WILEY

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Greening work–life balance: Connecting work, caring and the environment

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Abstract

The emerging field of green work–life balance (growing from the work–life balance and sustainability fields) largely centres its analysis around the organisational benefits of green work–life balance policies. Consequently, it often focuses on the way in which individual behaviours can reduce the environmental footprint of the organisation. This paper argues that the gendered assumptions underpinning the research mean that the nascent field of green work–life balance has failed to theorise the way in which personal, community, environmental and organisational needs interconnect. Specifically, it has failed to address the way in which 'care'—for people and the environment—lacks recognition because of gender norms of carework. This paper proposes a theoretical framework of green work–life balance that centres both environmental and people care. This theoretical framework can be used to inform both research and practice, including the way in which unions bargain and campaign for green clauses and just transition.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Work–life balance (WLB) research and practice focuses on how people balance the demands of paid work and personal life. In other words, WLB considers 'life' to be predominantly centred upon care for 'self' and care for other people. It has not considered the need for people to balance paid work with care for the environment, let alone how to balance paid work with competing care demands. Emerging research has identified the concept of 'green work–life balance'. However, rather than include environmental care *and* care for people, this nascent body of work only considers green work–life balance (green WLB) in respect of the environment. In the context of global concern to prevent an environmental crisis, the gaps in these two fields of WLB appear glaringly obvious. In contrast, this paper considers the demands of care for people *and* for the environment in WLB.

Pocock et al. (2012) pointed to the surprising dearth of theory in WLB, arguing that rather than descriptive research, WLB research needs to theorise the complex social and workplace relations behind how people balance work and personal life. Both WLB and green WLB largely centre their analysis around the benefits, often financial, to organisations who offer WLB and green WLB policies. In WLB, the benefits include employee engagement and employer branding, amongst others. In green WLB, the focus is on the reduction of carbon emissions and resource utilisation. Being centred on the organisation means that each field has a somewhat binary approach to WLB: (1) balance with paid work and personal care responsibilities and (2) balance between paid work and environmental concerns. Consequently, neither considers how the 'three pillars' of sustainability—financial, social and environmental (Harris & Tregidga, 2012)—can all be incorporated into WLB. Significantly both WLB and green WLB also largely fail to consider the impact of WLB policy on care recipients, such as children or nature itself. It is argued that this 'failing' is due to society's assumptions of 'what is care'. Aulenbacher and Riegraf (2017) emphasise this through their critique of capitalist notions of 'care' that promote both individual responsibility and self-interest, and the pursuit of profit for organisations. Capitalism, therefore, ignores the reciprocal nature of care and that how care is provided and organised can enable economic and social participation in communities (Aulenbacher & Riegraf, 2017; Tronto, 2013).

This paper argues, therefore, that gender regimes and an undue focus on achieving organisational outcomes through WLB has meant that both WLB and green WLB have failed to theorise and understand the way in which personal, community, environmental and organisational needs and outcomes interconnect. Therefore, this paper proposes a theoretical model that reconceptualises WLB, to include the relationship between paid work, and unpaid care work—for people and the environment. The model draws on the fields of WLB and green WLB but, importantly, identifies the way in which both are underscored by gendered assumptions of work and care. This model contributes to WLB theory by linking two previously separate fields: (1) care work theory and (2) the concept of environmental care and its relationship to ecofeminism.

The remainder of this paper is structured to firstly provide a brief overview of the domains of WLB and green WLB. It then synthesises what we know about the assumptions of care and work that underpin these domains. The latter section focuses on our knowledge of how gender informs the structure of WLB through the theory of care work and how gender informs green WLB through assumptions of environmental care and work. It then proposes a theoretical framework of green WLB that facilitates research that can contribute to a sustainable care system.

