The combination of work and care in SMEs in the Dutch energy sector
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DIVERSITY IN ENERGY

The combination of work and care in SMEs in the Dutch energy sector

Exploring how managers in SMEs in the Dutch energy sector perceive and approach the combination of work and care within their organization

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Abstract
This thesis investigates the combination of work and care within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Dutch energy sector. Despite an increase in female labor market participation, women remain underrepresented in this sector, while gender diversity is crucial to the transition to renewable energy. The study aims to understand how managers in these SMEs perceive and manage work-care integration, a critical factor for enhancing gender diversity and fostering an inclusive workplace. Using a qualitative research design, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with managers across various SMEs. Thematic analysis revealed five themes: 1) perceptions of work and care; 2) challenges in combining work and care; 3) the perceived impact on work performance and employee retention, 4) positive aspects of facilitating work and care; and 5) the importance of leadership and culture in facilitating work and care. The findings reveal a gap between theoretical expectations and practical realities within SMEs. Initially, managers did not recognize work-care integration as a pressing issue, but deeper reflections during interviews highlighted its prevalence. The research underscores that while SMEs often rely on ad-hoc solutions rather than formal policies, a lack of managerial awareness and formal support mechanisms persists. The masculine culture prevalent in the energy sector exacerbates these challenges, potentially limiting the effectiveness of work-care integration strategies and reinforcing traditional norms. The study concludes that bridging the gap between theory and practice requires heightened awareness and the development of more inclusive organizational cultures. Recommendations include fostering a workplace culture that values work-life balance and explicitly acknowledging informal caregivers as a distinct group. Additionally, industry-specific best practices should be shared to address the diverse needs of SMEs and enhance support for work-care integration. Future research should focus on specific sub-sectors within the energy industry and different organizational sizes to gain more nuanced insights into these challenges.

Keywords: Work-care integration, Gender diversity, Energy sector, Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), Organizational culture

Introduction: gender diversity and work-care challenges in the energy sector
Despite the ongoing increase in women's labor market participation in the Netherlands in recent years (CBS, 2024), labor market gender segregation continues, with significant under-representation of women in given sectors. The energy sector is an example of this, characterized by an over-representation of men. As of 2022, only 18% of workers in the energy sector were female (Human Capital Topsectoren, n.d.). This occurs at a time when the energy sector and societies face one of the biggest contemporary challenges: the climate crisis. The threat of the global climate crisis is pressing, undermining the health, economic stability, and essential resources of billions of people worldwide (IPCC, 2014). The root cause of the climate crisis lies in the emission of greenhouse gases, mainly due to fossil fuels intended for energy use and transportation purposes (Steg et al., 2015). Given the urgency of combating the climate crisis, the energy transition to renewable energy is essential.

A successful energy transition requires a diversity of perspectives, not only because efficiency and productivity are aided by higher levels of diversity in the energy sector (IRENA, 2019), but also because the sector is experiencing significant labor shortages (PBL Netherlands Environment Assessment Agency, 2022) and women as a population group are not drawn effectively to the sector (Creusen et al., 2023). The number of women available for the sector is also impacted by the fact that relatively few women in the Netherlands choose science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields in the first place (VHTO,

2023). Moreover, equal gender representation is crucial in undergoing any societal transformation. If female voices are not adequately heard in this undertaking, it will negatively impact outcomes and equality (IRENA, 2019).

The Dutch energy sector does not reflect this urgency for diversity. Three dimensions have been identified as playing a role in this continued gender inequality in the Dutch labor market. The first dimension is an unequal division across sectors, where women are often overrepresented in sectors with a larger proportion of part-time jobs. The second dimension is an unequal division between men and women when it comes to balancing work and unpaid care where the infrastructure surrounding care tasks puts women at a disadvantage. And finally, the third dimension is the social norms and attitudes that influence the choices of men and women when it comes to education, career, and care (Graven & Krishnan, 2018).

In particular, the second dimension of an unequal division in combining work and care is becoming increasingly important and prevalent in society. The Dutch population is aging and the Dutch healthcare system is deteriorating (Plaisier et al., 2015). As such, workers are increasingly expected to combine paid work with care. In a male-dominated sector like the energy sector, it is crucial to consider how this barrier is viewed and addressed as such. Given the current gendered nature of care (Giddings, 2021), it is likely that male-dominated sectors have the least experience facilitating this combination. Additionally, while women still do the majority of unpaid labor, this uneven distribution is slightly changing in some countries (Moos, 2021), including the Netherlands (CBS, 2022). As such, the combination of work and care is becoming more important in predominantly masculine sectors.

This thesis attempts to provide scientific insights into this potential barrier to greater gender diversity by studying how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Dutch energy sector view and address the combination of work and care. Although there are extensive organizational studies on work-life balance and the combination of work and care, there are few studies in the SME setting (Susanto et al., 2022). Organizational work-life balance arrangements have been demonstrated to increase employee satisfaction, positively impacting productivity, absenteeism, teamwork, and loyalty to the employer (Robak et al., 2016). However, implementing such arrangements often demands substantial financial investment and organizational development, which is beyond the capacity of most SMEs (Robak et al., 2016).

Consequently, work-life balance is an issue that may be marginalized or even entirely overlooked in SMEs (Robak et al., 2016). Given the critical role of the energy sector in addressing the global climate crisis and the persistent gender imbalances within it, understanding how work-care challenges are managed in this sector becomes even more vital. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the energy sector, despite their limited resources, play a pivotal role in the ongoing energy transition.

