers in the public sector), and part-time work is known to be linked to women carrying a heavier WLB burden than men (Holt and Larsen, 2019).

One final significant and potentially contradictory element of the Danish Model for WLB is flexicurity. The notion of flexicurity originated in the Netherlands with a focus there on normalizing atypical work and removing penalties associated with it (Bekker and Mailand, 2019; Bredgaard and Madsen, 2018), but it was the Danish flexicurity model that became most influential in the EU (Jensen, 2017). Flexicurity in Denmark aims to offer both labour-market flexibility and security via a 'golden triangle' that combines very low levels of job protection, generous unemployment insurance benefits, and strong activation and education policies (Bredgaard and Madsen, 2018). Ideally, this model is positive for workers not just business in Denmark: flexicurity should support voluntary job mobility and reduce

the use of non-standard employment, known to disadvantage certain groups. In actuality, increasingly, flexicurity covers only workers in blue-collar jobs (via collective agreements) because recent legislation stipulates notice periods for the dismissal of salaried/white-collar workers (Jensen, 2017). Pedersen and Lewis (2012) had proposed that flexicurity in Denmark is positive for WLB (and see Ferent-Pipas and Lazar, 2023). We ask whether it might build in WLB inequalities and instability: being dismissed relatively easily could undermine carefully arranged balancing strategies.

Methods and data

The aim of the article is to delve deeper into what underpins global WLB success, identify the most stubborn challenges, and consider what theoretical and policy lessons can be learned from a trailblazing case study. To that end, we carried out primary qualitative research with WLB experts in Denmark.

Investigating expert knowledge is a well-established approach in social scientific research. As Döringer (2021) discusses, it is useful because the experts are engaged day-to-day in the field of interest, often exerting real-world influence in that field. For Lewis et al. (2007; and Gambles et al., 2006), whose seven-country study of WLB (not including Denmark) employed expert interviews, invaluable insights can be gained from their grounded experiences, perspectives and reflections on WLB. As with that influential study, our project identified a range of national experts whose roles directly connected with WLB: we similarly sampled academics and consultants (because they shape major debates about WLB), and people in key roles in the employer organization, municipalities and trade unions (because they shape the WLB of workers). Accessing an expert-insider perspective helped us unpack

and move beyond headline WLB-rankings to better interrogate societal WLB success and challenges. Based on Yin's (1994) advice to search for 'information rich' cases and using the literature review and our networks to identify significant publications, projects, and personnel, we used purposive sampling to recruit.

FIGURE 1 HERE

The interviews took place in 2021, a year into the Covid-19 pandemic and amid national lockdowns. Twelve experts agreed to be interviewed (see Figure 1 with pseudonyms and participants' areas of work). The optimal sample size of interview participants is heavily debated. For Hennink and Kaiser (2022), while it is now accepted that 'saturation' is contentious as an aim, it is nevertheless still commonly pursed in qualitative research and often presumed, problematically, to necessitate large numbers. In their systematic review to assess strategies to achieve saturation, Hennink and Kaiser show that a narrow range of interviews (9-17) can yield sufficient qualitative material when the research objectives are not broad (Guest et al., 2020 similarly make the case for a sample of 12). While our sample size does reflect the challenge of reaching participants during a pandemic, our research objectives were precisely defined, and comparable themes were readily identified in the interview material.

We used semi-structured interviews so that we could pursue a common set of questions with each participant while being responsive to their specific experiences and insights, and allowing them the opportunity to express these in their own words. Reflecting our holistic understanding of WLB as being about the conditions under which people work (e.g. having both enough, but not too much, worktime and sufficient earnings to sustain a non-

precarious life), areas of questioning included interpretations and evaluations of the WLB concept; perceptions of Danish international success; and its WLB innovations and challenges. All interviews were held on-line via MS Teams, lasting around an hour on average. Interviews were carried out in English or Danish. The project was granted ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee of our academic school.

Thematic analysis allowed the identification of commonality and dissimilarities in the interview material (Miles et al., 2014). We followed the recommended stages of becoming familiar with all the data, generating initial codes and establishing, reviewing, and defining themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Ours was a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006): themes were identified relating to e.g. the importance of work. However, our coding was both inductive and deductive, in that we applied theoretical codes from our literature review while also generating new codes directly from the data. An initial thematic framework was derived in analysing the first interviews and used to code the data. It was amended as coding progressed, new themes were identified, and first codes fine-tuned.

