Helpdesk Research Report: Potential benefits of part-time working

Date: 16/03/2012

Query: Identify recent research that a) describes recent trends in part-time working in the UK and globally, particularly in the current economic crisis; b) analyses the potential benefits of part-time working for individual workers, the organisations they work in and for the economy as a whole; and c) identifies successful models and policies for part-time working.

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1. Overview

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines a part-time worker as, ‘an employed person whose normal hours of work are less than those of comparable full-time workers’ (ILO 1997). Part-time work is dominated by and still considered mainly the purview of women, who usually opt for part-time work to balance their responsibilities for family life. It has typically been considered disadvantageous in terms of work progression (European Foundation 2012; Lyonette et al 2010). In the recent economic crisis it has been even more criticised, as the number of people inadvertently in part-time work increases and it is presented as a less-favoured alternative to full-time employment (Allen 2010). These perspectives all serve to consolidate the position that part-time working is something that should be avoided.

This view is not helped by the type and level of jobs that are offered on a part-time basis. A recent survey by the Resolution Foundation (2012) found that highly skilled women have to take less-skilled jobs because they opt to work part time. However, this is not always the case. For instance, a study from Norway found for men in the study, working part time for a substantial amount of time did not have negative career effects (Bjørnholt 2010).
This report outlines general trends in part-time working in the UK and internationally (the bulk of evidence available is on European Union (EU) countries, so it draws heavily on EU country examples. It also considers the potential benefits of part-time working, and policies/strategies that have supported its development.

General trends in part-time working include:

- Globalisation and associated changes in the organisation of production has been driving the need for more flexible arrangements, including part-time work.
- In most developed countries there is a trend towards more part-time workers. In the EU for instance, the share of the population in part-time work rose from 14 per cent in 1992 to 25 per cent in 2010 (European Foundation 2007; 2012).
- Women continue to make up the bulk of part-time workers, as a result of their continued role as primary carers.
- Part-time working is prevalent among young people just entering the job market, and older people moving towards semi-retirement and retirement.
- Although there are exceptions, it is hard to gauge the level and impact of part-time working in developing countries, due to lack of data and the significant proportion of the workforce in informal employment.

In addition to providing more people with jobs, there is evidence of multiple other benefits to part-time working both for individuals and companies (and, by implication, for society at large). These include:

- Employees report a better work-life balance, improved health outcomes and better working conditions.
- Part-time employment allows employers to better respond to market requirements and the prevailing economy. Flexible arrangements can result in efficiency gains for companies.
- Organisations with flexible arrangements are more attractive to employees.
- Part-time and flexible working can promote sustainability and a robust economy.

At the same time, however, some drawbacks to part-time working have been identified, particularly for women. These include poor career progression and training opportunities, lower wages relative to full-time counterparts, and weaker job security.

Nevertheless, some countries, including the UK, have recognised the advantages of promoting part-time working and have put policies in place to encourage and support it. Examples of these are:

- International and regional laws and policies, such as the EU Framework Agreement on Part-time Work and the ILO Convention C175 on Part-time Work
- National laws such as the Netherlands’ Equal Treatment (Working Hours) Act (1996) and the UK Right to Request, and Duty to Consider, Flexible Working, introduced in April 2003
- Government initiatives, such as the UK government’s campaign promoting the ‘business case’ for work-life balance policies.
This discussion overlaps with debates about flexible working and appropriate leave periods (e.g. paternity leave). These are only examined to the extent that these discussions are related specifically to part-time working.

2. Recent trends

Although the economic downturn has brought a new impetus to the need to find creative ways of dealing with unemployment, the move towards flexible working has been a feature of a number of developed economies’ policies since the new millennium. The intensification of international competition and high levels of long-term unemployment, resulting from globalisation and structural economic changes in the organisation of production, along with rising female participation rates and more diverse working-time demands have all contributed to greater demand for flexible working hours both on the part of employers and employees (UN 2001; European Foundation 2007).