This thesis aims to answer the following research question: How do managers in SMEs in the Dutch energy sector perceive and approach the combination of work and care within their organization? This study focuses on "managers"—encompassing HR representatives, founders, and other managerial staff—as these individuals are key to shaping and implementing policies and practices related to work-care integration within SMEs, and their insights are crucial for understanding how these organizations address such challenges.

To address the research question, a thematic analysis has been conducted. This method involves identifying and analyzing patterns within qualitative data, which will be gathered through interviews with managers in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the

energy sector. The objectives of this study are to, firstly, uncover key themes related to work-care combinations in the sector; secondly, identify prevailing mindsets; and thirdly, unveil challenges and find strategies for improvement for both policymakers and SMEs in the sector. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to contribute to a more inclusive and supportive workplace environment within the energy sector.

This thesis begins by outlining the role of SMEs in combining work and care, the impact of organizational culture, and the energy sector context. It then details the study's methodology, followed by the presentation and discussion of findings, and concludes with final statements.

Literature and theory: the triangle of gender, work and care, and the role of SMEs
The energy sector is undergoing a significant transformation as the global community shifts towards renewable energy sources, and SMEs play a crucial role in this transition. In the Netherlands, SMEs are defined as enterprises with 250 or fewer employees (Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland, n.d.). These enterprises face unique challenges in facilitating the combination of work and care. By addressing these challenges, SMEs can not only enhance their resilience to modern threats and challenges, but also contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future (Shatilova et al., 2021). This literature and theory section addresses the role of SMEs in combining work and care, the impact of organizational culture and leadership, and the specific context of the energy sector.

SMEs and combining work and care
When it comes to considering work and care in SMEs, research shows that SMEs are often less inclined to provide family-friendly benefits beyond what is mandated by law (Arksey, 2002). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of balancing work and care, there remains a gap in research on work and care policies within SMEs (Susanto et al., 2022). This lack of research is particularly concerning given the fact that SMEs face unique challenges in implementing effective work-life policies. While larger firms often have the resources and formal structures to support comprehensive programs, SMEs often must navigate these issues with limited capacity and more informal management practices (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012), which can sometimes be performed in a more intuitive manner (Robak et al., 2016) and with a lack of formal HRM training (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012). Moreover, the lack of capacity can lead to marginalization or complete neglect of the work and life balance issue (Robak et al., 2016). Implementing work and personal life policies can also lead to negative consequences for SMEs, such as increased workload on coworkers and coordination issues with human resources (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012). Additionally, research shows that in SMEs the working hours can differ from those in larger corporations. Some SMEs may require employees to work longer hours, making it challenging for them to maintain a balance between their work and their personal lives (Susanto et al., 2022).

However, while SMEs face barriers to implementing work and care policies, there are also distinct benefits to these policies that address and mitigate these barriers. For example, work and care policies facilitate the retention of skilled workers, reduce costs by enhancing productivity and efficiency (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012; Robak et al., 2016), increase quality of life for workers, and ultimately increase profitability (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012; Lamane-Harim et al., 2023; Robak et al., 2016; Susanto et al., 2022). The hesitance of SMEs to

implement these strategies highlights the need for tailored strategies that address their constraints (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012).

The impact of organizational culture and leadership
Prioritizing the creation of a supportive work environment can be a cost-effective way for SMEs to support employees' work and family life combinations (Pavalko & Henderson, 2006). Simply having formal policies and programs in place is not sufficient to foster a family-friendly work environment. The presence of a supportive culture for combining work and personal life is essential. Usage of policies that are in place is dependent on employees feeling supported and encouraged to take advantage of them (Pavalko & Henderson, 2006; Plaisier et al., 2015). It is suggested that while formal arrangements were viewed as necessary for structural job adaptations, only a supportive work environment was associated with significantly improved outcomes (Lamane-Harim et al., 2023; Plaisier et al., 2015).

An important factor to consider in facilitating a supportive culture is managerial support (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012). Such support encompasses emotional, instrumental, role-modeling, and creative work-family management actions that supervisors undertake to enhance employee effectiveness and satisfaction both at work and in personal life and can be both formal and informal. This supervisory behavior has been shown to enhance job satisfaction and reduce work-related stress (Susanto et al., 2022). Managers who were accessible, listened to their employees, set clear expectations, and recognized good performance were particularly supportive for informal caregivers (Higgins et al., 2008). However, managers often see work-family balance as an individual's responsibility rather than recognizing it as a broader issue influenced by the work environment and organizational culture. This perspective has led to less emphasis on organizational actions that could mitigate work-family conflicts, perpetuating the belief that work and family are separate worlds (Kossek & Friede, 2006). Previously, there has been an inadequate effort from managers to address social barriers that prevent employees from utilizing work-family policies. Even when these policies are available, employees concerned about their careers often feel reluctant to use them due to fears of facing penalties or negative repercussions (Kossek & Friede, 2006).

Plaisier et al., (2015)] further revealed that beyond a supportive culture, working within an organization that openly acknowledges the challenges of informal caregiving enhances positive outcomes in balancing caregiving responsibilities with work. It emphasizes the importance for organizations to explicitly recognize informal caregivers as a distinct group. This recognition should go beyond merely offering formal leave options to also taking employees' dual responsibilities seriously and facilitating regular, individualized meetings with supervisors to find adequate solutions (Plaisier et al., 2015).