Findings

The major aspects of Danish society that were identified earlier as potentially linked to its WLB success emerged as significant for the experts. We group our discussion of the findings under three themes that underpin positive Danish WLB (the Danish model, worktime, and childcare) before moving on to the most significant of obstacles (eradicating inequalities). The findings from Denmark very much support our broader conceptual approach to WLB: it is more than just avoiding a time-squeeze.

Aspects underpinning WLB

1. The Danish model

First, because Denmark is known for its universalistic social-democratic approach to welfare, as stated, it was no surprise that the backdrop of its robust safety net underpinned participants' discussions of WLB. Academic Torben, for example, offered a holistic analysis of WLB in Denmark, noting that a more equal and 'coherent' society underlines its WLB model, in his view. This was not just an academic analysis, however, because each expert also referred positively to various elements of the Danish model. One aspect that emerged strongly was negotiation, in which key themes relating to WLB are debated regularly by and between government, trades unions and employers (and see FH, 2020; Teknologirådet 2005). We heard both from the negotiating table and researchers that the system of collective agreements is crucial for WLB. Participants from the Confederation of Danish Employers and trade unions, whose organizations are centrally involved in negotiations, unsurprisingly made a strong case for the importance of their collaboration. The model gains buy-in from each party, and so not only can compromises can be reached on WLB matters but innovations trialled, we were told. Jesper, a representative from the FOA union (for public employees), explained that collaboration means it is possible to explore different ways of working to agree better alternatives for WLB.

We noted earlier that the Danish flexicurity model was likely to be pertinent for understanding WLB (and see Pedersen and Lewis, 2012). A number of WLB-affirming strengths of flexicurity were offered in interview. Academic Bent, for example, felt that it empowered people to change work a lot and many of these job moves, in his own

observations, have indeed been to achieve better WLB. His understanding closely mirrored the employer position whose representative was very positive about flexicurity. Bodil reasoned that it directly supports WLB because, in allowing for secure worker mobility, it assists workers who want to seek WLB options elsewhere. At the same time, she argued, it encourages employers to offer good conditions both to attract and retain workers:

> We need to create some working conditions which are attractive, otherwise the employers will not attract their workforce. (Bodil, Confederation of Danish Employers).

We might expect that a representative from the employer organization would be keen to endorse the benefits of flexicurity for workers in the interview setting, but a similar view was expressed by an independent WLB consultant. Signe's assessment was also that flexicurity was positive for WLB, citing especially its financial support on job loss. Concerns were raised, however, by other participants about the WLB of workers who fall outside protection, linking us to WLB inequalities, the persistent obstacle that we return to later.

2. Worktime

A work culture in which all citizens are expected to undertake paid work is a knotty topic for WLB, as discussed: it could potentially lead to deep pressures, especially on workers with caring responsibilities. Most participants brought up the prominence of paid work as a framework for understanding WLB in Denmark. From the unions, for example, Danish society needs everyone to work, and the labour market is structured so that people must 'contribute' via paid work:

> We need work in Denmark, we need workers. (Mette, the Danish Trade Union Confederation).

> Presently, we have a labour market which is arranged in a way that everyone has to contribute all the time. (Jesper, FOA).

While these examples might indeed suggest a culture that intensifies WLB pressures, the experts added valuable insights into the significance of employment for workers in Denmark. They were keen to stress that paid work is viewed as meaningful: it contributes to an individual's identity, value and respect (and see Bakkær Simonsen, 2022). In Mette's words, work is important for a wage but not only that:

> It's also being a respected recognised person in society who is something through their job. So it's money, but it's also recognition of me as a person, a valued person in the society. (Mette, the Danish Trade Union Confederation).

Close links between the responsibility to work and citizens' rights in Denmark were also voiced very clearly. Academic Lotte, for example, assessed this as being about what is and is not 'acceptable' in Danish society. She stressed:

> The idea that you can have rights and not do your bit to contribute to the labour market, that is, that is simply not accepted. (Lotte, academic).

