

Increasing part-time working hours in the Netherlands. Identifying policy recommendations through Group Model Building¹

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Abstract

With 73% of women and 19% of men working part-time, the Netherlands are known as the champion of part-time work. In order to increase especially the working hours of women with small part-time jobs (less than 20 hours per week) the Dutch government installed a thinktank of employers, employees and government. This Taskforce Part-time-Plus commissioned a quantitative and a qualitative study focused on the relationship between women's working hours and ambition. Group model building was used to integrate the results of the two studies into a causal loop diagram and to derive policy recommendations. This paper describes the results of the group model building process and reflects upon the usefulness of the method for translating research results in policy recommendations.

Keywords: part-time work, Group model building, causal loop diagram, policy recommendations.

¹ We thank the TaskForce Part-time Plus installed by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs for the research grant and the participants to the GMB sessions for their commitment and contribution. Several participants provided us with comments on previous versions of this sub-study. We thank Suzan Aafjes, Ndo Ndoane, Marjan van Noort, Mirjam Engelen, Yvonne Benschop, Hans Doorewaard, Ine Gremmen, Berber Pas and Pascale Peters at Radboud University for their comments. Finally, we thank Suzan Aafjes, Marjan van Noort, Désirée van Gorp, Myra Keizer and Frans Vergossen of the Taskforce Part-time-Plus and Dennis Jacobs at Radboud University for their research support.

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Introduction

The Netherlands have a relatively high labour market participation of women (72% in 2010, compared to an EU average of 62%, according to the European Commission, 2013) but many women work limited hours. The majority of women in the labour market (73%) work less than 32 hours per week, compared to 19% of men (Merens, Hartgers & van den Brakel, 2012). As a result the Netherlands have been called ‘the first part-time economy in the world’ (Visser, 2002). Stimulating women’s part-time labour participation has been a conscious decision of the Dutch government since the eighties of the last century. It created part-time jobs in the public sector in the eighties and introduced supportive legislation ensuring part-time workers equal pay and social security in the nineties to support housewives to enter the labour market (Portegijs, 2009). Scholars have argued that the economic growth in the eighties and nineties in the Netherlands can be entirely be explained by the increase of part-time employment (Keuzekamp, 2009; Visser, 2002). In order to keep the relatively extensive welfare state viable in the context of an ageing population and shortages on the labor market, the Dutch government aims to increase working hours. In 2008 it installed the Taskforce Part-time-Plus in 2008 to examine how to reach this goal. The Taskforce Part-time Plus is a thinktank representing the main societal stakeholders: trade unions, employers and government. The aim of the taskforce was to make the women’s employment in large part-time jobs more self-evident. Changing societal images and perceptions about the gender division of labor plays an important role. A well-known image is that women are less ambitious than men regarding labor and career (Mescher, 2011; Mescher, Benschop & Doorewaard, 2010). The question is whether this image is correct and under what conditions women are willing to work more hours. To find an answer to this question, in 2009 the Taskforce Part-time-Plus commissioned a qualitative and a quantitative study on the relationship of ambitions, part-time labor and gender (Visser et al., 2009). To integrate the results, the Taskforce provided funding for performing group model building by the authors of this paper. The first objective of the group model building was to integrate the results of the two studies into ambition in a causal loop diagram that could visually represent the various aspects of the problem. The second objective was to determine policy recommendations on the basis of the causal loop diagram to support the Taskforce Part-time-Plus in the implementation of the research results.

Participants in the GMB were the researchers of the two studies, members of Taskforce Part-time-Plus and a policy advisor from the Ministry of Social Affairs. The first question in the GMB was defined as: which factors influence the number of hours Dutch women work? The insights from the two studies were translated into causes and effects and integrated in a causal loop diagram explaining the number of hours that women work. By jointly analysing the causal diagram the group was able to answer the second question: which key policy issues can be derived from the causal loop diagram? We reflect upon the use of GMB for translating research results in policy recommendations and the implementation of the policies.

1. Case description

The Netherlands is a relatively prosperous welfare state. After the second world war, the Dutch welfare state followed the male breadwinner model (Lewis, 1990), that supported men to earn a household income and women to manage the household and take care of the kids in the role of housewives (Bleijenbergh et al., 2006). Since the eighties, the Dutch government in cooperation with the social partners (trade unions and employers confederations) began to support the part-time work of women by creating part-time jobs. In the nineties, legislation about equal pay and equal social security rights for part-time workers supported a massive entrance of married women to the labour market. The entire growth of employment in the Netherlands in the eighties and nineties is due to women's part-time work (Keuzekamp et al, 2009, Visser, 2002). The Dutch model became a role model for European part-time legislation (Bleijenbergh et al, 2004).