Addressing work and care in organizations is increasingly critical. Since about 7000 BCE, with the rise of agricultural societies, care became primarily a woman's task within the family domain (Giddings, 2021). Today, with increasing female employment rates and an aging workforce, both employees and employers face growing challenges in balancing the care of family members with work responsibilities. Despite rising female employment rates, women continue to perform the majority of this unpaid labor, impacting their health, education, labor market participation, and overall wellbeing (Giddings, 2021). Rigid work schedules often complicate this balance, particularly for women who face the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities (Shatilova et al., 2021). Studies, including those by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA, 2019) have highlighted barriers such as insufficient

flexibility, which can impact women's retention and career progression, especially during critical periods such as childbearing years. Despite the potential benefits of flexible work arrangements, many traditional policies like maternity and family leave remain inadequate or unavailable (IRENA, 2019).

This often results in women accepting flexible or part-time employment to accommodate care responsibilities (Moos, 2021; Plantenga, 2021). Caregivers often experience higher stress, poor wellbeing, and other health problems (Pavalko & Henderson, 2006), and may reduce working hours or they leave the workforce altogether (Arksey, 2002; Plaisier et al., 2015). Despite these challenges, paid work can also serve as a buffer against caregiver stress (Plaisier et al., 2015). Policies such as family leave, flexible working hours, and childcare assistance have been linked to improved labor market outcomes and reduced absenteeism and turnover (Arksey, 2002; Pavalko & Henderson, 2006). Such policies can play a crucial role in reducing gender inequalities in the workforce (Giddings, 2021).

The potential for organizational policies to help employees reconcile paid work with caregiving is greatly dependent on the national context. As shown by a review by Ollier-Malaterre et al., (2013), cultural norms and organizational structures differ greatly among societies and impact the dynamic between work and personal/family life. For example, in many European Union countries, there is a prevailing view that the government bears a larger responsibility for providing work-life support than employers do, possibly due to the European Union's encouragement for public support policies (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013).

In the Netherlands, all organizations have formal policies in place to assist employees in balancing work and family caregiving responsibilities, ranging from paid leave to flexible work arrangements and remote work options (Plaisier et al., 2015). This focus on flexible work arrangements is highly correlated with the care infrastructure and the significant proportion of women working part-time in the Netherlands (Plantenga, 2021), with 70% of women in the Netherlands working part-time in 2021 (CBS, 2022). As a consequence, the female employment rate is high, but women do not have equal integration into the labor market compared to men in terms of financial security and independence (Plantenga, 2021).

Work-care and gender diversity in the energy sector
The challenges to combining work and care are particularly pronounced in the energy sector, where unique dynamics and barriers further exacerbate the difficulties women face in reconciling work and caregiving roles, such as rigid work schedules and lack of work and care policy (IRENA, 2019). This challenge in the energy sector contributes to a broader issue: the limited gender diversity, which not only curtails the creativity, profitability and resilience of the businesses in the sector (Hunt et al., 2015), it also deepens economic and social inequities, widening the chasm of gender opportunity gaps (Shatilova et al., 2021). In the Netherlands, the energy sector is overwhelmingly masculine, with 82% of workers in the Dutch energy sector being male (Human Capital Topsectoren, n.d.) Additionally, enhanced gender equality can shift norms and expectations within the energy sector, enabling women to participate fully across all facets of the industry (Shatilova et al., 2021).

Finally, the overwhelming masculinity in the Dutch energy sector (Human Capital Topsectoren, n.d.) indicates the existence of a masculine culture. This may further complicate the issue of combining work and care in the sector. While there has been some research on gender diversity within the energy sector, research focusing on work and care within SMEs in the energy sector is scarce. This while work and care combinations have been identified as an

important barrier to women entering this sector. This may be particularly relevant in SMEs, where work and care policy is often more intuitive.

Methods
This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the mindsets of managers in SMEs in the energy sector regarding the integration of work and care. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers working in SMEs in the Dutch energy sector. The study was conducted in the Netherlands but was not limited to Dutch-only enterprises. Due to the scarcity of existing research this study to adopts an exploratory approach to gather insights into the mindsets and attitudes prevailing within SMEs in the energy sector. As this there is little knowledge in this research field, semi-structured interviews are a well-suited research method. This provides the interviewer with the needed flexibility to identify and follow valuable leads (Adams, 2015).This project was given ethical approval by the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Science (Utrecht University) Ethics Review Board.

Participant sample and recruitment
Participant sampling and recruitment were directed towards small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Since HR functions in SMEs are often less formalized and can vary significantly, the term "managers" includes individuals such as HR representatives, founders, and other managerial staff who handle personnel-related responsibilities. People in this position are able to shed light on the position of the SMEs regarding the integration of work and care.

The initial source for potential participants in this study was provided by Platform Talent for Technology (PTvT). PTvT is a center of expertise focused on knowledge, expertise, and networking in the field of technology (PTvT, n.d.). PTvT produced a report (Topsector Energie et al., 2024) on gender equality mindsets in SMEs within the energy sector and provided a list of participants from their study who were open to engaging in further research. Three people out of this list were willing to participate, and from one of these participants another participant was introduced. Additionally, 75inQ, a research institute for gender and energy, allowed usage of their extensive network within the energy sector to recruit potential additional participants for the study. This is an open network for all women contributing to the energy transition, not limited to those working specifically in SMEs. These participants were contacted via a mass e-mail from the 75inQ network. Women in this network were encouraged to spread the e-mail themselves as well. Out of eight hundred people in this network, seven were agreed to participate and two participants were recruited after the e-mail was forwarded to them.

The final sample of participants consisted of 13 managers from different types of SMEs in the energy sector. A table overview of the interviewed is provided below (see Table 1 for an overview).