Data for developed economies shows similar trends. The total working population of the European Union (EU) defining themselves as part-time workers rose from 14.2 per cent in 1992 to 18.1 per cent in 2002 (European Foundation 2007). Current (2010) figures are 25 per cent (27 per cent for the countries cited in 1992) (European Foundation 2012).

Figures for the UK are above the European average, and rose from 22.9 per cent in 1992 to 25.0 in 2002, an increase that is mostly attributable to the rise in the part-time male figures from 6.3 to 9.4 per cent for the same period. The current figure is around 30 per cent (45 per cent of women and 13 per cent of working men (European Foundation 2012; Lyonette et al 2010). The country with the highest rate of part-time workers in Europe is the Netherlands: just over 50 per cent of the Dutch workforce work part time, with more than 80 per cent of female workers on part-time schedules (European Foundation 2012). Southern and Eastern European countries have the lowest rates of part-time workers and in some of these countries part-time rates have been declining (KILM 2010).

Part-time work is to be found mainly in certain sectors and occupations. In Europe, it is particularly common in the health, education and services sectors, where up to 22.6 per cent work part-time. This figure contrasts with 16.9 per cent in agriculture and 6.9 per cent in industry. The hotel/catering and retailing sectors show the largest presence of part-time employment (28 per cent and 23.1 per cent of total sector employment, respectively). Occupational status is also significant in the sense that part-timers, and especially part-time women, are more likely to be in certain jobs such as ‘white-collar professional and clerical’ or ‘blue-collar operating and labouring manual’. Part-time employment is particularly rare in managerial positions, regardless of gender considerations. There is a higher proportion of part-time workers in the public sector (29 per cent) than in the private sector (25 per cent) (figures from Eurostat Labour Force Survey 2002, quoted in European Foundation 2007).

In the UK, the wholesale, retail and motor trades, as well as hotels and restaurants, have the highest proportion of women and men working part time. A higher percentage of the workforce in very small organisations works part time than in larger organisations. For example, 55 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men in organisations with fewer than ten employees works part time. This is compared with 29 per cent of women and 6 per cent of men in organisations with 500 employees or more. (Lyonette et al 2010). In almost all occupational groups, apart from administrative and secretarial
occupations, a rise in part-time work is projected for men. Large increases are also expected in part-time work among women in professional and managerial occupations, as well as personal service jobs. Reductions in part-time work among women are expected in administrative and secretarial occupations, skilled trades, machine and transport operatives and elementary occupations. Men are increasingly likely to move in on female domains as they are squeezed out of traditional male jobs like manufacturing (Lyonette et al 2010).

2002 Eurostat data shows that part-time work is most often freely chosen as a way of reconciling participation in paid work with other activities (such as child and adult care and involvement in education activities). Only for a small (but significant – 14 per cent) share of EU part-timers does this represent the only possible form of paid work, at least temporarily (European Foundation 2007). This has increased since the global economic crisis: over the course of the recession, many member states extended or introduced publicly financed short-time working and temporary layoff schemes in response to falling demand. Between 2008 and 2009, the number of workers on such schemes tripled to almost two million (European Foundation 2012). During the recession, figures from the Labour Force Survey, from September to November 2009, show that the number of people in full-time employment in the UK fell by 113,000, and the number of people in part-time employment increased by 99,000 to a record high of 7.7 million. Recent figures also show that 25 per cent of men working part time said that they were doing so because they could not secure full-time employment, compared with 10 per cent of women (Lyonette et al 2010).

The average number of hours worked per week continues to be lowered, as a result of more people working part time, fewer people working long hours, and a fall in the collectively agreed working hours in many countries. Further, the use of flexitime has increased in European companies since 2004. Both managers and employee representatives acknowledge the benefits arising from such schemes (see section 3 below) (European Foundation 2012).

The gender dimensions of part-time work

Women generally have more flexible jobs than men, and enter and exit the labour market more frequently due to several factors related to culture, household needs, their reproductive cycle and institutional discrimination. Therefore, it is not surprising that a large majority of part-timers are women (UN 2001). EU figures show, on average, around three times as many women work part time as do men (European Foundation 2007). When their unpaid work in the home is factored in, however, women working part time work nearly as many hours per week as do men working full time (European Foundation 2012).