The obligation to undertake paid work is certainly not limited to Denmark but what is perhaps more unusual is that it is the presumed norm for mothers of young children too. The dual-earner model brings its own challenges for the attainment of WLB (Pfau-Effinger,

2012), different to those of a male-breadwinner model where women withdraw from paid work (Deding and Lausten, 2011; Lyngborg et al., 2007). The TUC's representative, the WLB-consultant and academics warned that paid work hours can mount up in Denmark leading to overworked dual-earner homes, and so a different type of WLB is needed when compared with models in many other societies. In his interview too, Jakob, a municipality worker, referred to typical working patterns among parents, identifying what he saw as the societal norm. Being a parent full-time did not fit the Danish system, he said: it is not a normal thing to do and would lead to incredulity:

> That is sort of not quite as it's supposed to be in the system. I don't think it's looked down upon, but it's just not a normal life choice and it's met with some kind of disbelief, perhaps. (Jakob, municipality).

The interview material evidences well how societal values structure both WLB challenges and feasible (and 'normal') solutions. Our findings supplement the sociological literature on how caring responsibilities are experienced and negotiated in different societal contexts, including the moral dimensions of 'doing' motherhood and fatherhood. The Danish case shows that how people manage WLB is firmly linked to perceptions of what Finch (1989) called 'the proper thing to do', perceptions of which are culturally shaped including, here, by strong societal values supporting the Danish dual-earner model.

Though paid work is critical in Denmark, it is pertinent that the worktime regime aims to constrain extremes so that workers do not spend too many hours in work. We saw from the international WLB rankings, based on quantitative data, that there is far less evidence of long hour's working in Denmark, charged elsewhere with negatively impacting well-being

and welfare, social inequality, and social cohesion (Chung, 2022). The interviews added useful qualitative insights into Danish values around long hours and long hours cultures. The above theme of what are un/acceptable work practices emerged on this topic too. For example, ideas of presenteeism at work or that long hours might signal status or work commitment were lambasted. For Jakob, very long hours in the labour market are again not 'normal', nor something to boast about:

> Sometimes there is a cult of people 'oh I work 70 hours a week', 'oh, I work 80 hours a week', I don't think that is very normal in Denmark. It's not something to really brag about like that. (Jakob, municipality).

It was also fascinating to see the participants clearly linking restricted hours in paid work to the value afforded to free time in Danish culture (Møberg and Rasmussen, 2024). For Bodil, for example, meaning in her own life is gained not only from paid work but also from leisure and creative activities. She stressed (twice) too that having free time is very important to Danes more generally:

> Spending time with my friends is meaningful to me. And this means a great deal to Danish people, a great deal. (Bodil, Confederation of Danish Employers).

Another indicative example of the cultural significance of avoiding long hours came up in Mette's interview when she was elaborating on quality of life and its links to WLB. She described what might be viewed as the 'ideal-typical' Danish lifestyle of summer houses, beaches, friends, family and community, and here she stresses the societal importance of leisure time:

> Leisure time and being in our summer house or taking a trip with the children to the beach, eating with the neighbours, grilling barbeque with the neighbours and so on. (Mette, the Danish Trade Union Confederation).

In effect, from the expert interviews, very long hours in work are culturally unacceptable in Danish society because they undermine the coveted 'hygge' lifestyle, and WLB is a core element to this.

Foundational to such cultural disapproval of long working weeks are the secure foundations afforded by minimum wages, low wage dispersal, and sufficient (or living) hours to provide a living income (Ilsøe et al., 2017). For Jakob:

> If we didn't have rather high minimum wages then it would be impossible to choose to sustain this work-life balance that we have now (Jakob, municipality).

As discussed, when compared with the known WLB-ramifications of working too many hours, not having enough earnings (via sufficient worktime/hourly wages) is sorely under researched in the literature. The Danish case evidences the importance of living hours and wages for WLB success and adds support to our more holistic conceptualisation of WLB as being about good working conditions rather than purely avoiding a time-squeeze.