Table 1: characteristics of study participants

	Gender	Age of company	Position in company	Number of employees	Gender diversity[1]	Type of work
P.01	Male	6	Founder	45	Mostly male	Only office-based
P.02	Male	2	HR	30	Mostly male	Office-based as well as production/manual work
P.03	Female	1	Founder	12	Mostly male	Only office-based
P.04	Female	5	Manager	4	Mostly female	Only office-based
P.05	Female	13	Director	45	Mostly male	Only office-based
P.06	Male	10	HR	250	Mostly male	Office-based as well as production/manual work
P.07	Male	2	Manager	15	Mostly male	Only office-based
p.08	Female	4	Manager	25	Equal	Only office-based
P.09	Male	6	Founder	40	Mostly male	Office-based as well as production/manual work
P.10	Female	6	Team lead	180	Mostly male	Only office-based
P.11	Female	6	Director	20	Mostly male	Only office-based
P.12	Female	6	Director	6	Mostly male	Only office-based

Out of twelve participants, seven were female and five were male. The participants held diverse positions within their organizations, including founders, team leads, directors, HR personnel, and managers. The companies represented in the sample vary in their years of establishment and type of work (see Table 1). Companies varied in size, ranging from 4 to 250[2] employees, with most organizations having a predominantly male workforce. One company reported an equal gender distribution, and one company the employees were mostly female.

The interviews showed that when considering the combination of work and care, the type of work that is conducted within an enterprise plays a role in the mindsets regarding integrating work and care within that company. Therefore, a separate column was created to represent type of work, where most of the companies are involved in only office-based

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[1] This refers to the gender distribution within the organization. 'Equal' indicates a distribution of 40-60% for both women and men. 'Mostly men' refers to over 60% men, while 'mostly women' refers to over 60% women.

[2] Under Dutch law, an enterprise is considered an SME if it has a maximum of 250 full-time equivalents (FTEs) employes. Multiple employees can fulfill one FTE (Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland, 2021).

activities, while three companies also engage in production of manual work alongside office-based tasks.

Study variables and operationalization

Four in-person and nine online Microsoft Teams interviews were conducted, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes each. The interviews were audio-recorded using Teams software or an audio recorder and transcribed using DoveTail software. The coding and analysis were performed using NVivo qualitative software. Personal identifiers[3] were removed during the transcription process and audio files were deleted upon completion of the transcript.

A semi-structured interview guideline was created based on theory and literature review, focusing on organizational details, work environment and culture, challenges in work and care, and policy development (see Appendix A). For example, a question about the presence of specific policies explored how the SMEs approached policy. This helped in identifying how SMEs challenges align with broader theories on work and care policy gaps.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to explore the data as it is a flexible method and allows themes to 'emerge' or to be 'discovered' during the process of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While other methods, such as grounded theory, also seek patterns in data, thematic analysis is distinguishable by its lack of theoretical boundedness. The goal of grounded theory is to generate a plausible theory. Thematic analysis does not have this goal, and is therefore not bound to implicit theoretical commitments (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As this research is explorative, thematic analysis is an appropriate method.

The data analysis has six phases. However, it is important to iterate that the analysis involves a recursive process: a constant moving back and forth between the data, the codes, and the analysis. Therefore, while the phases offer a demonstration of the process, it is not a strictly linear process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 1 focused on familiarization with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with initial thematic analysis taking place to identify main themes from the interviews. These themes were sometimes linked to the theoretical framework, but other themes also emerged. This phase largely took place during the transcription process. Phase 2 involved the generation of initial qualitative codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), whereby themes worthy of further exploration were identified and coded. For example, almost every interviewee underscored the lack of formal policy in their organization. Therefore, this was coded under ad hoc decision-making in SMEs. Phase 3 refocused the analysis by going back to the code list and identifying overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which allowed for consideration of the relationships between codes and themes. Phase 4 consisted of reviewing the themes and codes that were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006), recategorizing codes to form a coherent pattern. The entire dataset was once again consulted to test whether the themes are appropriate and to see if any data has been missed. Phase 5 included the systematic organization of the themes. A detailed analysis of each theme was conducted and documented, describing its significance. By the conclusion of this phase, the relevance of the themes and their contributions to addressing the research question were clearly established.

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[3] For example, the participants' name, name of their company, mentions of names of colleagues, et cetera.

Phase 6 involved finalizing the analysis and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The full coding tree can be found in appendix B.

Positionality

It is important to acknowledge ones own position and values in relation to the qualitative research conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative research often involves deep engagement with participants and subjective interpretation of data, which makes it essential to recognize and account for the ways in which the researcher's personal and professional background might shape the study.

One key aspect of positionality is reflexivity, which involves the researcher constantly considering their partial perspective and position (Karcher et al., 2024), which can help to identify potential sources of bias and taking steps to address them.

In this thesis, being a young female student researching the integration of work and care in the male-dominated energy sector, my gender and age provide a unique perspective on gender dynamics. My position allowed me to approach the topic with unique insights but also required careful reflexivity to mitigate biases and to respect the experiences of industry professionals. I did so via ensuring that I remain neutral by avoiding expressing personal views which could influence responses. In the analysis, the findings and interpretations were verified with other studies to enhance credibility.

Findings

A key finding from the interviews conducted with SMEs in the energy sector is that explicit awareness and formal strategies regarding the integration of work and care were largely absent. Moreover, SME culture in the energy sector seemed centered on maintaining an open, informal workplace. These views appear to be connected to the smaller size of SMEs and result mostly in ad hoc decision-making.