Since the new millennium, Dutch governments formulated the aim to further increase working hours. The ageing of the population in combination with decline of birth figures, calls for the entire labour force to be utilized. The Taskforce Part-time Plus involves social partners with government policy to increase labour participation. The Taskforce initiated research on different aspects of part-time work to prepare policy measures. This study describes the integration of two studies on the relation between part-time work and women's ambitions. The first study, performed by the research institute Research for Policy in the Hague³, focused on quantitatively testing the roles ambitions, and perceptions of ambitions, play in the number of hours women work. In a large survey 7000 women and men with payed jobs on a higher, middle and lower educational level were questioned through an internet-survey. The question to be answered was whether the level of ambition explains the differences in working hours of women and men.

The second, qualitative study was performed by researchers from the Radboud University Nijmegen. Focus group interviews were held with a sample of 35 workers and managers, full-time and part-time workers, women and men. In these groups they reflected upon the meaning of ambitions and gender in decisions and choices about working hours.

The two studies reported broad variations in the meanings of the concept of ambition. No proof was found for the assumption that women are less ambitious in their work than men. Nevertheless, the ambitions of Dutch women were found to have a broader focus than men's ambitions, including not only upward mobility but also personal development and societal relevance of the work. No evidence was found for part-time working women and men to be less ambitious than full-time workers. The research showed that

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ambition is not an isolated phenomenon but is given meaning and content within social interactions. To flourish, ambitions need acknowledgement and support. Perceptions of managers of the ambitions of part-time workers are often susceptible to stereotyping and sometimes hinder the realisation of the ambitions of part-time workers.

2. The method

We used group model building (GMB) to integrate the results of the two studies. GMB is a method in which a facilitator guides a group of professionals through the process of jointly building a causal loop diagram of a common problem and define leverages for change (Vennix, 1996). The professionals are situated in a semi-circle around a screen, to enable detailed discussion of the different steps and elements of building. The process can be supported by a model builder controlling system dynamics software, but can also be supported by the facilitator drawing a causal loop diagram by hand. This method is suitable for supporting strategic decision-making and is recently used for mapping and visualizing gender processes in organizations (Bleijenbergh, Benschop and Vennix, 2008; Bleijenbergh, van Engen, Blonk and Schulte, 2008). The Taskforce Part-time Plus gave us the assignment to use GMB for the purpose of deriving policy recommendations. According to Vennix (1996) GMB is preferably used with a team of managers or policymakers who have practical knowledge of the problem. In this case we combined researchers with theoretical knowledge, stakeholders with practical experience with the problem and policymakers. We will reflect upon the consequences of this composition of the group of participants for the process of GMB

The GMB sessions consisted of three meetings in September and October 2009 at various locations in the Netherlands (Zoetermeer, Breukelen, The Hague). The first author served as a facilitator, the second author as a modeller. The participants in the GMB did have specific knowledge of the problem due to their varying backgrounds. The researchers of the two sub-studies had knowledge on the issue through their empirical research, while the members of the Taskforce Part-time-Plus contributed their expertise as stakeholders in Dutch labor relations. Finally the government representative had extensive knowledge of the field of labor policies. The joint building of a causal model of the problem fostered the exchange of this knowledge and supported thinking into various directions.

During the meetings the participants went through the steps of the model building process. In the first meeting the central variable of the causal diagram was determined. Participants selected the average number of hours that Dutch women work as the central variable because increasing this variable was the main aim of the Taskforce Part time Plus. Furthermore, the first meeting was used to identify the factors that are related to the currently low average number of hours that Dutch women work. Based on the

outcome of a discussion the participants clustered the main causes and started on building the model. The second session focused on consequences of (changes in) the average number of hours women work and the way in which these consequences are reinforced or stabilized through feedback processes. Participants selected the main consequences by clustering the list of factors that came forward.

The third session focused on identifying the relations between the most important variables. Clustering the relations in five domains enabled the facilitator and the modelbuilder to suggest feedback processes, which were corrected, adjusted and complemented by the participants. As a result, the entire causal loop diagram was validated by the participants. If any relation was falsified by research knowledge or expertise of any of the participants, the facilitator deleted it from the model. As a result, only variables, relations and processes were adopted on which unanimous consensus existed. Moreover, the causal diagram was analysed by the participants in small heterogeneous groups for identifying policy recommendations. The participants identified policy recommendations in all five domains related to the average number of hours women work. The causal diagram made clear that these domains are highly interrelated and that they influence each other. For example, the perception of women's ambition by supervisors is related to both the careers of women and the cultural norms. Measures that cover only one domain can easily be offset by developments within other domain. Effective policy for increasing the number of hours Dutch women work should, according to the participants, be comprehensive and varied and include all five domains.

3. The causal diagram

The central variable in the causal diagram was defined by the participants as the average number of hours that women work. Participants have distinguished five domains in the model. They relate to the central variable and overlap each other partly. These domains relate to:

- job supply
- career path of women
- cultural norms
- combination of work and care
- income

The complete causal diagram is shown in figure 1.