1.1 | Defining WLB and green WLB

WLB research has generally focused on the balance between paid work and home or personal life. Underlying the title of 'balance' is a common analytical lens of work–life spillover or conflict (Schilling, 2015). WLB has often focused on childcare responsibilities, with the gendered assumption that it is women who will use WLB policy (Cortis & Powell, 2018; Ravenswood & Kennedy, 2012). Furthermore, WLB research and policy prioritises WLB for positive organisational outcomes, rather than better outcomes for individuals or their communities (Pocock et al., 2012). Therefore, the focus on balancing care and paid work in WLB policy and research means that it has often focused on flexibility in work as the solution. A large focus of WLB has been white collar and professional occupations where flexibility is more readily achieved, as compared with blue collar occupations and non-standard work such as shift work (Ravenswood & Harris, 2016).

The focus on flexibility in WLB has usually been based on a gendered assumption that women are responsible for childcare (Cortis & Powell, 2018). WLB policy therefore focuses on women and on childcare. Although such policies have seen increased participation of women, and their increased success at work—particularly in male dominated industries (Noback et al., 2016)—the same gendered assumptions have been a barrier to addressing the care needs of women, families and communities. One example is the way in which WLB has been seen as 'women's issues' and consequently sidelined by unions in union campaigning and bargaining, with priority given to issues that support the 'traditional' male, full-time, standard worker (Gregory & Milner, 2009; Larsen & Navrbjerg, 2018; Ravenswood & Markey, 2011). WLB research has rarely questioned how care is shared between household members, therefore reinforcing the assumption that men do not need to care for children at home and therefore have less use for WLB policy. Indeed, Goldstein-Gidoni (2020) notes that research shows that workplace culture and norms can drive men's use of family-friendly policy.

More recently, WLB has begun to look at broader care responsibilities such as elder care (Murphy & Cross, 2018; Schilling, 2015), and to consider the roles of men in family care (Fernández-Lozano, 2018; Hagqvist et al., 2020). In order to better create change in how WLB is understood and enacted in policy, Goldstein-Gidoni (2020) suggests that WLB research steps back from a sole workplace focus to understand the gendered roles of mothers and fathers in society and how that limits men who wish to organise their working lives around childcare. This, Goldstein-Gidoni (2020) argues, would also begin to break down the gendered assumptions around WLB that women carry all the care responsibilities.

Goldstein-Gidoni's (2020) approach centralises the importance of care in a way that WLB of working women has not been able to achieve. Challenging the gendered approach of most WLB research that centres paid work, Goldstein-Gidoni (2020) prioritises 'care' in the WLB equation, rather than making care (unpaid work) subservient to the business of paid work. This can therefore unravel the ways in which paid work is part and parcel of 'fatherhood' and in which motherhood is feminised to the point that it is incompatible with paid work (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020). These gendered norms inform Noback et al.'s (2016) findings that flexibility policies aimed at WLB have a more positive effect on women than men's careers in masculine industries. Noback et al.'s (2016) findings may indeed be because women are under-represented in male industries and often in lower status positions. Furthermore, men who change their working hours or patterns to accommodate care, may well be perceived as less dedicated than other men (Kelland, 2019), as doing so challenges the idea of male work and careers.

The focus of WLB research is often on professionals and managers in relatively standard work (Haar et al., 2018; Pocock et al., 2012; Ravenswood & Harris, 2016; Schilling, 2015) and overlooks the range of occupations that work in non-standard hours such as shift work (Brauner et al., 2019). Consequently, it often centres around issues of flexibility in paid work—allowing working from home, flexible start times, flexible schedules and so on (Avgar et al., 2011; Delsen & Smits, 2010). As Schilling (2015) notes, within flexibility, there is a focus on time to balance competing work and family demands.

A focus on making work flexible, so that care responsibilities can fit around it, still privileges paid work in the concept of WLB. Therefore, arguments in favour of WLB and flexibility focus on how it is positive for organisations. Arguments supporting the utility of WLB for organisations (Avgar et al., 2011) include greater participation and performance of women in work (Gregory & Milner, 2009; Noback et al., 2016; Schilling, 2015)—especially where there are skill or labour shortages—improved job satisfaction and retention (Haar et al., 2014), and improved wellbeing (Grünberg & Matei, 2020). Much of this research measuring organisational outcomes is quantitative and overlooks the context within which organisational outcomes are achieved, including the greater impact on individuals and their families (Pocock, 2006).

