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 **Sophie Mathieu.**

SOPHIE MATHIEU

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Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/sophie-mathieu/

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

Sophie – I first became interested in work-family issues while attending CEGEP (College of General and Vocational Education), Québec's unique pre-university and technical college system. This grew out of a broader feminist interest in gender inequalities and the unequal expectations surrounding care and family responsibilities.

Later, during my master's studies, I worked on gender inequalities across 22 countries. That experience shaped the way I think about these issues. I came to understand that many gender inequalities are connected to work-family policies and to the way societies organize care. It made me realize that these inequalities are not simply individual "choices," but are shaped by gender norms, societal constraints, and family policy.

Then, during my PhD, I turned my attention to Québec, which has had the most progressive family policy in North America since the late 1990s. I became interested in how policies such as subsidized childcare and generous and accessible parental benefits transformed family life, especially through mothers' employment and fathers' increased participation in caregiving, while also revealing the limits and social inequalities that still persist. That is what led me to become a researcher in this field.

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

Sophie – I first became involved with the WFRN after attending the 2022 conference in New York. I was impressed by the quality of the presentations and the openness of the community. At the time, I was working at the Vanier Institute of the Family, a pan-Canadian organization focused on family-related research and knowledge mobilization. Since the conference was going to be held in Montreal in 2024, I was excited by the opportunity to contribute to the organization for the first time.

As someone who researches Québec family policy, I also really appreciated the chance to help showcase Québec's experience and contribute in whatever way I

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could to the event. I am proud of what Québec has accomplished in terms of family policy, which gives valuable insights to the rest of Canada and the US on how public policy can support gender equality and child development, while also recognizing the limits and contradictions of Québec's model. It felt meaningful to help create connections between local research and the broader international community.

What I value most about WFRN is the balance between academic excellence and collegiality. I also value the international dimension of the network, the opportunities for collaboration and networking, and the attention given to emerging scholars. From the beginning, I was struck by how welcoming and supportive the community is.

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

Sophie – My current research examines parental leave and childcare policies, and how these measures can both reduce and reproduce social inequalities. Conducting and publishing research in French is central to my work. In the Canadian and North American academic context, French-speaking scholars are part of a linguistic minority, and supporting the next generation of francophone students and researchers remains important while staying engaged with academic debates often dominated by English.

My research focuses on access to childcare services in the context of the shortage of spaces in Québec. I am interested in the gap between family policy commitments on paper and access in practice, especially during the transition following parental leave. Québec has developed two major programs to support families: the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) and a subsidized childcare system. These measures are often presented as part of the same family policy model, yet they are administered separately and families often experience a rupture between the end of parental leave and access to childcare. I study how families navigate the transition between parental leave and childcare, and the strategies they use when they cannot find a space that truly meets their needs, in a context marked by regional shortages, differences in quality, and unequal access, particularly for low-income families and children with special needs.

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I am also interested in questions related to low fertility, an issue often discussed through a demographic lens, but that must also be examined through the perspective of care and gender equality. In 2023, I published a book titled *Égalité, fécondité et maternité: Le soutien aux familles au Québec*, which examines the evolution of Québec family policy and its relationship to motherhood, gender equality, and fertility.

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

Sophie– A central finding of my research is that family policy plays a determining role in shaping the organization of care, gender relations and even fertility.

Conceptually, I have developed the concept of "demotherization" to describe the extent to which care responsibilities become less exclusively centered on mothers through public policy. Scholars have often focused on states, markets, and families, while treating the family itself as a single caring entity. The concept of demotherization instead sheds light on the gender and power relations within families, and on the extent to which public policy can redistribute care responsibilities beyond mothers alone. In many ways, it builds on the idea that "it takes a village to raise a child," while recognizing that there are more people than mothers in that village. Demotherization refers to the extent to which policies can unburden women and shift part of caregiving responsibilities to other actors and institutions, such as childcare services, fathers, grandparents, and other family members. I see demotherization as a conceptual tool that can help us think about and design family policies that support more equal distributions of care, time, and economic responsibilities between women and men.

WFRN – ***How can your research guide the formulation of social policy?***

Sophie– My research suggests that social policy should move away from narrow pronatalist approaches and instead focus on the conditions that allow people to combine care, employment, and family life in sustainable ways. Québec had an explicit pronatalist family policy in the late 1980s, but its effects were mostly

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short term. The measures that were offered, especially baby bonuses, did not sustainably support the care needs of families and did little for women who wanted to pursue a career while having children. In other words, they did not sustain the "demotherization" of care work. In contrast, policies such as accessible childcare, parental leave, and greater support for work-family balance have had broader and more lasting impacts on gender equality through a better division of caregiving responsibilities.

I am concerned by the rise of masculinist discourses and policy debates that frame low fertility as a problem caused by women's employment or changing gender roles. My research instead shows that gender equality and fertility should not be understood as opposing goals. The challenge in the coming years will be to help families have the children they wish to have without reinforcing gender inequalities or forcing women and men to choose between a career and a family.

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?***

Sophie – In a graduate seminar, students complete a comparative assignment on a family policy in two different countries. The goal is to help them understand how work-family issues are shaped by broader social, political, and cultural contexts, and how different policy designs can produce different outcomes. To better follow the students' progress throughout the semester, and to encourage engagement with scientific literature rather than relying only on AI tools, I ask them to give an oral presentation on their research topic midway through the semester. This also gives students an opportunity to discuss their ideas and receive feedback from me and their classmates.

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

Sophie –

- **Recognize that personal experiences can also shape research questions**. Many of the questions that now shape my research emerged directly from my own experiences of caregiving and work-family balance.

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- **Accept that networking and professional development involve awkward moments**. Conferences and academic events can feel intimidating, especially at the beginning, and there are moments where it feels like everyone already knows each other and no one wants to talk to you. That discomfort is part of the process for almost everyone. Some of the most important opportunities and collaborations in my career began with small conversations that initially felt awkward. The WFRN is one of the few academic spaces where I immediately felt a sense of openness and collegiality, especially toward emerging scholars.
- **Make your work visible.** Use social media, use different pictures of yourself, create a website, and give your name to journalists. Remain open to opportunities outside traditional academic spaces, whether through public engagement, collaboration, or knowledge mobilization. Research can contribute to broader social conversations and reach audiences beyond universities.
- **If academia is the path you wish to pursue, remember that academic careers unfold differently from one person to another**. For some, the path is quick and straightforward. For most people, it is much longer, uncertain, and difficult. Rejection, failed applications, and setbacks are part of the process and do not define the value of your work or your potential as a scholar.

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.

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

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