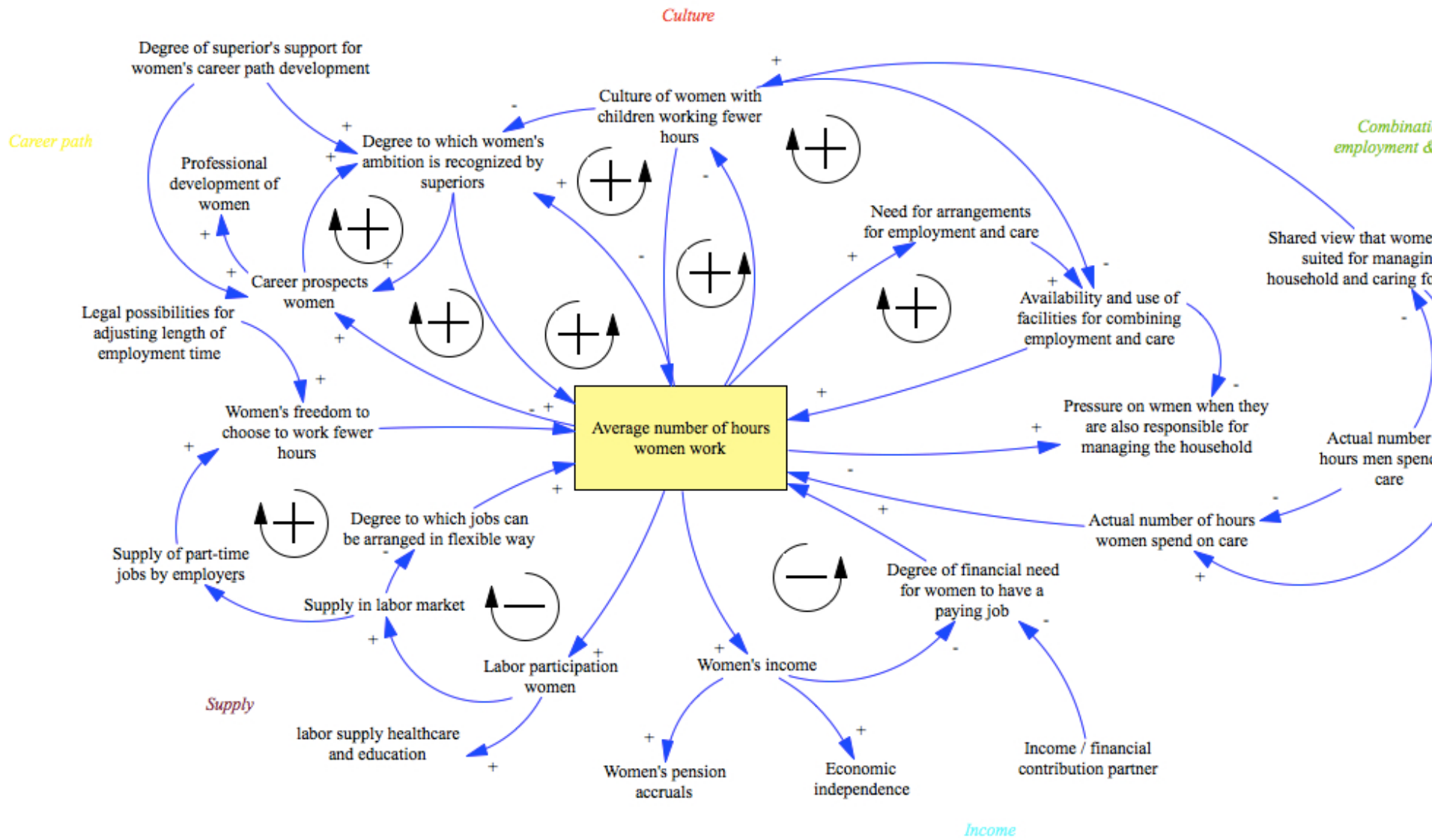


Figure 1: The causal diagram

The causal diagram shows which feedback processes reinforce changes in a variable. Consider for example an increase in the supply of jobs. This would increase the supply of part-time jobs as well, which in turn causes an increase in the freedom to choose part-time jobs, which would increase the number of women part-time and so further increase the supply of jobs which is a positive feedbackloop.

Other feedbackprocesses have a balancing character. For example, when women work less hours, women's income decreases and the financial need for paid work may increase, which would lead to women working more hours which is a negative feedbackloop.

The five domains were discussed separately by the participants, by going through the model clockwise, starting in the bottom left corner of the causal diagram. The domains were discussed separately and their underlying reasoning was articulated. The discussion was focused on the feedback processes because they show how a problem is being sustained or how it could change. In these processes the key policy recommendations were identified.

3.1 Domain I: Availability of jobs

The supply side of the model relates to the supply of part-time work and flexible work in the labor market and is located in the bottom left of the model.