While the greater impact on individuals is under-researched and not well recognised, the way in which WLB is framed in terms of boundaries, spillover and conflict (Haar et al., 2018; Hagqvist et al., 2020; Schilling, 2015) means that policy and rhetoric is centred around supporting, generally, professional women to manage these 'conflicting' demands (Grünberg & Matei, 2020). Rather than an organisational problem, this problematises the individual woman. Much of the research emphasises individual responsibility, forgetting the role of power and 'societal, institutional and organizational forces' (Pocock et al., 2012, p. 396).

Pocock et al. (2012) point to the dearth of theoretical frameworks in industrial relations research on WLB. In a way that is still relatively unchallenged, they build on Voydanoff's (2007) model of WLB to suggest a multilayered model of WLB that incorporates some of the complexity of WLB: employer-employee power, gender order, prevailing technologies, dominant work cultures, regulatory regimes for work and immigration arrangements (Pocock et al., 2012). Importantly, they extend the WLB concept from a focus on individuals and individual workplaces to include the interaction between individuals, workplaces and community (Pocock et al., 2012).

More recently, WLB research has begun to more explicitly call into question assumptions of gender roles and how this influences WLB. Goldstein-Gidoni (2020) identifies a need to address gender roles in domestic spheres as well as workplaces—although with a focus on how extant WLB theory has disadvantaged men. Grünberg and Matei (2020) call into question the way in which WLB and its framing of work–life conflict perpetuates gender norms around women's paid work and care, as this implicitly suggests that care responsibilities and paid work are incompatible through the discourse of 'conflict'.

1.2 | Green WLB

WLB research has focused on the balance between paid work and care responsibilities for other people. Although there are calls to re-theorise WLB to include the complexity of gender norms and to move away from models that focus more on organisational outcomes of WLB, there is scant research that has looked at WLB in relation to the environment. Indeed, even though Grünberg and Matei (2020) refer to sustainability of WLB in their title, they refer to current WLB frameworks as no longer being fit for purpose, in other words not sustainable in the long term.

In contrast, green WLB, an emerging field, focuses mainly on the balance between paid work and the environment (Muster, 2012; Muster & Schrader, 2011; Pham et al., 2020). In doing so, it has developed green WLB in relation to encouraging pro-environmental behaviours such as green consumer practices (Pham et al., 2020) and reducing carbon emissions. As with 'traditional' WLB research, green WLB has centred on the offering of flexible work. However, instead of flexibility to facilitate balance with care responsibilities, it has promoted flexibility in order to increase an organisation's sustainability (Chapman & Skinner, 2015), for example, the use of flexible work locations to decrease commuting and reliance upon private modes of transport. Flexible work locations and times are also promoted in relation to reducing an organisation's resource footprint, for example downsized premises (van Heck et al., 2012). Chapman and Skinner (2015) found that flexibility to work at home increased pro-environmental behaviours at home, such as recycling, and led to greater environmental action at work. Thus, they illuminate the way in which workplace practices that are not specifically linked to environmental outcomes can improve pro-environmental behaviours. Despite relying upon approaches such as Voydanoff's (2007), which encourage connecting work, family and community, Chapman and Skinner (2015) largely focus on individual behaviours, and only pro-environmental behaviours.

Chapman and Skinner's (2015) approach to Green WLB reflects that of the nascent body of research into Green WLB. Green WLB is based more on ideas of business sustainability, often focused on how consumption and production can be changed to reduce harm to the environment. For example, consumers can conserve the environment through supporting environmentally friendly products, packing and production (Agrawal & Gupta, 2018; Heo & Muralidharan, 2019; Tucker & Farrelly, 2016). Individuals can make their commute to work more environmentally friendly through car-sharing (Rotaris & Danielis, 2018) and using public transport (Diniz & de Quieroz Pinheiro, 2017). They can reduce waste through efficient consumption (Agrawal & Gupta, 2018; Diniz & de Quieroz Pinheiro, 2017), reducing their purchase of single use products and limiting their personal consumption to what's necessary (Agrawal & Gupta, 2018; Ambrosius & Gilderbloom, 2015). These activities fit within the idea of pro-environmental behaviour (Larson et al., 2015; Siegel et al., 2018), and specifically the categories that Larson et al. (2015) define as 'conservation lifestyle' (daily individual or household habits such as recycling).