It is well-documented that there are fewer part-time jobs available in higher-level occupations, meaning that women wishing to work on a part-time basis are increasingly moving into lower-level jobs. Additionally, part-time jobs have largely failed to share in the general trend towards ‘up-skill’ and significantly contribute to the gender pay gap. The proportion of women in the UK working full-time and employed in high level occupations rose three-fold between 1975 and 2000; for women working part time, the proportion in higher-level jobs barely changed over the same period. Further, research into local government jobs in the UK found that female part-time workers are most likely to be found in the most feminised areas and particularly in (low-paid) jobs frequently viewed as ‘women’s work’, such as catering, cleaning, caring and teaching assistance (Lyonette et al 2010).
The evidence shows that many senior part-time jobs provide reduced opportunities, both in terms of work content and assigned tasks and also in training and development opportunities. The inevitable consequence of this is that women will become sidelined into occupational roles and groups with a lower chance of being promoted within senior occupations such as medicine and accountancy (discussed more fully in section 3) (Lyonette et al 2010). Lyonette et al (2010) also argue that women’s choices are constrained by expensive childcare and long full-time working hours in the UK, in comparison with other EU and OECD countries. The fact that so many women work part time also has substantial implications for their current income and future material prosperity: a lower income translates into lower social security contributions and a lower eventual pension pay-out (European Foundation 2012).

The motivations and options differ for women of different income levels, however. A Resolution Foundation survey found Women with higher level qualifications were more likely to say that they had freely chosen to work part time. Among survey respondents with a degree, 76 percent said that working part time was a free choice compared to only 50 percent with no qualifications. Women with higher level qualification are more likely to be in higher income households, putting them in a strong position to freely choose how to balance their work and family commitments. Lower income women were also much more likely to say that they were planning to increase their working hours when their children got older than those on higher incomes (Alakeson 2012: 4).

An Equality and Human Rights Commission Survey found that flexible working is highly valued by fathers for the benefits it brings to family life (EHRC 2009). The survey found that many fathers were also dissatisfied with the amount of time they spent at work and the amount of time they spent with their children. Half of fathers, and particularly those who work long hours, believed they spent too much time at work, while 42 per cent of fathers thought they spent too little time with their children. There is evidence that a significant minority of fathers take advantage of greater flexibility within the workplace, and that this brings benefits to their family lives. However, only 20 per cent thought part-time work was an available option. They more commonly took advantage of flexitime, staggered start and finishing times and working from home. 96 per cent of fathers who were working flexibly valued these arrangements.

**Age dimensions**

An age perspective shows an uneven distribution of working time over an individual’s life course. The highest presence of part-timers shows at the beginning and at the end of people’s working lives, especially for men. These results suggest that part-time work may facilitate, at least in a number of countries, the gradual entry of young persons into the labour market as well as the gradual withdrawal from wage employment for older workers (European Foundation 2007).

Explicit in the Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Inclusive and Sustainable Growth is the aim of retaining older people in the workforce for longer. This becomes a more urgent priority as Europe’s population ages and more pensioners need to be supported by a relatively smaller base of working adults. However, if people are to work for longer, there is a potential need for a more flexible, differentiated pattern of time use over the course of their working lives. Moreover, if more older people are to remain in employment, then work itself must be more sustainable: it must be possible to perform over the long term without suffering either physical harm or mental harm. Working time, its duration and how it is structured, is an important element in this (European Foundation 2012).
Part-time work in non-OECD countries

Although part-time work is not new in industrialised countries, in less developed countries it is less recognised as a category and accordingly there is little information on trends. In the developing world, the category of full-time or part-time is less meaningful as workers perform unreported multiple income-generating jobs to make a living (UN 2001). Considering the case of Chile, Leiva (2000) notes that part-time time employment has no particular status and is an area on which little research has been conducted. National instruments for data collection are not sufficient for measuring part-time work. A major recommendation of her study is the need to improve national data collection tools so that progress can be made in research into this type of employment.

