

Social dialogue's role in the shift towards flexible work:

A social reproduction perspective on the gendered flexibilization of labour

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1988 – sectoral social dialogue (FOD WASO)



2021 – intersectoral social dialogue www.vbo.be

Overview

- **Theories:** Flexible work, gender and social reproduction theory
- **Case study:** Belgian National Labour Council
- **Methodology:** analysis of opinions and collective agreements
- **Findings:** Four periods of gendered negotiations
- **Discussion**



Theoretical framework

Flexible work:

- **Employer-led** flexibility (economic production)
- **Workers-led** flexibility (social reproduction)
- Gendered effects ('gender contract' in sphere of family)

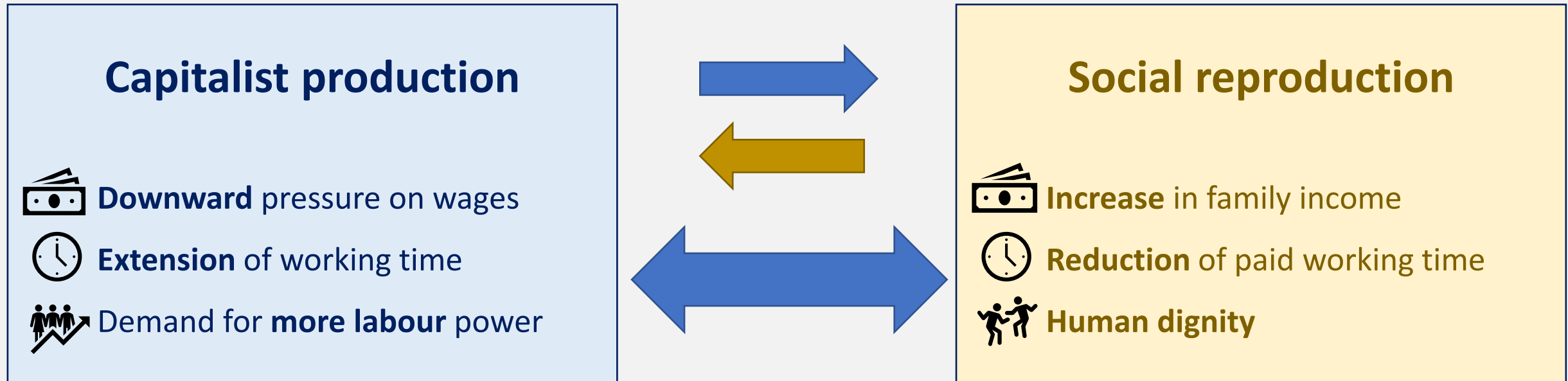
Yet: pressures conceived **separately**

→ **Interconnection?**

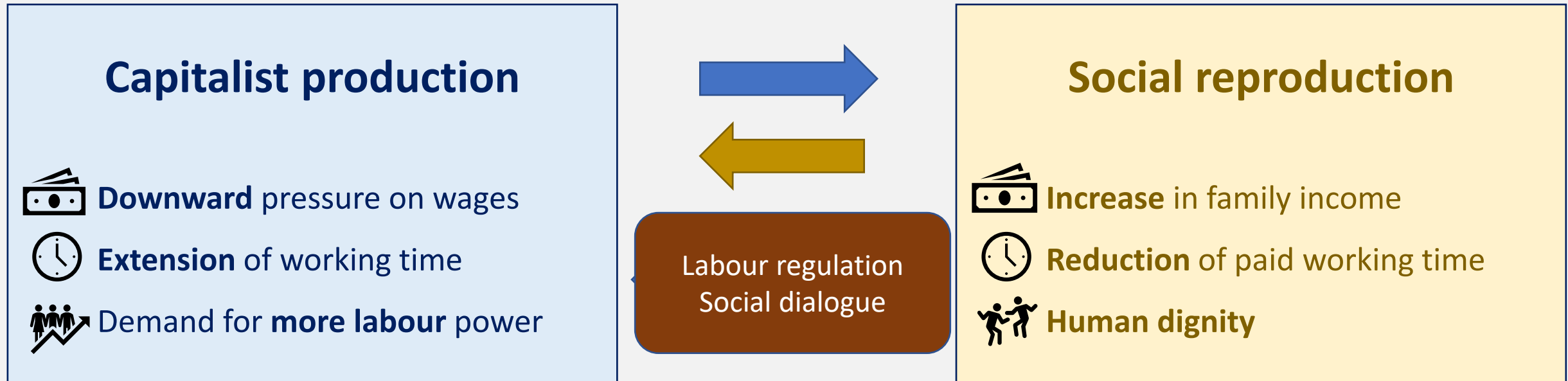
→ Perspective: **Social reproduction theory (SRT)**



Social reproduction and gender inequalities in capitalist society



Social reproduction and gender inequalities in capitalist society



Research questions:

- 1) Which **forms of flexibility** resulted from social dialogue over time?
- 2) To what extent did these outcomes **respond to**
 - the labour force demands of **production**?
 - the needs of social **reproduction**?
- 3) How did it resolve the **conflict** between productive and reproductive needs, and which **new tensions** did arise?
- 4) How has this **shaped gender inequality** over time?

→ *Case study:* National Labour Council

National Labour Council

- **Bipartite** composition (private sector)
- **2.311 opinions** since 1953
 - 83,4% *unanimous*
 - 16,6% *divided* (NAR 2021)
- 160 collective agreements (Law of 1968)
- On **social policy** questions (labour law, social security, social dialogue,...)



Findings

Turning points:

- Alterations in flexibility content and problem definitions
- Major changes in economic context

1953-1978: Growth of labour demand in a strict sexual division of paid and unpaid labour:

- General **working time reduction** in exchange for productivity increases
 - **Special arrangements** for women workers' reproductive needs
- **Standard work according to breadwinner model**
- **Women's flexible labour**

1988-2004: Labour shortages and time squeeze of working families/ women

- **Corrective measures** to production-oriented flexibility: work-life reconciliation rights + care sector
 - Subsidized work through 'standard' work statutes (service voucher)
- **Work-life corrections to flexibility** more gender-equal take-up, but no access for low wage households
- **(Insufficient) collective care services**

1979-1987: Economic restructuring with an oversupply of labour

- Flexible work to preserve employment (*women: part-time; men: shift work*)
 - Career breaks (*women: care; men: early retirement*)
 - Atypical subsidized employment schemes for societal (care) needs
- **Preservation of employment along gendered lines: part-time for women; asocial working hours for men**

2005-2022: Cost-competitive pressures

- Production-oriented flexible work (overtime hours, nightwork, Sundays)
 - Telework regulation
 - Reorientation of work-life to work-care
 - Regulation of informal care work and semi-formal activities (voluntary work, extra-earnings,..)
- **Increased stress on families/ women, increased dualization due to privatisation of care services and retrenchment**

Discussion

National social dialogue

- regulated flexible work mainly to respond to **labour force demands of production**
 - integration of **women**: from **flexible to more stable labour force** (equalisation) & flexible work-life arrangements
- **Social reproduction**: partly collectivised through **non-standard work**

Despite: **crisis of social reproduction** ('care crisis') mostly felt in:

- **Working families - women**: privatised & individual solutions
- **Welfare state**: increasingly fails to care for its population leading to a **political crisis** and re-emergence of **neo-conservative** gender relations