However, there is more depth to pro-environmental behaviours, and Larson et al. (2015) include the following categories in addition to conservation lifestyle mentioned above: social environmentalism (teaching others about the importance of conservation); land stewardship (conserving and enhancing habitats); and environmental citizenship (involvement in higher level decision making about the environment, such as making a submission on an environmental policy). Green WLB research does not encompass these broader pro-environmental behaviours nor those such as protectionism and activism (Larson et al., 2015; Siegel et al., 2018). Furthermore, Green WLB largely fails to consider the social and structural influences (e.g., labour market norms, technology, national economy and culture and so on) on both employers and employees that can influence and restrict their opportunity to engage in pro-environmental behaviour (Pham et al., 2020; Yong et al., 2020).

2 | CARE AND ITS UNDERPINNING ASSUMPTIONS

Given that WLB and green WLB tends to focus more on organisational outcomes rather than care (of people or the environment), this section considers what is 'care' and the gendered assumptions that underpin this understanding. Care of people can be defined as an

interdependent, complex relationship between a human carer and human care recipient (Nishikawa, 2011; Tronto, 2013). When it is considered as work, or paid work, 'care work is work in which concern for the well-being of the care recipient is likely to affect the quality of services provided' (Folbre, 2012, p. 598). Care theory argues that our care systems are built on gender discrimination and exploitation (Duffy et al., 2013; England et al., 2002; Gilligan, 1995; Rummery & Fine, 2012; Tronto, 2013). It argues that care is undervalued because it is perceived as a domestic undertaking of women, especially ethnic minority women (Duffy, 2005; Folbre, 2006). Those who provide paid care in the market are disadvantaged through poor work conditions; those who provide unpaid care struggle to balance that with paid work and financial stability (Ravenswood & Harris, 2016). Women shoulder most paid and unpaid people care work (Hill et al., 2017; Ravenswood & Markey, 2011; Ravenswood & Smith, 2017).

Cultural and societal norms have traditionally placed less value on skills that are associated with women and female dominated occupations than those of men (Neysmith & Aronson, 1996). Part of the gendered devaluing of care work has been an assumption that care work, carried out by women, is an innate quality of women—not a skill (Meagher & Cortis, 2009; Palmer & Eveline, 2012). This is in comparison to 'skill' that is perceived to be the result of learning, capability, application and expertise in male dominated industries such as manufacturing, or even medicine. These latter skills are acquired rather than innate, affording status, and are easily quantified and assessed. Care and love, perceived to be women's work, has been associated with low skill and intrinsic reward (Palmer & Eveline, 2012), thus devaluing the skill required. Davies (1995) reframes the concept of care work not as affection but as 'a commitment to the creation of a sustained relationship with the other, together with an ability to reflect on the specifics of that person's history' (p. 19). This reframes care work not as a natural quality or personality trait of the care worker, or an inherent womanly quality, but as a skill (Davies, 1995).

Gendered assumptions of care work include that, as caring is a natural part of women's qualities, their 'love' for the job, intrinsic rewards, compensates for low pay (England et al., 2002; Palmer & Eveline, 2012). It is also assumed that quality care can only be provided by someone who has 'an unconditional desire to help others and whose needs for their own financial support are secondary' (Cortis, 2000, p. 59). Therefore, low wages in paid care work are maintained because of the rhetoric that it is a calling, not a skill, that is part of the innate nature of women (King & Meagher, 2009). These same gendered assumptions—that care work (paid and unpaid) is women's work, that it has low or no economic value, and is an inherent attribute of women—influence the way in which WLB is approached. Care theory aims to move away from the gendered stereotype that care is a 'special' female quality not a skill, thus highlighting its increased value in capitalist society (Briar et al., 2014; Folbre, 2006; Nishikawa, 2011).