3. Childcare

The third major factor supporting WLB in Denmark that came up in interview was the public provision of high-quality childcare. This was discussed as foundational for the type of WLB adopted by working parents. Indeed, in academic Lotte's view, the main lesson to learn

from Denmark is that quality early childcare is a win-win for WLB: it facilitates working lives while investing in the development of children.

Legally, childcare is considered first as a right of the child in Denmark. Its benefits for children are embedded in Danish culture (Larsen and de la Porte, 2022), so much so that most Danish parents want to place even their young children in childcare. Children get to spend time with other children, playing together and learning together, cared for by well-educated and well-paid staff. In Lotte's words:

> It's not just a place to park your children, it is also a place for them to get stimulated and to get the skill sets, so they can learn later in life. (Lotte, academic).

Persistent WLB obstacles

We now discuss obstacles to WLB in Denmark. Insights from a world-leading case could reveal the most tenacious of challenges that are likely a risk elsewhere too. The main finding was that levelling the playing field so that all groups in society experience WLB equally is not something that even Denmark has achieved. Most participants, while recognising that gaps in Denmark are narrower than in many other nations, revealed examples of significant and, in places, potentially deepening WLB-inequality. Importantly, the examples provided went beyond notions of WLB as avoiding a time-squeeze.

Denmark and the other Nordic countries stand out internationally for narrowing work inequalities among women and men, but gender WLB inequalities endure. Dual-earner societies face their own WLB challenges, as discussed, that do fall heavier on women. In interview, the experts reported that still unequal paternity/maternity leaves, and heavily

female-dominated parental leave (Adamson et al. 2022), embed inequalities in WLB that persist as the children grow. Limited child-sick days for working parents were mentioned (the participants were comparing with Sweden and Norway), for example, and we were told that it is women who take far more unpaid leave to care for sick school-age children, bringing added WLB pressures. Mette (trade union worker) reported too that women do most of the interaction with childcare institutions/schools and this can be a larger job than in many other countries. Even in Denmark then, entrenched gender inequalities in caring lead to and result from women working far more often in lower waged sectors than men and with weaker career progression (Rostgaard and Ejrnæs, 2021), with unequal WLB risks.

The next inequality raised in interview was WLB pressures falling heaviest on those in precarious employment. WLB debate and targeted policies are increasingly being criticised for prioritising the problems reported by the time-pressurised but financially secure among senior workers, and for neglecting the types of WLB-challenges that other workers experience more (Lewis et al., 2007; Warren, 2015; Wong et al., 2023). Our analysis of the literature and interview material suggests that, in Denmark, significant WLB gaps occur between those workers employed in more secure jobs (including in the public sector) and those with precarious contracts, on lower wages and with weaker working conditions overall (Rasmussen et al., 2019). For academic Arne, Denmark has a very segmented market with WLB corollaries. It is:

> Like an A team and a B team. (Arne, academic).

Sectoral inequalities, specifically in workplace flexibility and worker autonomy, were mentioned as producing unequal work-life balancing. FOA, the trade union representing

many public sector workers, had worktime autonomy (alongside predictability of shifts) on its agenda to improve WLB, noted its representative Jesper, while call centres workers, we were told by academic Arne, can face exceptional WLB pressures in Denmark because they lack both flexibility and autonomy at work. Alongside these sectoral differences, academic Caspar pointed to palpable hierarchal inequalities within firms whereby administrative staff, for example, have far less autonomy over how they work than do senior staff in the same workplace.

A final challenge to WLB raised was the mounting problems facing even secure workers as the nature of work is changing (see Mellner et al., 2015; Vesala and Tuomivaara, 2019). Stress came up repeatedly as an escalating WLB-problem. Academics pointed to studies showing intensifying pressures on workers in the public sector, and in knowledge-based occupations where work is becoming more boundaryless (see e.g. Gleerup et al., 2023). For the TUC, stress was currently leading to 'huge debate' among its members, and we heard from the FOA that the union was dealing with rocketing figures on stress-related sick leaves. Jesper felt that workers were being squeezed out of the labour force because they are 'worn out by work', both mentally and physically.