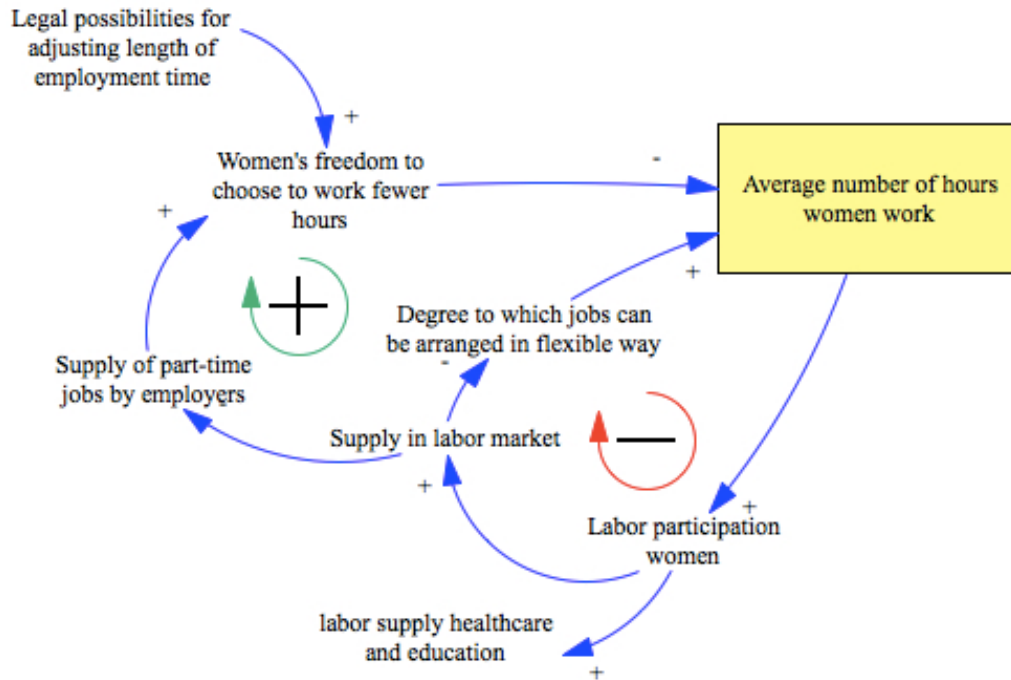


Figure 4: Domain I 'Job supply'

Two feedback processes can be identified, which are described below.

The feedback process regarding the supply of part-time jobs in the labor market (the green circular arrow) is reinforcing. The reasoning is as follows: as the average number of hours women work increases, the labor participation of women increases, which causes the supply of work on the labor market to increase. If the labor supply increases, the supply of part-time jobs by employers decreases and this causes women's freedom to choose to work fewer hours to decrease as well. The result is that the average number of hours women work increases. An increase in legal opportunities for adjusting the working hours in the Netherlands has for example led to a lower average number of hours women work because women opted for smaller jobs. The increased supply of part-time jobs by employers in the eighties led by definition to more women choosing smaller jobs. At the same time the total number of women in the labor market has increased. Because the increasing number of women on the labor market working fewer average number of hours over the past few decades, the labor of women women (43%) in the Netherlands is in an international perspective still relatively low (Keuzenkamp, 2009).

The feedback process regarding flexible work (red circular arrow) is balancing. The reasoning is as follows: as the average number of hours women work increases, the labor participation of women increases, causing the supply in the labor market to increase as well. And as the supply of labor increases,

the degree to which jobs can be arranged in a flexible way decreases. The underlying reasoning is that employers feel less need to create flexible working conditions in such circumstances.

When the degree to which jobs can be arranged in a flexible way decreases, the average number of hours women work decreases as well, because it becomes harder to combine work and care. Apart from that, increased labor participation of women also leads to an increase in labor supply in the education and health care sectors.

3.2 Domain II: The career path of women

The second domain, which relates to the career path of women, can be found in the top left of the model.