2.1 | Environmental care

A similar gender inequality is echoed in environmental care work: women dominate in less visible environmental work while men hold well paid leadership positions (Arora-Jonsson & Sijapati, 2018; Moore, 2016; Young, 2018). Ecofeminist theory has addressed the role of gender and highlighted inequalities in perceptions of environmentalism (Moore, 2016; Young, 2018). Women's work in environmentalism is undervalued as it is perceived to be more 'relational' and community based than 'traditional', it is often concentrated in volunteer community

organisations. Masculine forms of environmental activism, such as paid positions as directors and managers of policy receive greater recognition (Arora-Jonsson & Sijapati, 2018; Bord & O'Connor, 1997; Dietz et al., 2002; King, 1991; Logsdon-Conradsen, 2011; Martin, 2007; McCright, 2010; O'Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010).

However, in contrast to care theory, which has highlighted skill and tasks in care work, some ecofeminist research has instead focused on gender essentialist theories. These theories equate gender stereotypes of women's 'innate nurturing' with a special connection to nature (Moore, 2016). Essentialist ecofeminist theory *reinforces* gender stereotypes of women and care (Bolsø et al., 2018). These arguments led to a call for research within ecofeminism that extends beyond gender stereotypes (Phillips, 2015, 2019; Young, 2018).

Perhaps the move beyond gender stereotypes could begin with how environmental care is conceptualised. As discussed earlier, much of Green WLB has been premised on pro-environmental behaviours that focus on individual responsibility and improved organisational outcomes. There has been lesser, if any focus, on aspects such as social environmentalism, land stewardship, environmental citizenship (Larson et al., 2015) or indeed protectionism and environmentalism (Siegel et al., 2018), 'care' that involves greater connection amongst communities, and, of course, more time. Discourse around sustainability continues to be based on dualities that privilege economic success over social and environmental need, and disempower women, ethnic and other minorities (Irving & Helin, 2018). These dualities also force us to prioritise either the environment or people. Rather than perpetuate these dualities (Roach, 1991), theory and practice could move beyond our current systems and ways of thinking in order to promote positive environmental and social outcomes (Biesecker & von Winterfeld, 2018; Ergene et al., 2018; Irving & Helin, 2018).

Although care theory (for humans) focuses more on the skills and process of care work, care is considered reciprocal between the carer and the person receiving care (Nishikawa, 2011; Tronto, 2013). Care theory focuses less on caring about than caring for. Caring *about* is emphasised in sustainability research that highlights the importance of connection and interaction with the environment. The environment, it is argued, provides care as well as receives it (Buser et al., 2018; Larson et al., 2015; O'Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010; Siegel et al., 2018). Caring for the environment is a result of love and connectedness with the environment (Cosgriff, 2011). This focus on relationships and interaction, 'deep caring' (Diniz & de Quieroz Pinheiro, 2017; Fien, 2003), is stronger in environmental research than in care work theory. The concept of deep caring for the environment also challenges the notion of who is doing the care: environmental care that encompasses regeneration of nature, protecting nature from destruction requires actions from communities, not just individuals (Singh, 2013). Other initiatives that encourage more reciprocal caring relationships with the environment such as community gardens, also require care to be thought of as a community concern, not an individual responsibility (Torres et al., 2018).

By drawing out the concept of care, and emphasising the need for community, interaction and reciprocal care, it becomes possible to reconceptualise how WLB and green WLB are understood. We can begin to understand that organisational outcomes are connected to individual, social and environmental outcomes, both positive and negative. A changed focus in green WLB drawing on deep environmental caring can highlight that 'business' occurs in relationship with and benefitting from the environment. Indeed, such a reconceptualisation highlights that deep caring, and caring both about and for people, requires more focus and time than is currently promoted through WLB and Green WLB research and policy. It suggests that that the narrow focus of WLB and Green WLB is not compatible with environmental care.