The findings focus on five major themes emerging from the analysis: perceptions of work and care, challenges in combining work and care, the perceived impact of combining work and care on work performance and employee retention, potential positive aspects of facilitating work and care, and the importance of leadership and culture in facilitating work and care. In this section, each of these themes will be discussed.

Perceptions of work and care in SMEs in the energy sector

Most interviewees did not perceive work and care as requiring special attention. For instance, one participant noted:

> *"When it comes to care, I don't think there is special attention for that because there is no need for that." (p.06)*

The absence of attention for the combination of work and care could be related to gender dynamics within the sector. One participant noted:

> *"When selecting production staff, we kind of have to know, this is someone who has no issue working [from] 8-17." (p.02)."*

The masculine culture within the energy sector can lead to reluctance in sharing personal care details. One female participant noted:

"As a woman you really want to advance your career. And especially in a masculine environment, you don't want to share too many personal care details." (p.05)

The same participant noted that men in her organization who do have a care task do not show this reluctance to share details.

Despite the absence of explicit attention for the combination of work and care, the interviews revealed a general concern for employee wellbeing, which often implicitly included considerations of work and care. However, most SMEs had no formalized policies on the matter. One interviewee reflected:

"We do not really consider work and care as a separate theme. It is, I think, part of the broader framework regarding inclusivity and participation of employees within the company" (p.01)

A common theme across interviewees was the value placed on maintaining an open and transparent organizational culture where employees could discuss their issues if they needed support. Informality was frequently mentioned as a feature of this culture. Interviewees often linked the ease of communication to the small size of their organization. For instance, one participant observed,

"If there is something going on, privately, then I try to keep it to myself. But when you're a small company and people see you all day and get to know how you are, then they will see something is up." (p.04)

Although informality was seen as an advantage by many respondents, most SMEs viewed their size as a barrier to formal policy development. Many felt that their small size allowed for more flexible, ad hoc responses to individual needs, although this approach has its drawbacks. One interviewee remarked:

"I think it should always be a lesson, that as soon as people start asking for things, it is A, a good sign that they are asking, but B, also an indication that we as a company are too late in facilitating certain needs." (p.01)

Conversely, another participant valued the flexibility of ad hoc policymaking, arguing:

"I think it is easier with a smaller company [not to have policy]. To offer tailored responses. With bigger companies this may become confusing." (p.07).

The trend toward ad hoc decision-making was more apparent in the smaller companies interviewed. These findings suggest that while formal policies may be beneficial, some SMEs prefer to address issues as they arise rather than preemptively. However, the perceived informality and presumed transparency means that employees need to signal issues with their employer rather than the other way around.

Challenges in combining work and care in SMEs the energy sector
When asked directly about challenges experienced with the combination of work and care for employees in their company, most participants initially felt that the integration of work and care did not present issues within their organization. However, some interviewees did share specific challenges. For example, one participant described a colleague in another company who left her job due to inadequate support for her care responsibilities:

> *"A co-director of a different company, she is leaving because she feels there is not enough space for her care tasks." (p.11)*

This example highlights that combining work and care can be an issue within the energy sector. In the engineering field, another participant noted, again not in their company, that some women choose not to have children to avoid the perceived difficulties of balancing work and care responsibilities.

Concerns about the negative consequences of facilitating work and care were also raised. For instance, the impact on the rest of the team was a common theme. One participant observed:

> *"Well, it does, of course, have an impact on the rest of the team. They need to step up. That's just the truth." (p.10)*

Additionally, the small size of teams in SMEs means that accommodating work and care can lead to tensions and challenges, as noted by one interviewee:

> *"Because we are with a relatively small team and there are a lot of things to juggle at the same time, [facilitating work and care] can lead to tensions. (p.11)*

For SMEs in the energy sector with a production function, flexibility in work and care integration proved more challenging. Production functions often require a high level of teamwork and adherence to schedules, making it difficult to accommodate individual needs without impacting operations. One participant highlighted:

> *"Production is highly time sensitive. This means that the production team has less flexibility than the office team" (p.02).*

Several interviewees mentioned that educational level or organizational position may play a role in how much flexibility an employee can get. For example, a participant mentioned:

> *"I think that people who are more highly educated have an easier time [combining work and care]. I think that when you are in a high position you have a lot more freedom to decide your hours." (p.04)*

This was especially prevalent in production type of work, where a participant (p.02) noted that people who can do 'more' often move up to office tasks which allow more flexibility.

Impact on work performance and employee retention for SMEs in the energy sector
Many interviewees expressed concerns about the potential or perceived impact of combining work and care on job performance. One participant noted that employees may worry about being judged if they share too many personal details, which could affect their performance evaluations.

> *"Some people find it hard to talk about. They feel like they are judged if they share too many personal details. In a certain way, they are, since if you miss a couple of important meetings or if you are unable to finish tasks, that will be held against you." (p.11).*

However, another perspective was that providing support could lead to better performance and retention:

> *"If there is truly a need for combining work and care, then you need to be flexible. Because if you are not, then it could come back to bite you. That person may be a very valuable asset, and then you lose them." (p.10)*

It is suggested that flexibility can sometimes be contingent on work performance, where those who perform better can expect more flexibility. Additionally, some observed that facilitating work and care may even inadvertently increase performance pressures.