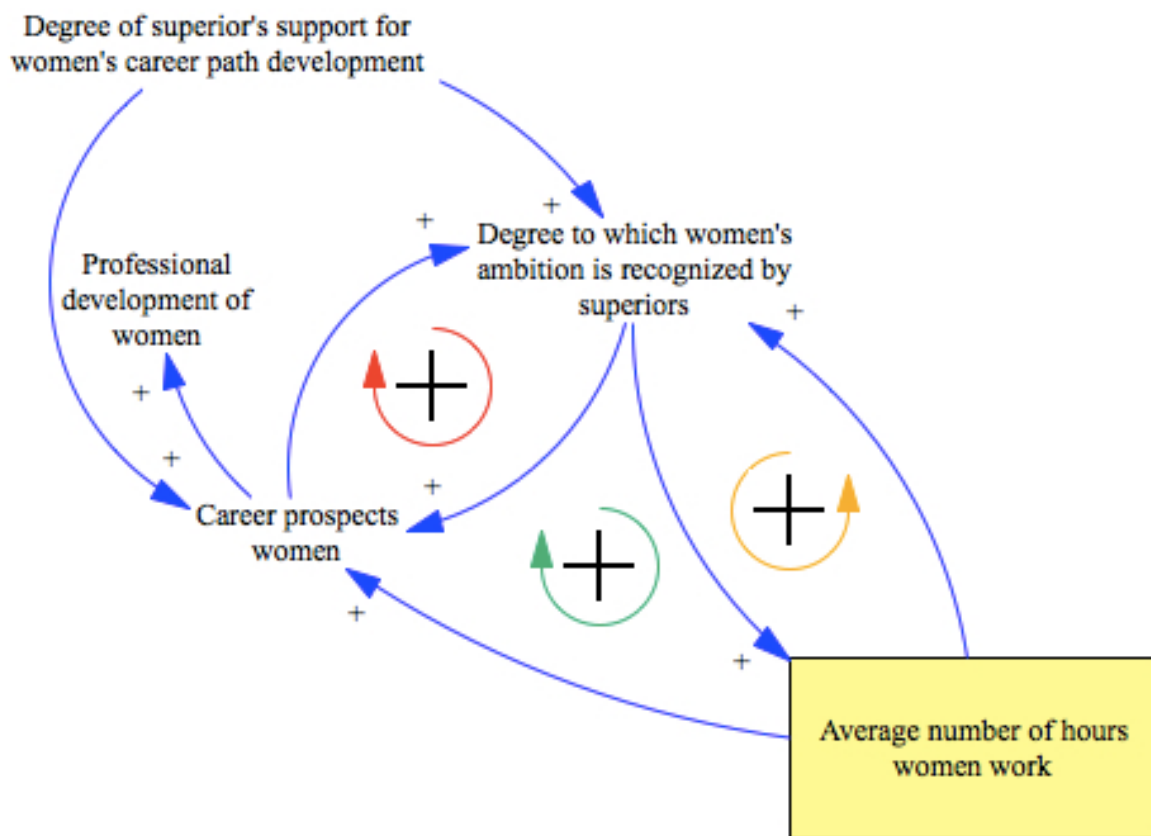


Figure 5: Domain II 'Career path of women'

The group identified three reinforcing feedback processes. They are indicated with a red, green and orange symbol.

The green symbol shows that as the average number of hours women work increase, the career prospects for women increase as well. This causes the degree to which women’s ambition is recognized by superiors to increase also. Furthermore, superiors support for women’s career path development contributes to women’s career prospects and the degree to which women’s ambitions are recognized. The consequence of an increase in the recognized ambition is that women on average will work more hours. The underlying reasoning is that superiors support and encourage such decisions. Within this process we see two smaller feedbackloops. When the average number of hours women work increases, the degree to which women’s ambitions are recognized by superiors increases as well. This causes the average number of hours women work to increase further. This is a reinforcing process, as indicated by the orange symbol. This also applies to the relation between the degree to which superiors recognize women’s ambition and the career prospects of women (the loop with the red symbol). Moreover, an increase in career prospects causes an increase in the professional development of women as well.

3.3 Domain III: Cultural norms

The third domain, which relates to cultural norms, can be found in the top of the model and is connected with the domains of the career paths of women and the combination of work and care.

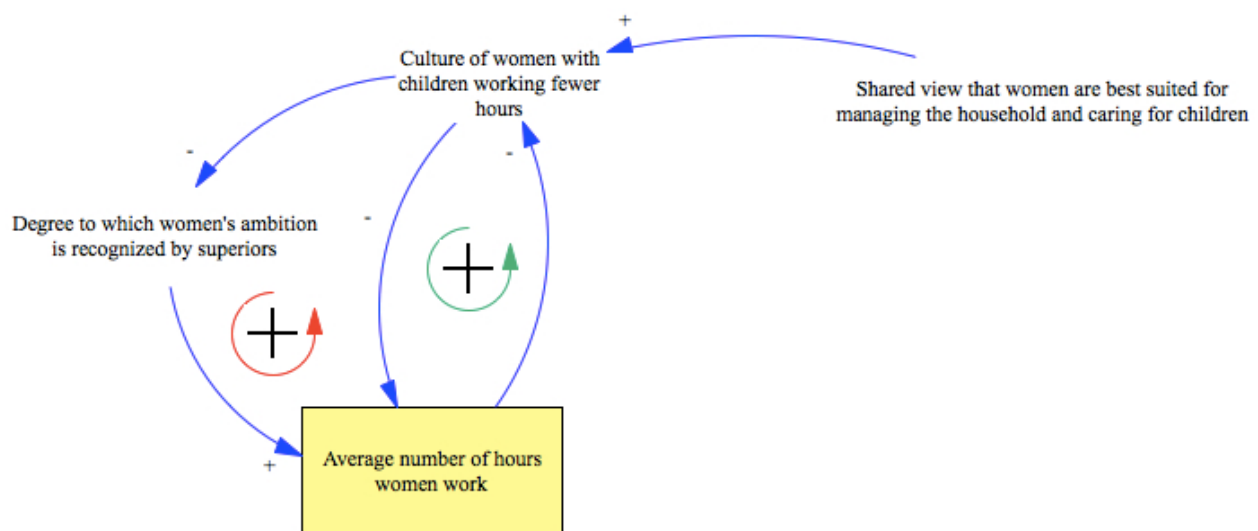


Figure 6: Domain III 'Cultural norms'

In this domain two feedback processes are central. The first (green circular arrow) is about cultural norms in society, by which we mean the shared view that women who have children should work fewer hours

than women without children or men. Thus, when this cultural view becomes more shared, the average number of hours women work decreases. When the average number of hours women work decreases, the cultural habit of women with children working fewer hours increases further. So this is a reinforcing process. This also works the other way around. When the culture of women with children working fewer hours loses strength, the average number of hours women work increases, causing this view to become less shared.