It could be argued that the unsustainability and inequality inherent in WLB and green WLB frameworks result from a market focus on care. Profits are valued over care (Tronto, 2013; Waring, 2004); and people and business prioritised over the environment (Milne et al., 2009; Phillips, 2019). Both WLB and green WLB has, generally, prioritised organisational outcomes and profit and have largely failed to recognise the complex context of care and paid work that is situated within communities, society and the environment (Aulenbacher & Riegraf, 2017; Cosgriff, 2011; Pocock et al., 2012; Siegel et al., 2018; Singh, 2013; Tronto, 2013). The very phrases used in WLB research such as conflict, spillover, work and life are based in an idea that these are separate, competing demands. Such an approach, prioritising business outcomes over social and environmental outcomes, and based on a simple duality (Irving & Helin, 2018) fails to encompass the way in which our care systems are based on inequalities that disempower women, and other minorities, and harm the environment. Some purport that our systems of care are not sustainable (Macgregor, 2004; Ravenswood & Smith, 2017; Tronto, 2013). Therefore, green WLB needs to be theorised in its rich and complicated context, including the way in which social norms and power determine how we value work, care and the environment.

3 | A SUSTAINABLE CARE SYSTEM

A 'care system' describes how individuals, organisations and the socio-political context interact to sustain care in our society. Gender norms prioritise visible, high status 'care' work and overlook care that is perceived to be more 'domestic'. This produces gender inequalities in our care systems. WLB has identified some of these inequalities, whereby women have been unable to access well paid and rewarding careers due to a lack of organisational support care responsibilities—inequalities that some men now experience when trying to balance family life with work (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020; Kelland, 2019; Noback et al., 2016). Gender norms also mean that 'deep caring' for the environment is overlooked, with a focus not on *caring* in green WLB so much as prioritising individual behaviours (Agrawal & Gupta, 2018; Chapman & Skinner, 2015; Diniz & de Quieroz Pinheiro, 2017). Furthermore, gender inequality is embedded in current concepts of care and care systems, so that women and the recipients of their unpaid care work (people and the environment) shoulder the burden of care (Moore, 2016; Ravenswood & Smith, 2017; Tronto, 2013; Waring, 2004). It could be argued that a gender blind approach has created unsustainable care systems that focus on financial or economic gain, rather than social or environmental concerns in WLB policy and research. Therefore, in order to meet the needs and calls for renewed ways of approaching WLB and green WLB, this paper proposes a model for how to research and design sustainable care systems (see Figure 1).

This model of a sustainable care system illustrates that gender regimes are fundamental to how organisational policy and context and the regulatory environment are created and implemented. Simultaneously, it indicates the way in which gender regimes influence our concepts of green WLB and care itself. The model aims to emphasise the dynamic and reciprocal nature of care and care recipients, thereby refocusing green WLB on care as relational and interactive, and a concept that includes both environmental and people care. Furthermore, organisational outcomes—while still a part of green WLB—are considered in relation to outcomes for care and carers.

Green WLB in this framework is influenced by organisational policy and context, including the priority that an organisation gives to the financial, social and environmental concerns (Harris & Tregidga, 2012). It also acknowledges that the regulatory environment influences
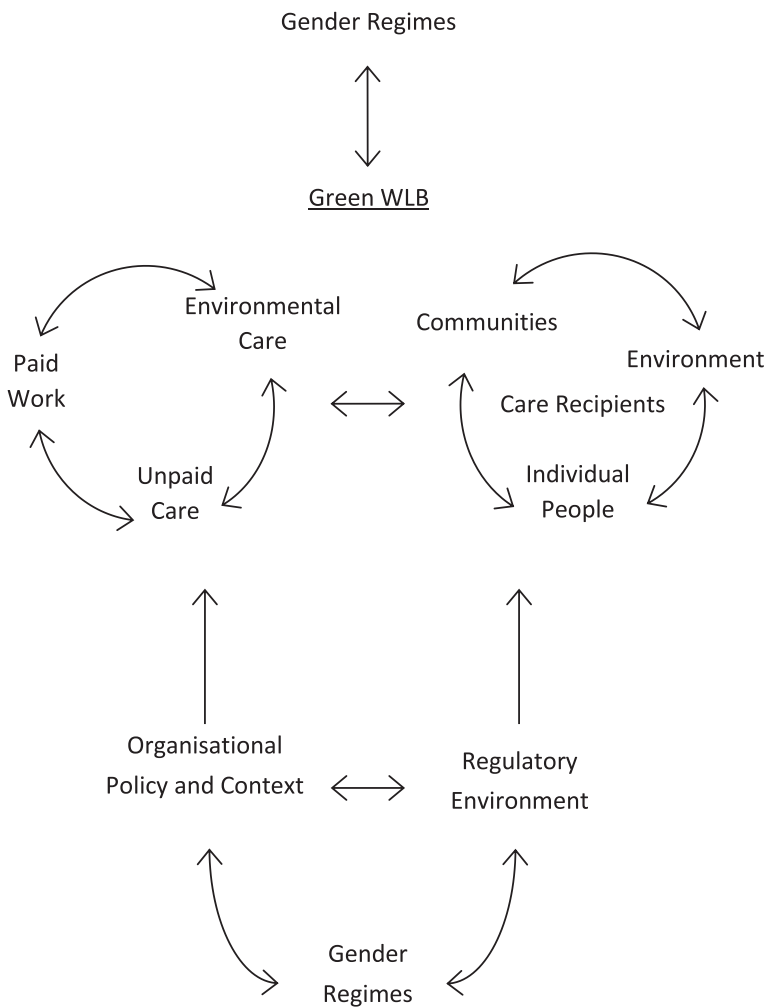
FIGURE 1　Model of a sustainable care system