Bóo et al 2009, have, however, investigated the relationship between part-time work and job satisfaction, using a recently fielded household survey in Honduras. They observe that the share of women working part time (i.e. less than 40 hours a week) has increased from 33 percent in the mid-1990s to 43 percent in the early 2000s, and is more prevalent relative to men (27 percent for the period 2002-2004). In contrast to evidence in developed countries, they do not find a preference for part-time work among women, however. Their findings are also consistent with an interpretation of working part-time as luxury consumption.

Research among multinational corporations in India and South Africa suggests that employee demand for flexible work schedules is high, and at comparable levels with Spain, the UK and the US; it is not clear, however, whether and how companies are responding to such demands (Gornick and Hegewisch 2010).

3. Potential benefits of part-time work

Benefits for the individual

Work-life balance

Part-time workers report that their work lives are more compatible with other commitments, probably due to their decreased working times and higher influence over working hours. Between 91 per cent and 93 per cent of those working part time feel that they have a good or very good work-life balance, compared to 80 per cent of those who work more than 34 hours per week. Part-time workers are also in a better position to take an hour or so off work should an emergency arise in their private lives (European Foundation 2012).

Health

The available empirical evidence shows that part-time workers (especially women) report higher levels of general satisfaction with their working conditions than full-time workers (European Foundation 2007).

Part-time workers are also less exposed to a number of hazards (loud noise, vibrations, handling/breathing dangerous substances, and so on). In addition, part-time workers are less exposed to poor ergonomic conditions than full-time workers (repetitive hand/arm movements, painful/tiring positions, carrying/moving heavy loads) (European Foundation 2007).
Dutch evidence also confirms that part-time employees have a lower level of ‘emotional exhaustion’ due to working conditions than full-time employees (European Foundation 2007).

**Working conditions**
Part-timers are generally less at risk of high levels of work intensity. In addition to this, they are much less likely to be in jobs where they have to work to tight deadlines or have insufficient time to do their job. These results explain why part-time workers report less need to work overtime than their full-time counterparts. Part-time workers have slightly more influence over their working hours than full-time workers. Part-timers are also less likely to have their pace of work set by external factors (i.e. demand of customers, work done by colleagues, machine speeds, managers/supervisors’ control). Unforeseen interruptions at work are more prevalent for full-time than part-time workers (European Foundation 2007).

**Benefits for the organisation**

**Responding to market requirements**
Employers favour the development of more flexible forms of employment that may enable them to control labour costs and respond to international competition and fluctuations in demand (European Foundation 2007). Part-time working can provide employers with cheap and flexible labour. It also enables optimal staffing, which can be important in establishments where services are concentrated in a few hours per day, where the workload varies in other forms (by the day or by the week) or where the operating hours are extended. Part-time working avoids paying full-time workers for idle hours (Anxo et al 2007).

Chung et al (2007) argue that the main reason for which companies introduce flexible working time arrangements relates to the cost benefits that can be derived from such practices: companies can reduce costs by quickly adapting to workload as a result of fluctuations in business.

Short-time working schemes seek to compensate workers for reduced income due to lower working hours, thereby providing the employers with greater flexibility (not having to pay workers their full wage, while retaining access to skilled labour) and giving workers security both in terms of their income and their job. Such schemes have been widely seen as successful in mitigating the worst effects of the recession (European Foundation 2012).

**Attracting and retaining employees**
Part-time working may provide a solution to attracting workers to understaffed sectors or workers with specialised skills: for instance, due to the problems with recruitment and retention of nurses within the NHS, Edwards and Robinson (2004: 170, quoted in Lyonette et al 2010) argue that ‘ensuring an adequate supply of qualified nursing staff is patently the most compelling element of a new business case for flexible working arrangements in the NHS’.

Many companies are also responding to workers’ preference for shorter working hours, promoting flexible working arrangements in order to attract and retain good employees. In this they are responding to employees’ preferences. For example, Edwards and Wajcman (2005, cited in Lyonette et al 2010) describe research undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers in which work-life balance,
rather than income, was the main factor in choice of employer for 45 per cent of new graduates worldwide (Anxo et al 2007).