Cultural norms are related to the way individuals perceive themselves and to how they are perceived by superiors. The second feedback process (red circular arrow) is as follows: when the cultural habit of women with children working fewer hours decreases, the extent to which women’s ambition is recognized by superiors increases. This causes an increase in the average number of hours women work, thereby further decreasing the cultural habit. This cultural habit also increases the shared societal view that women are best suited for managing the household and taking care of the children.

3.4 Domain IV: Combination of work & care

The fourth domain, which relates to the combination of work and care, can be found in the top right of the model.

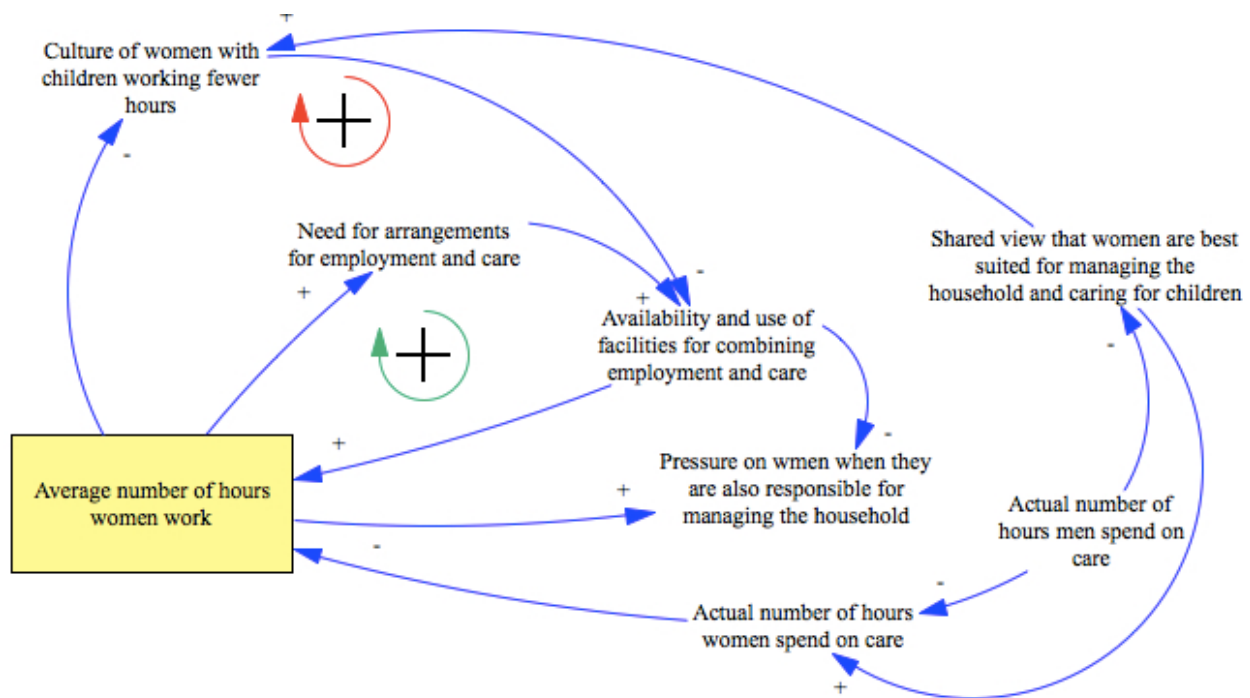


Figure 7: Domain IV ‘Combination of work and care’

In this domain two feedback processes are present that both relate to the presence of facilities for combining work and care. When the cultural habit of women with children working fewer hours decreases, the availability and use of facilities for combining work and care increases. This increase causes the average number of hours women work to go up. And this causes the cultural habit of women with children to lose strength. This is a reinforcing process (red symbol). The second feedback process (green symbol) relates to the demand of arrangements for combining work and care. When the need for arrangements for combining work and care increases, the availability and use of facilities for combining work and care increases. This increase causes the number of hours women work to increase as well and consequently, the need increases even further. Within this domain other variables matter as well. When men spend more hours on care, the number of hours women spend on care decreases and the view that women are best suited for managing the household and caring for children becomes less shared. This causes a decrease in the number of hours women spend on care, but also a decrease of the cultural habit of women with children working fewer hours. The pressure on women when they are responsible for managing the household decreases when they work fewer hours and when the availability and use of facilities for combining work and care increase.