both the organisational context and green WLB. The regulatory environment includes factors such as the labour market, legislation governing employment in any given country, and social policy around paid work, and unpaid care work. Examples of social policy that influence care systems are state funded parental leave, and single parent pensions. The regulatory environment for work also encompasses the role of unions and how they prioritise care and WLB in their campaigning and bargaining (Gregory & Milner, 2009; Ravenswood & Markey, 2011).

　　As discussed earlier, care work both for people and the environment has long been assumed to be low value work that women do (Arora-Jonsson & Sijapati, 2018; Dietz et al., 2002; England et al., 2002; O'Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010; Palmer & Eveline, 2012). The way in which care is valued as paid work and supported in workplace and broader policy is influenced by the lack of value and priority given to care in all forms because of persistent gender stereotyped norms. Therefore, the existence of gender regimes or norms are explicitly stated in this model in order to examine, from a research or policy perspective, how they influence green WLB policy in its full context. This addresses the need for WLB to explicitly examine what to

this point have been assumptions over gender roles in paid work and care (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2020; Grünberg & Matei, 2020; Pocock et al., 2012).

Building on previous research (Pocock et al., 2012) and incorporating concepts of deep caring and community as carers and care recipients (Buser et al., 2018; Cosgriff, 2011; Diniz & de Quieroz Pinheiro, 2017; Fien, 2003), this model acknowledges that green WLB decisions in the workplace impact individuals, who themselves are members of families and communities. Therefore, the model encourages a multilevel approach to understanding how green WLB can benefit not only organisations, but individuals, communities and the environment. By including these elements, this model of sustainable care systems requires policy and research to interrogate the way in which gender regimes within the care system may disadvantage some groups of people over others; privilege organisational outcomes over the environment; or prioritise people over the environment. Importantly, the model includes the 'care recipients'—in reality, people, communities, society and the natural environment within which we exist.