Several respondents also discussed the potential impact on work performance from a financial perspective. These discussions centered on concerns about the potential misuse of supportive policies and the need to balance employee care with business interests. One interviewee commented:

> *"I [as HR] would like to start that conversation, asking how people are. However, my CEO sometimes says… you needn't wake sleeping dogs. And what he means by this is, people might take advantage of your kindness. […]. So A, you want to care for your people, all of your people, including the production side. But B, at the end of the day, you are a business. And businesses depend on money, on revenue."* (p.02)

This highlights the perceived tension between supporting employees in their job performance and maintaining business efficiency.

Positive aspects of facilitating work and care for SMEs in the energy sector
Despite the challenges, several positive aspects of facilitating work and care were highlighted by the participants. For example, one participant noted how support can lead to better performance and retention.

> *"Yes, [facilitating work and care] can be tough because your team has a higher burden and […] your productivity may go down. But if you don't then you have an employee with a burn-out, or people leave because it's not working. Then you have to hire new people and train them. That costs even more time, and definitely more money." (p.10)*

Additionally, it was noted that supporting work and care can have long-term benefits for financial independence and set a positive example for future generations. In the context of

tight labor markets, accommodating work and care can be an attractive feature for potential employees. One participant observed:

> *"It is an incredibly tight labor market. So, you want everyone to feel welcome and that they want to stay. And part of that is not making it too difficult to combine work with possible issues at home." (p.09)*

Leadership and culture influences
Leadership emerged as a critical factor in shaping attitudes towards work and care integration. Effective leaders are seen as crucial in fostering a culture where employees feel supported. The example set by leaders plays a significant role, as noted by a participant:

> *"My fellow director gives the right example also. He is fifteen years younger than me, has young children, and goes home on time." (p.11)*

The generational and gender composition of leadership also affects organizational attitudes towards work and care. One interviewee noted:

> *"The tone at the top is crucial. [...] If you still have a generation at the top, say someone aged fifty plus, who is used to always having to keep going, then [facilitating work and care] is harder. They likely had a partner at home and expect the same from their employees. [...] If you have someone at the top who is a bit younger, then they probably will be more understanding." (p.04)*

This finding is confirmed by another male interviewee, who noted that he went to an appointment for his child and his male colleague made a comment:

> *"I just thought it was interesting, because I never did that myself. I think it is remarkable when people always join those things [the child's appointment, red.]." (p.07)*

Diverse leadership may bring unique perspectives. As one female co-founder mentioned,

> *"I also benefit from setting this up properly, the combination of work and care. There is a significant chance that I will start a family in the next 5 years." (p.03)*

This suggests that diverse leadership can be crucial in anticipating and addressing the needs of employees balancing work and care in the sector, as they currently often shoulder the care burden. Another female interviewee corroborated this:

> *"I personally experienced [struggles with combining work and care] a lot. But that's why I am trying to do it differently." (p.11)*

However, experiences with struggles in combining work and care in their company are not restricted to female employees. A male participant noted the following:

"Despite how flexible we are, I recently went to a healthcare appointment for my child, and I got comments on that. Like, interesting that you went along to that appointment." [...] "That comment made me feel disappointed, [...] and as a manager, it made me realize that communication about these kinds of themes is very important." (p.07)

Finally, several interviewees highlighted the role that organizational culture, particularly humor, plays a role in shaping the work environment. Many participants pointed out how jokes and informal interactions can significantly impact workplace dynamics. For instance, one participant noted:

"The tech guys have pretty blunt humor, that's their culture. [...]. Women don't always like that. And men don't even realize that their humor is often not at all inclusive." (p.01)

This suggests that cultural norms such as humor may affect inclusivity within the energy sector, potentially influencing both employee satisfaction and hiring decisions. This in turn could impact organizational culture, which plays a large role in the facilitation of work and care combinations.

The findings from the interviews reveal a complex picture of how SMEs in the energy sector perceive and approach the integration of work and care. Work and care are often not seen as a distinct issue needing special attention in the organization. While explicit policies are often absent, there is a general emphasis on flexibility and informal support. Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping organizational culture and attitudes towards work and care in the sector. The challenges in balancing operational demands with employee support are particularly pronounced in the production-focused segments of the sector. Nonetheless, participants also note positive aspects to facilitating work and care, including enhanced employee retention and attractiveness in a competitive labor market.

Discussion
The transition to renewable energy underscores the necessity for increased gender diversity in the energy sector, as diverse teams drive greater efficiency and productivity (IRENA, 2019). However, balancing work and caregiving responsibilities remains a hurdle in the sector. This may especially be the case for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that often lack the resources and capacity to support such needs. This thesis investigates how managers in SMEs in the energy sector navigate these challenges and investigates their perspectives on integrating work and caregiving responsibilities.

The findings from the interviews are largely in line with what has been theorized in the theoretical framework. Initially, many interviewees denied the significance of work and care integration, suggesting it was not an issue within their organization. However, as the interviews progressed and participants reflected more deeply, nearly every interview uncovered specific instances or challenges related to this integration. This shift indicates that while awareness of this issue may be limited, it becomes more apparent as participants engage in the discussion. The interview process itself served as an awareness-raising intervention, helping participants to recognize and articulate the challenges related to work and care integration. This evolving awareness underscores that, despite initial denial, the issue is indeed prevalent within these organizations. This finding is in line with the theory, which suggested that the issue of work and care combinations may be overlooked (Robak et al.,

2016). However, since in SMEs, managerial awareness and support have been shown to possibly be able to play a crucial role when considering combining work and personal life (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012), this finding is problematic.