3.5 Domain V: Income

The fifth domain, which relates to the income of women, can be found in the bottomright of the model.

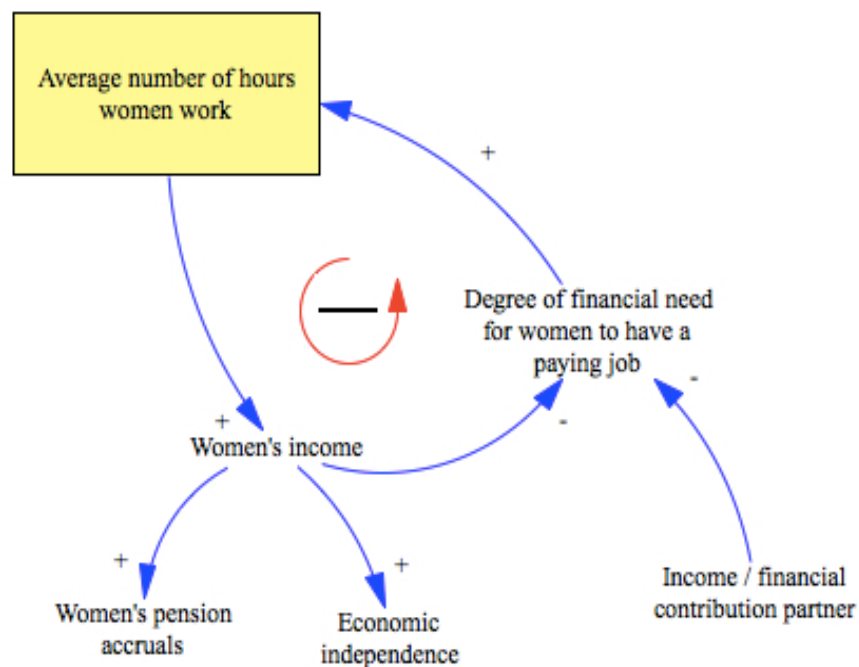


Figure 8: Domain V 'Income'

In this domain one feedback process is present (red symbol). When the income of women increases, the financial need for women to work decreases. As this need decreases, the average number of hours that women work does so as well. As the average number of hours women work decreases, so does their income. This in turn causes the financial need to work to increase again. This is a balancing process, meaning that at a certain income level of women a stable situation is reached. In this situation the financial need to work more hours is not present anymore. This domain contains some other variables, such as the economic independence of women, the amount in which women build an occupational pension, their income and/or the financial support of their (ex-)partner. The economic independence and pensions increase as their income increases. The participants consider this as a gender equality side-effect of increasing the average number of hours women work. On the other hand, the financial necessity to work decreases as the partner has a higher income or contributes more to the family income.

4. Key issues for policy

During the third session of the GMB the participants identified policy recommendations. In this process, the focus was on how to increase the average number of hours Dutch women work. The integration of the knowledge from empirical research (the researchers) and from practical expertise (stakeholders and policymakers) shows how many different societal, organizational and individual factors influence the average number of hours women work. The participants selected five aspects which, based on the research and their expertise, offer the best opportunities for enabling structural changes. The average number of hours women work is related to the supply of part-time jobs and the opportunities to arrange flexible employment conditions. It is also related to the extent to which their superiors recognize women's ambition. The cultural habit that in the Netherlands women with children work less hours effects the average number of hours women work, as well as the availability of facilities for combining work and care. Furthermore, the financial need to work is an important factor related to the average number of hours women work. As long as other sources of income keep this need within bounds, this stimulus is not present. Many of the identified processes apply to men in part-time jobs as well. Other processes actually have the opposite effect on men. The view that women are best suited to manage the household and care for children is a stimulus for men to work more instead of fewer hours when they have children.

The causal diagram has shown that various factors are strongly correlated and that they reinforce each other. The shared view that women are best suited to care for children and manage the household is for

example related to the cultural norms, but also to the availability of facilities for combining work and care. The culture of women with children working fewer hours is not only directly related to the average number of hours they work, but also to the extent to which their ambition is recognized by their superior. Changes in one domain thus can bring about changes in other domains as well. The model shows the complexity of the problem and how many interrelationships exist between the domains.

Participants in the GMB sessions have, based on this analysis, identified key policy recommendations, which are present in all five domains. They emphasize that effective policy for increasing the average number of hours women work should relate to all these domains, and should be comprehensive and varied. Only by coherently addressing the various aspects of the problem a number of reinforcing processes currently taking place can be changed.

Promoting flexible working conditions

In the domain of supply, an important key issue is that employers could promote flexible employment conditions. On the other hand, employees could make better use of these opportunities. The analysis shows that when these opportunities increase, women (and men) are willing to work more hours in combination with household and care responsibilities at home.

Career support by superiors

In the career path domain superiors could support the career path development of women. Superiors are in a crucial position to play a role in this process. They can explicitly point women to the possibility to work a few hours more. The analysis shows that when superiors support for career path development increases, part-time working women are more willing to work more hours. The same holds for men with a part-time job. Furthermore, the flexible arrangement of work has a positive effect on this (see the first policy issue).