**Efficiency gains/sound business sense**
Research on the impact of employee-initiated alternative work arrangements on employers suggests that such policies may produce considerable benefits for employers by improving retention, reducing absences and increasing performance through enhanced commitment and motivation of individual employees as well as through improved work organisations. The UK government conducted a regulatory impact analysis in preparation for the extension of the Right to Request Flexible Working to employees with children between the age of six and fifteen. The study estimated annual reductions in recruitment costs of £21 million, in absences-related costs of £6 million, and gains in terms of £64 million in terms of enhanced profitability, compared to an estimated £69 million per year of costs to employers resulting from the implementation of the extended flexible working rights, a net benefit of £22 million annually (BERR 2008, cited in Gornick and Hegewisch 2010 – please see the attached paper for more examples of potential benefits).

There is a substantial body of research on the impact of work-life policies on employees’ turnover intention, motivation and commitment. Typically, employees with access to such policies, and with line managers who are supportive, are significantly more likely than those who do not have access to respond that they are not planning to change jobs, and to respond more positively to questions assessing motivation and commitment. While much of this research does not go beyond examining attitudinal data, a small but growing number of studies measure impacts more precisely (Gornick and Hegewisch 2010).

**Benefits for the economy and society**
In terms of the economy, the expansion of several tertiary activities (health and education, sales, hotels and catering, and domestic workers) rely particularly on the use of part-time workers (European Foundation 2007).

A recent report by the New Economics Foundation made a radical proposal to limit the working week to 21 hours (which, it argues, is close to the average people in Britain currently spend in paid work). It argues that growth is not sustainable and that reduced work hours could ‘help to address a range of urgent, interlinked problems: overwork, unemployment, over-consumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities, and the lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each other, and simply to enjoy life’ (NEF 2010: 2). Their three main arguments for considering this are:

- **Safeguarding the planet’s natural resources.** Moving towards a much shorter working week would help break the habit of living to work, working to earn, and earning to consume. People may become less attached to carbon-intensive consumption and more attached to relationships, pastimes, and places that absorb less money and more time.
- **Social justice and well-being for all.** A 21-hour ‘normal’ working week could help distribute paid work more evenly across the population, reducing ill-being associated with unemployment, long working hours and too little control over time. It would make it possible for paid and unpaid work to be distributed more equally between women and men; for parents to spend more time with their children – and to spend that time differently; for people
to delay retirement if they wanted to, and to have more time to care for others, to participate in local activities and to do other things of their choosing.

- **A robust and prosperous economy.** Shorter working hours could help to adapt the economy to the needs of society and the environment, rather than subjugating society and environment to the needs of the economy. Business would benefit from more women entering the workforce; from men leading more rounded, balanced lives; and from reductions in work-place stress associated with juggling paid employment and home-based responsibilities (NEF 2010).

### Potential disadvantages

Whether part-time working really does facilitate a better work-life balance depends to a large extent on the basis on which a part-time job is offered and how such work is structured in an organisation (European Foundation 2012). While it is not the purpose of this paper to dwell on the disadvantages of part-time work, empirical evidence clearly shows that part-time work is associated with several negative working conditions for the individual. These must be highlighted, if only to identify key areas that policies need to address:

- **Hinders career progression:** Part-time workers are less likely to have planning and supervisory responsibilities. In Europe, male and female part-timers with supervisory roles account for 12 per cent and 8 per cent of the total, respectively, whereas these shares are doubled in the case of full-time workers. European Foundation research has found that companies generally do not employ part-time workers in highly qualified positions or in supervisory roles. Downgrading when moving to part-time work affects as many as 29 per cent of women from professional and corporate management jobs, and up to 40 per cent in intermediate-level jobs. Extrapolating from survey evidence, researchers have estimated that 69 per cent of female part-time ‘downgraders’, equivalent to around 1.25 million women in the UK aged 25–54, are ‘stuck’ in jobs below their skill and experience levels (Lyonette et al 2010).