The importance of explicitly acknowledging informal caregivers as a distinct group (Plaisier et al., 2015) is also relevant in this finding. If considered at all, the issue of combining work and unpaid care was considered by most participants as part of general employee wellbeing, indicating that explicit acknowledgement is lacking.

Additionally, a critical aspect to consider is that employees may not always feel comfortable discussing their difficulties balancing work and caregiving responsibilities, especially within a sector characterized by masculine culture and informality. Employees might be reluctant to voice concerns for fear of being perceived as 'complaining' or being the odd one out. This reluctance can further complicate the integration of work and caregiving, as especially given the prevalence of ad hoc policymaking, unspoken issues remain unaddressed and might exacerbate the existing challenges.

While some participants acknowledged the positive aspects of facilitating the balance between work and caregiving for employees, this acknowledgment appeared to be closely linked to the current tightness of the labor market. This dependence on labor market conditions raises concerns about the sustainability of these positive perceptions. If the labor market were to loosen, the perceived benefits of such facilitation might diminish.

Several interviewees also pointed out a potential downside of flexible work arrangements: employees might overcompensate by working longer hours to offset any time taken for caregiving. This tendency aligns with existing research, which suggests that workers adhering to the 'ideal worker' norm often work longer hours when offered flexibility (Golden & Altman, 2008). In a sector where traditional, male-centric work norms prevail (Shatilova et al., 2021), such pressures can be especially pronounced. This situation is particularly concerning in the context of an increasingly care-oriented society, where balancing work and caregiving is becoming more common (Cegarra-Leiva et al., 2012; Pavalko & Henderson, 2006), as this may exacerbate work-life conflicts.

There have also been novel findings that would not necessarily be expected based upon the theory. For example, the differences in difficulties in SMEs within the energy sector when it comes to facilitating work and care are notable. Enterprises that focus solely office-based functions generally find it less difficult to implement flexible work arrangements compared to those also engaged in manufacturing functions. An interesting factor that appears to play a role in this is socio-economic status. Several interviewees mentioned that educational level or organizational position may play a role in how much flexibility an employee can get. This finding is confirmed by research, which suggests that low-wage workers often are less likely to have flexible work arrangements (Poydock et al., 2024). More research in this area is needed.

Finally, a relevant finding from the interviews was the recurrent mention of the impact of jokes and humor within the organizations. While humor can foster collegiality (Holmes, 2006), it can also create discomfort, especially when it veers into offensive humor. This type of humor can negatively impact employee satisfaction and productivity (Sacco et al., 2021). Although research on humor in the context of inclusivity within organizations is limited, existing literature suggests that offensive humor often serves to reinforce an 'overly masculine culture' (Plester, 2015). The same study indicates that women seeking to integrate

into such masculine environments may need to participate and conform to these cultural norms.

The findings are in line with this literature, as participants often mentioned a 'hard' and masculine culture. Additionally, one participant noted that when given the choice between two female applicants, they opted for the candidate who was able to hold her own and could handle a masculine culture, thereby maintaining the existing cultural norms. This highlights the need for further research into factors such as humor impact gender inclusivity in the workplace. These underlying cultural elements can influence hiring practices and perpetuate masculine norms in the energy sector, which in turn may impact the organizational culture that influence facilitation and usage of work and care policies.

Implications and recommendations

SMEs in the energy often lack explicit awareness of the combination of work and care within their organizations. This while managerial awareness is a particularly crucial tool for facilitating this integration, especially in the context of SMEs (Lamane-Harim et al., 2023). Fostering a workplace culture that values and promotes work and personal life combinations can be a cost-effective way to support this (Robak et al., 2016), with acknowledging informal caregivers as a distinct group being a key factor (Plaisier et al., 2015). While many SMEs mention that they prioritize open communication where employees are allowed to articulate their needs, this explicit addressing of work and care issues is absent.

The findings of this thesis reveal that while work and care integration is a relevant issue for these SMEs, it is commonly addressed using ad hoc strategies rather than formal policies. This is a known strategy within SMEs (Durst et al., 2023). The prevailing belief among the interviewees was that it is highly important to take care of your employees' personal needs. However, this belief co-existed with the idea that you often do this *in spite* of your companies' best interests. This indicates that the lack of awareness of work and care combinations and its challenges goes hand in hand with a lack of knowledge on the benefits of work and care policies. This may prevent a widespread adoption of them.

Significant variations were observed among SMEs, ranging from those who perceive work and care integration as non-issues to those actively considering policy development. This disparity aligns with research indicating that SMEs are quite heterogenous, making one-size-fits-all approaches inappropriate (Durst et al., 2023). Additionally, industry-specific factors such as the presence of production lines, contribute to these variations. Therefore, sharing best practices can be advantageous, as it allows SMEs to learn from each other's experiences, tailor solutions to their unique contexts, and collectively improve their strategies and policies (Durst et al., 2023).

Strengths, limitations, and future research

A significant strength of this study is its interdisciplinary approach, which integrated views from various fields to address the complex issue of work-care combinations in SMEs within the energy sector. By combining perspectives from psychology, sociology, and other disciplines, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of managerial attitudes and workplace dynamics. This broad approach, coupled with the inclusion of diverse SMEs and a range of participants and experiences, enriches the findings and offers valuable depth.

A limitation of this study is that, as it is qualitative research, it lacks generalizability in statistical terms (Smith, 2018). However, as this research was explorative, this qualitative

approach is an appropriate method. Additionally, the research may be affected by selection bias, as organizations and individuals with a vested interest in work-care integration were more likely to be willing to participate. This could limit the applicability of the findings to those less engaged with the topic.