Recognition of women's ambition

In the domain of cultural norms superiors should actively be motivated to recognize women's ambition. The analysis shows that when superiors are better able to identify this ambition, the average number of hours women work increases. This observation is linked to the societal views about the role of women, which can change under influence of an increase in the average number of hours women work. Many processes related to part-time work are positively influenced when the recognition of women's ambition improves.

Facilities for work and care

In the domain of the combination of work and care investments can be made in the facilities that enable combining work and care. According to the analysis, an increase in those facilities increases the average number of hours women work. The same holds for the number of hours men spend on care. When men spend more hours on care, the average number of hours women work increases. Additionally, it causes the view that women are best suited to manage the household and care for children to lose strength. Thus, enabling men who want to be responsible for care to actually do this, is another key issue for policy in this domain.

Income

The fifth key issue for policy relates to income. When women's financial need to work increases, their willingness to work more hours increases as well. The participants acknowledge that this is outside the scope of the Taskforce Part-timePlus. The financial need to work (more hours) can be connected to individual factors such as composition of household or divorce. A critical evaluation of tax policies stimulating the financial independence of women could foster the increase of the average number of hours women work.

5. Follow-up

The causal loop diagram produced by the GMB sessions, is based on empirical research and practical experience of stakeholders. The model represents an integration of the knowledge and expertise they have gained in this field. It is a preliminary qualitative diagram of the various processes related to the average number of hours women work in the Dutch labor market. In September 2010 the Dutch cabinet took a stand on the final report from the Taskforce Part-time-Plus, of which the GMB project described in this paper was a part (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2010). The stand of the cabinet focuses on the modernisation of the labor market. The cabinet calls for social partners to improve working conditions for men and women. The cabinet announces to abolish tax advantages for breadwinners, while it introduces tax advantages for combining work and family life. Next, the cabinet enhances the communication about these tax arrangements. Moreover, the cabinet aims at adjusting day schedules of schools to support the employment of parents and to further integrate the school system with pre-school and post-school facilities. Finally, the cabinet advises the next cabinet to further improve work family arrangements. This fits with three of the five key policy issues identified by the participants in the GMB, namely promoting flexible working conditions, income and facilities for work and care (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2010). We can conclude that the GMB sessions indeed helped to translate the research results in policy recommendations.

A next step in the development of knowledge about processes that effect the number of working hours of women could be the quantification of the model, though it would be a difficult task with this model since a lot of variables are soft variables. Quantification would mean a leaner model with a selection of variables, that can be measured, conceptualised in a stock-flow-structure. In this way the effect of the suggested policy recommendations changes could be calculated and predictions can be made. This can provide additional support to the political and administrative decision-making processes in which the various policy options are central.

6. Discussion

In this part we reflect upon the use of GMB for translating research results in policy recommendations. GMB is preferably used with a team of managers or policymakers who have practical knowledge of the problem (Vennix, 1996). In this case we combined researchers with empirical and theoretical knowledge, with stakeholders and policy makers with practical experience. This composition of the group of participants differs from the traditional group of participants in GMB. The combination of the roles of experts with those of policymakers/stakeholders is innovative and is an extension to the traditional application of GMB.

The facilitators perceived the dynamics of the group process to be different from the traditional team where people know each other closely and work together as a team. In this case we combined participants with different organizational backgrounds, different types of expertise and different interests. This made the communication between participants complex and sometimes fuzzy. The facilitators had to pay extra attention to the process of knowledge-elicitation. Since a lot of variables were not taken for granted by the participants or had different meanings, we had to put a lot of effort in clarification of concepts. It slowed down the process of GMB in the early stages. Close cooperation between facilitator and modeller was necessary to smooth this process. We payed extra attention to potential differences in meaning and signalled each other when we discovered them.

Another issue arises when the facilitator herself has content expertise, as was in this case. The combination of two roles can give rise to an extra dimension to the complexity. In this case we followed Vennix rule: “The facilitator must be neutral to the *content* of the discussion. The facilitator should refrain from airing his or her personal opinions..(..) There are a couple of ways to ensure that you as a facilitator do not interfere with the content of the discussion. The first (..) is an inquiry attitude (..). Every now and then, however, there will be situations in which you would like to contribute to to the discussion’s content. (..) be sure that you make it clear to the group that you abandon your facilitator role for the moment and

would like to make a comment or present an idea (Vennix, 1996: 150).” At some moments the facilitator temporary stepped out of her role to contribute to the discussion and let the group decide whether to discuss or ignore it. Though since the communication process took a lot of attention, the facilitator had scarce opportunities to do so. “Another possibility is to invite an outside expert to participate in the group discussions, in order to prevent the group from premature closure” (Vennix, 1996, p.150). In this process three researchers with comparable expertise were involved in the model building. This helped the facilitator to leave the discussion to group and emphasize the role of facilitator.

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Appendix:

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