Discussion and conclusions

WLB is growing in importance for workers and businesses, yet it is also under intensified pressures in many societies. The article asks what underpins world-leading WLB societal success, and what are the persistent obstacles, to contribute to sociological and policy-relevant knowledge around the meaning of the pervasive but contested WLB framework. Adopting the strategy of learning from good practice in pioneering societal contexts, we

identified Denmark as a strategic case study. Denmark stands out in international WLB-rankings, yet it is underexamined in the WLB-focused literature. Our aim was to go behind the headline rankings to delve deeper into global WLB success via gaining an expert-insider perspective: we carried out interviews with experts engaged day-to-day in and shaping the field of interest. What lessons can academics and stakeholders, in and beyond Denmark, learn from our analysis?

The first contribution of the article is to identify what factors explain WLB global trailblazing. To begin, the Danish case strongly re-affirms the importance for WLB of battling very long hours in the workplace. Much academic WLB-debate and many WLB-dedicated policies are heavily time-focused, stimulated by the negative impact on the rest of life of spending too much time in paid work (Albertsen et al., 2007; Lewis et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2023). Notions of being time-squeezed shape the way that WLB is routinely measured too, feeding the international WLB-rankings that regularly place Denmark among the global trailblazers (OECD, 2024; Piasna and Theodoropoulou, 2024). Our analysis evidences well that upper limits on paid working weeks are needed both to protect time for non-paid work activities (including caring and leisure) and narrow inequality gaps in WLB (e.g. between women and men; socio-economic groups).

The conceptual approach of this article is that WLB is indeed about the hours that workers spend at work, and that balance includes avoiding a time-squeeze. Yet WLB is also about the quality of work more broadly, including having sufficient hours and earnings to sustain a non-precarious work-life. In addition then, shaped by this more holistic understanding, our analysis of Danish WLB also evidences the importance of battling a worktime model in which

some workers have too few hours of work. The phenomenon of worktime underemployment is neglected in the WLB literature (Warren, 2015) but, from Denmark, we can see that providing workers with living hours is as important for WLB as is capping working weeks. Linked to this, the Danish case shows how financial security is essential if WLB is not to be destabilised. The financial security from a living wage is essential to buttress work-life balancing acts, yet finances are also a neglected dimension of how WLB is understood, in academic literatures, WLB measurements and in WLB-framed policies.

The second major lesson from our analysis of Denmark is in identifying the most tenacious obstacles to achieving WLB that persist even for a world leader. Eradicating within-society WLB-inequalities is a genuine challenge. While inequality gaps in Denmark are far narrower than in many other places (Grönlund et al., 2017), WLB pressures still fall unevenly. Women carry a heavier WLB burden than men and there is more work-life imbalance for those in precarious forms of employment. WLB emerged in the USA context and, as it developed, the study of WLB was led by the temporal concerns reported more by managerial and professional workers (Evans and Wyatt, 2024). Their experiences still dominate the bulk of the WLB literature and, connected to this, managers and professionals fare better under WLB-targeted policies that have been devised with their concerns in mind (Warren, 2015). Yet WLB pressures also appear to be heightening even among the more secure workforce in Denmark as work-intensification and the blurring of work and non-work lives amplify work-related stress. Within-society WLB inequalities require far more sociological attention, in and beyond WLB-progressive societies like Denmark. As part of this, we need more consideration of those voices that have fallen outside the academic WLB-lens so far,

underpinned by a more holistic conceptual understanding of WLB that recognises rather than disregards their specific work-life challenges.

The third contribution of the article is thus to update the theoretical understanding of WLB, drawing on the above insights from Denmark. The meaning of WLB matters. For Gambles et al. in 2006, the WLB language that initially helped to raise awareness of paid work and personal life balancing issues was already becoming a barrier to thinking, including about how work-lives might change (and see Kelliher et al., 2019). The language we use to talk about combining paid work with other parts of life is significant because oversimplification limits possible solutions. Simplistic, partial, and blinkered understandings of a concept can distort the real-world phenomenon, misidentify the main WLB challenges being experienced in society and by whom, fail to spot changing patterns and trends, and misdirect well-meant policies to the wrong groups, neglecting those in most need of support. Prevailing WLB-labelled support is known to have been directly shaped by older academic debate (Gregory et al., 2013; Kossek and Buzzanell, 2018), with a focus on enabling people who fall outside the 'ideal worker' norm (usually mothers of young children) to undertake paid work, rather than critiquing how paid work could or should be organised (Lewis et al., 2007: 369). As stated too, a classed understanding of the WLB concept that prioritises the WLB needs of the most time-pressured but financially secure among middle-class workers also endures: it has transitioned successfully into policy and organizational practice, and we can see its influence in those international WLB-metrics. Dominated by the time-squeeze notion, they all disregard or under-emphasise such WLB challenges as underemployment, financial insecurity, stress, and lack of autonomy, integral to our more holistic WLB conceptualisation.