As this research was explorative, it identified several areas for future research. It would be beneficial to focus on specific sub-sectors within the energy sector to gain more detailed insights into the unique challenges and perspectives of these areas, as this study's findings suggest that research on the energy sector as a whole may be too generalized due to its diverse nature. Furthermore, the broad definition of SMEs (2 to 250 employees, (Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland, n.d.)) may obscure differences between smaller and larger enterprises within this category. Distinguishing between these categories could provide a clearer understanding of the unique challenges faced by each group. Although this study indicates variations in approaches between larger and smaller SMEs, the small sample size and the scope of this research limits the ability to make definitive conclusions. Future research with a larger and more representative sample could provide insights into these differences.

Additionally, investigating the impact of socio-economic status on flexibility and examining how humor influences workplace culture in masculine sectors could provide valuable insights. Lastly, exploring the long-term effects of labor market conditions on work-care integration would help assess the sustainability of current practices.

Conclusion

The transition to renewable energy and the drive for greater gender diversity in the energy sector underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of work and care combination challenges, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Using thematic analysis, this thesis examined how managers in SMEs in the Dutch energy sector navigate the complexities of combining work and caregiving responsibilities, revealing a range of insights that both align with and challenge existing theories. The study confirms that SMEs often lack the capacity and desire to implement formal-family friendly policies. Particularly where production roles complicate flexible work arrangements. While managerial awareness and a supportive culture are critical in facilitating the combination of work and care (Robak et al., 2016), many SMEs do not explicitly address work-care issues, resulting in ad hoc solutions rather than systematic approaches.

The study highlights a notable gap between theoretical expectations and the practical realities faced by SMEs. Although existing literature emphasized the need for explicit policies and awareness, the findings suggest SMEs in the Dutch energy sector often assume such issues are implicitly covered under general employee care. Bridging this gap requires a comprehensive approach that includes managerial awareness and fostering an inclusive organizational culture. By addressing these areas, SMEs can better support their employees, promote gender diversity, and contribute to a more innovative and equitable energy sector.

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Appendix A – Interview guide

- Kunt u iets vertellen over uw rol in het bedrijf, wat voor werk u doet?

Organisatiedetails
- Organisatiegrootte, structuur, industrie
  - Hoe lang is uw bedrijf al actief in de energiesector?
  - Hoeveel mensen werken er ongeveer op uw locatie?
  - Hoe divers is uw bedrijf kijkend naar man/vrouw verhouding?

Werkomgeving en cultuur
- Flexibiliteit, werk-zorg, cultuur, beleid
  - Hoe zou u de bedrijfscultuur van uw bedrijf omschrijven?
  - Waar denkt u aan als het gaat over combineren van werk en zorg binnen uw organisatie?
  - Zijn er specifieke beleidsmaatregelen die werknemers met zorgverantwoordelijkheden ondersteunen?
    - Waarom wel/niet?
    - Is daar, naar uw weten, behoefte aan?
    - Is dit iets waar op dit moment over nagedacht wordt binnen uw bedrijf?
  - Wat zijn enkele voor- of nadelen die u ziet aan het implementeren van beleid rondom het combineren van werk en zorg binnen uw bedrijf?
  - Is het faciliteren van werk en zorg binnen uw bedrijf iets wat u ziet als uw verantwoordelijkheid (versus die van de overheid)?
  - Staat uw bedrijf open voor input van werknemers over dit onderwerp?

Uitdagingen
- Tijdsbeheer, communicatie, werklast, ondersteuningssystemen
  - In uw opzicht, wat zijn enkele uitdagingen waarmee uw medewerkers te maken hebben als het gaat om het balanceren van werk en zorgtaken?
  - Wat denkt u dat uw rol hierin is als [functie]?
  - Faciliteert uw bedrijf open communicatie tussen en met werknemers over het combineren zorgbehoeften en werkverplichtingen?

Toekomst
- Programma's, beleid, cultuurveranderingen, integratie
  - Bent u op dit moment bezig met het implementeren van programma's of initiatieven gericht op het helpen van werknemers met een zorgtaak?
    - Zo niet, staat u daarvoor open?
    - Wat voor belemmeringen / obstakels ziet u in dit aspect?
    - Wat is er, denkt u, nodig vanuit de overheid om hier overheen te komen?
  - Voorziet u veranderingen in de bedrijfscultuur wat betreft de combinatie werk en zorg?

Appendix B – Code tree

Managers' perceptions and approaches to combining work and care within their organization

Attitudes towards work and care
- Awareness
- Communication
- Expectations
- Impact of care responsibilities (on employees)
  - Impact of lack of support (for employees)
- Impact of COVID-19 on work practices
- Impact of demographics
- National context
  - Cultural norms
  - Greying
- Perceived negative consequences of facilitating work and care combinations
- Perceived positive consequences of work and care combinations
- Support for caregiving
  - Flexibility
    - Barriers to flexibility
      - Socio-economic status
      - Performance

Attitudes towards diversity and inclusion
- Fit
- Gender (organizational level)
- Gender (sector level)
- Labor market conditions
  - Impact on attraction
  - Impact on retention

Organizational culture
- Boundaries
  - Humor
- Culture and norms
- Gender
  - Impact of lack of diversity
  - Lack of inclusivity
  - Masculinity
    - Lack of awareness
- Industry-specific factors
- Leadership and influence
  - Diversity in leadership
- Openness and informality
- SME-related
  - Ad hoc decision-making
  - Policy
  - Size
- Team dynamics
  - Visibility and awareness
- Solutions