- **Fewer opportunities for training.** Empirical evidence also shows that part-timers are less likely to receive training than full-time workers. Moreover, part-timers with a non-permanent contract are less likely to benefit from training compared with part-timers with a permanent contract (European Foundation 2007). In April-June 2009, the Labour Force Survey showed that, in the UK, of all full-time working women, 34 per cent took part in some education or training in the previous three months, whereas for women working part-time, the figure was only 24 per cent (Lyonette et al 2010).

- **Weaker job tenure:** Part-time workers are more likely than full-time workers to feel that their jobs are not secure. On average, 16 per cent of workers in 2009-2010 strongly agreed with the statement ‘I might lose my job in the next six months’ (European Foundation 2010).

- **Lower salary levels:** Part-timers are more present than full-time workers in the lowest earning groups. Women are most at risk of low pay (47 per cent of women part-time workers fall into the lowest earnings band, compared with 32 per cent of male part-timers). The available empirical evidence also shows that part-time workers are less likely to receive a
fixed salary or wage, and are more likely to be excluded from supplementary payments such as bonuses or premiums (European Foundation 2007).

- **Less access to supplementary payments and social protection benefits**: Part-time workers also suffer discrimination regarding access to social benefits. In a number of EU countries, a minimum number of hours of work within a specified reference period are required to qualify for certain social benefits and entitlements. Thus, part-timers are often excluded or benefit less from certain pension and social protection entitlements (European Foundation 2007; Hegewisch 2009).

- **Poor work-life balance**: One common form of part-time work (used by 35 per cent of companies) is flexible working hours that are fixed only a few days, or in some cases a few hours, in advance according to the company’s needs. This is the least employee-friendly set-up, as it makes planning personal and other responsibilities difficult (European Foundation 2012).

### 4. Successful models and policies

‘The way that establishments use part-time employment is influenced by different policy frameworks and operational principles across countries’ (Anxo et al 2007: vi). Some of these policies are in response to global and regional directives, such as the ILO Convention C175 on Part-time Work, which provides equal treatment in relation to pay, maternity leave, sick pay, vacations, and rules governing termination, and which obliges governments to remove social insurance regulations that disadvantage part-time workers. In some countries, such as the Netherlands and the UK, government policy has used different regulatory approaches to facilitate the expansion of part-time employment (Anxo et al 2007). Apart from being motivated to promote labour market flexibility in general, in some countries, such as Germany and France, there have been significant policy drives focusing on the promotion of part-time employment as a form of job creation or labour market integration targeted at the non-employed (Anxo et al 2007). In some countries, such as Sweden, flexible and part-time working is promoted for particular phases in life, such as during parental leave.

**European Union Policies**

The EU has intervened through legislation to improve employment conditions and the health and safety of workers. The 1993 Working Time Directive, and its subsequent revisions, stipulates that working time policies should ensure a high level of protection of workers’ health and safety in terms of working time, allow for greater flexibility for companies and Member States with regard to the management of working time, ensure a better balance between work and private life, and avoid unreasonable constraints on companies (European Foundation 2012).

Part-time employment is covered by the EU Directive (97/81/EC), implementing the Framework Agreement on Part-time Work, which was signed by the social partners in 1997. Its objectives are to eliminate discrimination against part-time workers; improve the quality of part-time work; facilitate voluntary part-time work; and contribute to the flexible organisation of working time, taking the needs of both employers and workers into account (European Foundation 2012). The Part-time Work Directive urges Member States to set up a legal framework for the equal treatment of part-time
workers by the employment and social protection systems vis-à-vis comparable full-time employees in all aspects of the employment relationship (Hegewisch 2009). Member States have designed several legislative reforms in response, modifying unemployment benefit systems, providing more flexible and part-time retirement measures, and promoting part-time work through collective agreements or extending entitlements to work part-time as a means of reconciling work and family life. The most concerted attempt to develop equal treatment of part-time workers has taken place in the Netherlands (European Foundation 2007).