The article's final contribution is to make suggestions for further investigative work that builds upon our project and its approach to WLB. The interviews gave valuable insiders' insights into WLB from the grounded viewpoints of those working directly in the area and took us beyond superficial international WLB-rankings. However, they necessarily involved a small group of willing participants. It would be useful next to gather insights from a wider range and larger number of experts (employers, trade unions, policy stakeholders and researchers), locally, nationally and at supra-national levels. A next step would also be to explore workers' lived experiences of WLB in this trail-blazing context, taking us beyond the quantitative international rankings of Danish exceptionalism. This step should include sampling workers in the most/least supportive workplaces and at different levels of organizational hierarchies to ensure that diverse voices are included and that inequalities in WLB are not forgotten even within a nation faring so well internationally.

Lastly, we have argued that sufficient earnings from paid work underpin WLB. Yet the Danish case, via its particular flexicurity model, also raises new questions around non-waged income and its ramifications for WLB. Predicated on high unemployment benefits and flexible labour (alongside active labour market and lifelong learning policies), Danish flexicurity provides an ideal-typical WLB model that is rooted in the collective regulation of employment and a solid safety net for citizens. There is debate in Denmark, however, over a bifurcation of flexicurity for blue- and white-collar workers (Bredgaard and Madsen, 2018; Jensen, 2017), offering up opportunities for further investigations into work-lives under diverse models within Denmark itself. Further, at an international level, in-depth research would be valuable into how WLB is experienced under different WLB trail-blazing societal

systems: the Dutch version of flexicurity, for example, focuses more on normalizing atypical work (Bekker and Mailand, 2019), while Swedish flexicurity has legislation that provides firmer restrictions around employers' dismissal of workers (Emmenegger, 2010), both offering up intriguing potential comparisons with Danish WLB.

The article asks how to lead the world in WLB, with insights from Denmark. Identifying innovative policies and good practice from a global leader is a valuable strategy but we cannot simply export its WLB model from Denmark. Participant Jakob (municipality worker) put it well: Danish WLB cannot just be 'cherry-picked and transferred elsewhere': its 'a big package if you want to do this', he said. We show that the Danish package is embedded in strong societal norms surrounding the value of paid work, 'the proper thing to do' (Finch, 1989) around childcare, and the significance of living a hygge life. Nonetheless, the Danish case-study usefully affirms the importance of taking a holistic approach to WLB, essential if we are to use the concept to help detect and better support the needs of all groups of workers. Workers in many countries are facing challenges in reconciling pressures from paid and unpaid work and the rest of their lives, it is increasingly difficult to balance these pressures, and the need for real-world solutions is pressing. We need more sociological insights from societies that have been neglected in the WLB-literature to advance a more holistic and inclusive understanding of WLB.

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Figure 1 The participants.

		Area of work	Details/expertise
1	Arne	Academic	Work-life balance, self-management
2	Bent	Academic	Stress, flexible work
3	Bodil	Employer	DA (Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening), the Confederation of Danish Employers
4	Casper	Academic	Diverse work-life contexts, well-being
5	Dorte	Academic	Family-working lives, segmented labour markets
6	Jakob	Municipality	Strategy and policy
7	Jesper	Trade union	FOA (Forbundet af Offentligt Ansatte), the Trade Union of Public Employees (social workers, cleaning staff, health care assistants, day care workers etc).
8	Lotte	Academic	Work-life balance policy, EU policy
9	Mette	Trade union	FH (Fagbevægelsens Hovedorganisation): Danish Trade Union Confederation
10	Nina	Municipality	Human resources
11	Signe	Consultant	Work-life balance and leadership
12	Torben	Academic	Work-family relations, welfare regimes