



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 Doctor Charlotta Niemistö.



Charlotta Niemistö, Ph.D.

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Experts Panel Link: <https://wfrn.org/expert/charlotta-niemisto/>

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

Charlotta - *I did not initially plan to become a researcher, but after I had my three children, I got involved in local and national politics, where my interest focused especially on family policies. I was also quite heavily involved in a family NGO lobbying for family-friendly policies in Finland, and during this time, I became interested in work-family research, which was an important source of information in the lobbying. I felt that there was room for important research to be conducted. I planned to aim for a governmental job after my PhD, but as research is so interesting and addictive, I have stayed in academia, now it is already close to 10 years after finishing my PhD.*

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

Charlotta - *I came across WFRN already during my PhD studies, and as I come from a business school with very few colleagues interested in similar topics, it felt exciting to find a community where so many shared the interest in work-family issues. Also, the diversity of perspectives was engaging, intriguing and helpful, as I only just started to understand the cross-disciplinary nature of this research field.*

I highly value the stimulating and well-organized conferences with such a wide range of work-family researchers present. I enjoy the formal part with keynotes and presentations, but I equally getting to know people from the field, from different parts of the world.

WFRN - Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?

Charlotta - My research engages with questions around work and care in the broad sense, and how this related to social sustainability. I try to here give a few concrete examples of my work.

I have recently published on the challenges of combining an ambitious career with motherhood¹, and how work affects expectations of and for motherhood, even before women have children. Further, I have continued to focus on the challenges of combining an ambitious career with parenthood (both father and mother managers) and how

¹ see Niemistö, C., Hearn, J., Kehn C. and Tuori, A., 2021. 'Motherhood 2.0: Slow progress for career women and motherhood within the 'Finnish Dream'', *Work, Employment and Society*, 2021. Online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0950017020987392>

boundaries between work and non-work increasingly blur, in different ways and with different (gendered) consequences in post-industrial work organizations.

Additionally, I am involved in an international project, EqualCare, on digitalization, older people, and intergenerational (informal) care chains, and inequalities related to both digital skills (or lack of them), and relations of care, support and help among and between people 60+ in their late careers and early/late retirement and younger generations. In this research, we draw on these several recent chapters.²

Linking back to questions around social sustainability, I am interested in the interconnections of production and reproduction, work and care, boundaries between work and non-work, gender and age/generations, and social/human sustainability. This is a long-term interest and will probably occupy me for the next ten years or so. We have, for example, a forthcoming, open access publication that might be of interest titled *Care and work matter: a social sustainability approach*.³

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

Charlotta - My first “big finding”, in the sense that it was surprising, was that in Finland, where the legal frame for family leave and benefits is state-led and relatively strong and generous, companies have been relatively reactive in their family-friendly policies, and consider themselves family-friendly merely by following the national law.⁴ In my opinion, a family-friendly company should be more proactive than that. This finding was interesting, as the Nordics have been presented as relatively family-friendly, but, at least in Finland, there seemed to be a gap between state-level policies and company family-friendliness. This was one of my main findings in my PhD thesis, and later work has supported this. More recently, we have concluded that efforts to create family-friendly practices can fail due to, for example, pressures from within the company or business field⁵; these invisible demands are in sharp contrast to corporate family-friendliness and societal social sustainability. These findings motivate me to continue doing research and

² see Hearn, J., Niemistö, C. and Parkin, W. (2021): The Making of Organizations: Contexts, Forms and Aims; and Hearn, J., Niemistö, C. and Parkin, W. (2021): The Doing of Organizations: Structures, Processes and Talk. In Hearn, J. and Parkin, W., with Howson, R. and Niemistö, C. (2021). *Age at Work: Ambiguous Boundaries of Organizations, Organizing and Ageing*. London: Sage. pp. 65-93.

³ see Niemistö, C., Hearn, J. and Kehn, C. (2021): Care and work matter: a social sustainability approach. In Binswanger C. and Zimmermann, A. (Eds.) *Transitioning to Gender Equality*. Open Access book series *Transitioning to Sustainability*. MDPI, Basel. Forthcoming (<https://www.mdpi.com/books/pdfview/edition/1296>)

⁴ see Niemistö, C. (2011): *Work/family reconciliation: Corporate management, family policies, and gender equality in the Finnish context*. Publications of Hanken School of Economics, nr 236, Economics and Society. Hanken School of Economics, Helsinki, available online: https://helda.helsinki.fi/dhanken/bitstream/handle/10138/28133/236_978-952-232-148-0.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y.

⁵ see Heikkinen, S., Lämsä, A-M. and Niemistö, C. 2021: Work-family practices and complexity of their usage: a discourse analysis towards socially responsible human resource management. Forthcoming, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 171: 815-831, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-020-04458-9>

they also, for me, stress the importance of research having a strong social impact to help improve the work-family interface of parents in our contemporary societies.

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

Charlotta - In recent years, I have been in different projects steering and working groups of projects targeted to develop the family-friendliness of the Finnish working life, and companies operating within it.⁶ These have been excellent opportunities to have a dialogue with key actors and stakeholders in developing strategies, policies, and practices. I am keen to discuss my findings (see, for example Q2) with these key actors and stakeholders, such as any corporate managers and HR personnel. The accessible information of my research is, that the work of developing family-friendliness goes far beyond formal policies, it needs a proactive family-friendly culture throughout the organization. Further, the findings we have about blurred work/non-work boundaries, flexibility, overwork and burnout, and how workplace cultures affect family plans even before having children are not from one organization, nor one field of business, which have convinced me about the necessity of a move to more sustainable ways of working, having a career, and combining a family with career. Even single organizations need to think more collectively on workforce well-being. Workforce moves between organizations during their career, so the concern is shared between current and future potential employers.

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?*

Charlotta - My teaching most often relates to leadership and HRM, or more specifically these related to questions around gender and/or age. Thus, questions around work and care, or work-family are very central. I try to emphasize the contextual differences, as different (welfare state) models vary, affecting where the “responsibility” for work-family is perceived to be. Further, I try to illustrate how organizations work in national, or transnational, contexts, affecting their policies, for example in work-family issues. Further, organizational contexts differ, and affect the leeway individuals have to organize their work-family interface, on a daily basis, and also in career and family planning. So, to summarize, different levels affect each other. And I like to link these to questions around social/human sustainability, and sustainable organizations and societies.

⁶ for example *Social and Economic Sustainability of Future Working Life: Policies, Equalities and Intersectionalities in Finland, 2015-2021* AND *Equality and Fathers* led by the Family Federation of Finland; a working group within the *Working life 2020*-project, to increase family-friendliness in Finnish working life, led by the Ministry of the Economic Affairs and Employment, <https://tem.fi/en/working-life-2020-project-2013-2019->

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

Charlotta - I think the greatest promise for the work-family field is in integrating this research more fully to broad and transdisciplinary research on societies (see, for example, the International Panel on Social Progress: <https://www.ipsp.org/>), different pillars of sustainability, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (see <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). By doing this, we can engage in larger discussions around work and care, production and reproduction, and see beyond local communities, single organizations, or single country-contexts, to build theory and explore new methods in addressing core societal questions. At least I have found collaboration in a cross-disciplinary research group called *Responsible Organising*⁷ extremely interesting and important.

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/>.

⁷ [https://www.hanken.fi/en/departments-and-centres/departments-and-centres/departments-and-centres/department-management-and-organisation/ccr/research/responsible-organising](https://www.hanken.fi/en/departments-and-centres/departments-and-centres/departments-and-centres/departments-and-centres/department-management-and-organisation/ccr/research/responsible-organising)