

## FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with Professor Ariane Ollier-Malaterre.



### Ariane Ollier-Malaterre, Ph.D.

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Experts Panel Link: <https://wfrn.org/expert/ariane-ollier-malaterre/>

**WFRN - How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?**

**Ariane -** *I worked about 10 years before getting a PhD. I have worked for one of the large US consulting firms, as a junior up to a manager; I also had my own start up in the years 2000s, and I worked for a University (Grande Ecole in France) as a project leader.*

*Two things struck me, all these years:*

- 1) The workplace was operating as if people didn't have lives outside of work.*
- 2) Women were leaving "up or out" and high potential career tracks.*

*In the workplaces I observed, priority was almost always given to work deadlines and clients requirements, sometimes at the expense of employees' personal and family lives.*

*Therefore, in my PhD I focused on how employers handled the "annoying" fact that employees are not robots, but in fact have lives, commitments, and aspirations outside of work. I wanted to examine the policies employers were adopting and if these policies worked.*

*At that time, I had not fully gathered that the two phenomena I was observing were related. This research helped me understand the career trajectories of my peers, as well as career dynamics in my own life.*

**WFRN - How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?**

*Ariane - I discovered the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network, the "ancestor" of WFRN in a sense, in 2005 as I was in my first year of PhD studies. It advertised an announcement for an upcoming work and family conference in Barcelona. I had missed the deadline by 2 days but the conference organizer, Professor Steven Poelmans, graciously conceded that I could submit a paper if I really hurried. I had no paper yet! I somehow managed to put something together and when I attended that first conference, I knew I had found my scholarly home. The Sloan network was a fantastic source of information and a gateway to identifying mentors, creating friendships, and even finding a post-doc position with Professor Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes at Boston College. I have been a member of WFRN since its creation and I really value the network and its conferences. When the Special Interest Groups/Networking Communities were created, I volunteered to help launch the Technology, Work and Family group, whose leadership team has been organizing workshops and symposia at every conference since. I find that the interdisciplinary range of the network makes for exciting conferences where you can always learn something new.*

**WFRN - What are your big findings? Did you make any unexpected discoveries?**

*Ariane - I work across different streams of research, at the individual, organizational, and country levels, so it is hard to choose one set of findings over another. Let me highlight two considerations as I look back on my work.*

*The first is the time and effort that many people devote to managing technologies. Given that we have become very connected, it takes will and skill to detach from work and from our devices. Social media requires active strategies because this is a social space where worlds collide. I have been very interested in the new forms of boundary management between work and life that emerge on sites such as Facebook or WeChat. Another issue that warrants attention is the matter of privacy and surveillance, against the backdrop of facial recognition, electronic payments, and smart devices. Last year, I spent part of my sabbatical leave in China and am working on a book based on the interviews I conducted there.*

*The second big finding is the importance of context, which shapes experiences, identities and understanding of work and family roles. As a qualitative researcher, I have been fortunate to spend time and talk with people in different countries and who have diverse social backgrounds. I never cease to be amazed by the ways different layers of contextual values, opportunities, and constraints (e.g., culture, socio-economic and political system, gender beliefs, social class) shape the perceptions of both employers and employees. This is how we learn and internalize what it means to be a good parent, a good worker, and so forth. Context also informs our perceptions of technology, and the strategies we can craft around technology.*

### **WFRN - How does your research connect to social policy?**

**Ariane** - *Let me speak not just of my research but also of my understanding of scholarly research in the field. Social policy is key to advance work-family issues because little can be improved if we focus only on the workplace. Workplaces are embedded in societies and employees have roles in their families. Therefore, achieving sustainable work-life balance requires not only policies and cultural change in the workplace but also changes in families and societies. As long as we devalue care (care for children, care for elders, care for the disabled), domestic work, and community involvement, and as long as we overvalue work and careers, inequalities between men and women will persist because men do not embrace care to the extent that women do. When women remain the primary caretakers, they are held back in workplaces. It is a systemic issue. Research points out we have been operating on an illusion of gender equality and this is very damaging to changing home and workplace dynamics.*

### **WFRN - Does your research inform workplace practice? How?**

**Ariane** - *We urgently need programs to evaluate and redesign work processes and workloads - this should be the core of any work-life, health, well-being, resilience, or sustainability program. I'd like to share a saying from a pharmaceutical company where I did a lot of field work; they said, employees are like fish in a pond, you can enroll the fish in a stress management training but if you put them back in a toxic pond, they will still burn out. This company had team resilience workshops in which teams identified where the stress and the hurdles came from. They worked to find solutions and then had follow-ups on what they had decided to change, with dates and people responsible for each action. In my view, the policies need to be much bolder; they need to address how we can reinvent work and the distribution and scheduling of tasks and responsibilities.*

*The other set of policies that we need pertain to supporting managers who implement work-life policies. It is not enough to issue the policies and let managers struggle with them, because managers are already over-worked and their knowledge of the policies is quite poor unless they invest time and effort to understand them. It is not even enough to train managers; what they need, usually, is support as they deal with an employee's request. One possibility is having a work-life champion in the HR department who can help managers trouble shoot and explore strategies. Another possibility is implementing a hotline that managers can call or email with specific questions regarding (for instance) how many days someone in a specific type of job should telework, or how they should appraise remote workers' performance.*

**WFRN - *How do you integrate work-family topics in your teaching and/or training? Do you have an assignment or approach that is especially effective?***

**Ariane** - *I teach a doctoral seminar where we begin with what I consider the foundations required to understand work-family topics. We read identity research that examines personal, interpersonal and social identities. We analyze gender roles and other key social constructions such as the work devotion schema. Then, with this psychological, psycho-social, and sociological toolbox, we are equipped to read about work-family conflict and balance, boundary management behaviors, and gender inequalities in different contexts. I make sure my students carefully read the classic articles that are too often cited but understudied, and a couple books I love, by Arlie Hochschild, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, and William H. Whyte. The semesters often begin with students wondering why I insist on reading "old" work, yet they always end with a recognition that it really helps to build a deep and solid understanding of work-family phenomena.*

**WFRN - *What advice would you give to graduate students or those early in their professional careers?***

**Ariane** - *The most important advice, in my eyes, would be to work on something you really care for, something you have a personal need to understand. If you are going to work on a topic for several years, perhaps decades, and if you want to persist despite the pressures, distractions, and manuscript rejects, you need some serious fuel. This comes from within. Also, and very important, is to try and find your academic home as early as you can, build honest long-term relationships with colleagues you admire and appreciate, make friends in your academic community, and help one another out.*

*And if I may state the obvious - at least obvious for many in our community: an academic career is a marathon, not a sprint. Take work-life balance seriously. When you work hard, make sure you do so in a sustainable way, for you and your loved ones.*

## **ABOUT THE WFRN**

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

During 2021, the WFRN will host a series of virtual conference events. We look forward to our next in-person conference June 23-25, 2022 in New York City.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website [WFRN.ORG](https://wfrn.org). To become a member, please click on this link <https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/>.

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<sup>i</sup> Ariane has also discussed her research trajectory and recommendations for employers and policy makers in a Work-life Hub podcast you can listen to at: <https://soundcloud.com/theworklifehub/ariane-oilier-malaterre?fbclid=IwAR0mD7Q7-GTaN441WAlvjQ2aMvtsG2rm56iwW54riGUpJY3EzrBDZ-ULWw>