4 | FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Work on this conceptualisation of sustainable care systems began before the Covid-19 pandemic, which has highlighted inequalities in our care systems that could be better understood, and perhaps improved or rectified, if this model of a sustainable care system was applied to rethink how people and environmental care is supported in our society. In early stages of the pandemic when many countries globally were restricting movement and travel, through increased pro-social behaviours (Li et al., 2021), there were reports of increased bird life in urban areas and less pollution in waterways. However, these positives sit alongside increasing inequalities in society caused by the pandemic, and society's response to it. Peck (2021) describes the short- and long-term negative economic and health effects that impact women more than men. Others have highlighted the effect on women's careers as social and familial norms require them to take a greater proportion of childcare responsibilities when day-care and schools are closed (Clark et al., 2021; Lavado et al., 2021). Further inequalities deepened along race divides as many low-wage frontline workers, often migrants and ethnic minorities, were required to keep working during the pandemic without the recognition of those who worked in more visible institutions such as hospitals. Globally, while workers could stay at home in many developed countries, their demand for products was at the cost of workers at the other end of the global supply chain who did not experience the same government, social or employment support, and had no choice but to continue working in unsafe conditions in factories (Tejani & Fukuda-Parr, 2021). Although Cullen and Murphy (2021) point to a more transformational shift in feminism throughout the pandemic, connecting the benefits to our environment of our changed social patterns during the pandemic has not been fully considered in relation to care and care systems (Women's Budget Group, 2020). Applying the model of sustainable care systems, we can see immediately that organisational and economic outcomes are prioritised, often ahead of the needs of people providing care, and ahead of caring for the environment. Gender regimes influence the way in which highly feminised care occupations, despite being high risk and essential during the pandemic, remain under-valued and unrecognised. Gender regimes also influence the roles of men and women at work and at home, so that it is often women who are expected to move in and out of paid work in order to provide unpaid care to family that also supports organisational and economic outcomes. Environmental care is sidelined in the crisis and recovery. While this is a surface, snapshot illustration of how the model could be applied, the following paragraphs

highlight how by taking a more in-depth look at unions, employers, policy makers and the way they interact with green WLB, care recipients and gender regimes can not only explain why we have inequitable care systems but signpost the way to future sustainable care.

This model of a sustainable care system can be used to inform research and practice to ensure that the way we support paid work and care (for people and the environment) is truly sustainable in all senses of the word. As a multilevel model of a sustainable care system, it lends itself to research that focuses on in-depth data from people and contextual elements. It could, for example, be used to inform participatory research in organisations or communities to change the way we organise paid work and environmental care, acknowledging that many or most people have care demands for people in our community as well. Similarly, it could be used to inform a policy analysis to understand the way in which employment regulation is designed and implemented, and how changes could be made to improve it, especially given current crises in care provision and environmental care. This would highlight the way in which many people in low wage, uncertain jobs, are often those who take the most time to provide care with no financial recognition, in other words, they care for others to the detriment of their own economic (and consequently other) wellbeing. It could instigate policy that would enable people to be able to care for other people, and to also take part in caring for the environment. For example, the model of a sustainable care system could inform debate, research and policy on issues such as universal basic incomes and living wages—which at heart include participation in society in their policy for wage support.

There is a clear lacuna in both green WLB and WLB on how individuals make decisions, and prioritise their own activities in paid work, care and environmental care. Using this proposed model would facilitate analysis and research that breaks down the binary approach to each of these fields, to understand the way in which employees move through their often-competing work and care demands. Without understanding the way in which employees do prioritise these demands, it is difficult to shape workplace and regulatory policy that can enable people, and communities to create and support society and environment that flourishes for all.

There is also a place for this model to inform future research on the way in which unions bargain. As mentioned above, this model can inform how unions bargain for WLB, as one example (Gregory & Milner, 2009; Larsen & Navrbjerg, 2018; Ravenswood & Markey, 2011). It could also inform related fields of research such as equality bargaining that examines how unions can use their resources to bargain for gender equality (Milner et al., 2019; Williamson & Baird, 2014). Importantly, this proposed model could inform the nascent research on unions and green bargaining, and union and just transition—research that has largely focused on male dominated industries (Goods, 2017). Through using this model as an analytical lens, it could contribute to a more full understanding of the roles unions could play in ensuring just transition for all genders, and prioritising not just 'green technology' (Goods, 2017; Masterman-Smith, 2010; Newman & Humphrys, 2020) but deep caring for the environment.

Finally, this model has focused on gender in the way that much of WLB and, indeed, gender in industrial relations has—in that gender refers to men and women assuming binary genders of male and female. The same way that gender stereotypes have informed systemic, long term discrimination against women in employment, gender stereotypes inform policy and practice that discriminates against transgender and non-binary people. Indeed, it could be argued that the near invisibility of transgender and non-binary people in WLB, green WLB, care theory and industrial relations is a result of systemic discrimination. Future application of this analytical framework could usefully investigate the role of gender regimes in green WLB, across a range of genders, not solely from a binary gendered perspective.

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