**National policies**

**The Netherlands**
The Dutch model of part-time employment is considered one of the best practice models across Europe in terms of (a) implementing the principle of equal treatment for part-time workers in working conditions and prospects for career advancement; (b) the penetration of part-time employment into the higher occupational levels and organisational hierarchies; and (c) regulations that establish the right for individual reversibility of working time arrangements between full-time and part-time working (Anxo et al 2007).

Laws supporting this model include the Equal Treatment (Working Hours) Act (*Wet verbod op onderscheid naar arbeidsduur, WOA*), which became law in 1996. It prohibits an employer from discriminating between full-time and part-time employees, unless there is an objective justification for doing so. In February 2000, the Part-time Employment Act (*Deeltijdwet*) was passed, giving employees the right to reduce or increase their working hours, with employers able to deny employee requests for such changes only on the grounds of specific conflicting business interests. The Part-time Employment Act is part of the framework Work and Care Act (*Kaderwet Arbeid en Zorg*), which brings together numerous existing and new leave provisions (such as time off to care for family members), aimed at helping reconcile employment and family care responsibilities. This legislation responds to a trend that was already set in a considerable number of collective agreements (European Foundation 2007).

**UK**
In contrast to the Netherlands, the regulatory protection offered in the UK is much more limited and part-time employment can incur severe penalties: there is a pronounced pay gap between full-time and part-time workers, and a period of part-time employment has a prolonged scarring effect on earnings and labour market advancement (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005, cited in Anxo et al 2007). Part-time employment expanded in the UK during a period when the political emphasis was on deregulated labour market flexibility and when few measures were put in place to regulate the conditions of part-time work (Anxo et al 2007).

However, the UK Right to Request, and Duty to Consider, Flexible Working was introduced in April 2003 to provide employees with parental responsibility for children under the age of six (or 18, if disabled) with a right to request a change in how many hours, when or where they work, and to have such a request seriously considered by their employer. In April 2006, the coverage of this right was extended to employees who care for a dependent adult; a second extension, from April 2009, extends coverage to parents of children under 16. The UK’s Right to Request differs from many other statutes adopted to enhance employee access to workplace flexibility in a number of regards. It limits the right
to employees with young children and disabled children and to employees with care-giving responsibilities for dependent adults. As such, unlike other countries (such as the Netherlands, France, Germany and Belgium) it does not automatically provide a right to flexible working to all employees. It is also important to note that it provides a right to a process for considering a request, not an actual right to an alternative work arrangement. It, does, however adopt a comprehensive approach to flexible work arrangements, including the number of hours worked, the scheduling of hours, and the location of work and, unlike most other statutes, it does not more narrowly focus on part-time work (Hegewisch 2009b).

Various UK surveys show that the availability of flexible work options has increased since the introduction of the Right to Request; that it has been successful in opening access to flexible working options which do not lead to a reduction in salary, such as flexitime; and that both men and women are requesting flexible working, although women are much more likely to make requests for childcare reasons. Part-timers have been particularly likely to (successfully) request flexible working. Court cases help to clarify the boundaries of flexible working rights and can send strong signals to employers about their obligations to facilitate change. Court cases have also successfully challenged employers’ blanket refusals to consider alternative work arrangements or seriously to consider the feasibility of a request (Hegewisch 2009b).

With specific regard to work-life balance, while there has not been any new legislation, the UK and Ireland are the main examples of where there are high profile, developed government initiatives to encourage companies to develop work-life balance policies on a voluntary basis. The emphasis of the UK government’s campaign from 2000/2001 was on promoting the ‘business case’ for work-life balance policies. One merit of this approach is that employers are more likely to develop initiatives if they are aware of the benefits of work-life balance policies for their company, and to design policies tailored to the particular circumstances of their company and workforce. However, the danger of relying upon a voluntary approach is that policies spread unevenly across sectors, particularly where collective bargaining representation is uneven. Work-life balance provisions are therefore often targeted by employers at particular groups of skilled employees for recruitment and retention purposes, with fewer provisions to enable lower status employees to enhance their work-life balance (Fagan 2003).

**France**

In France, since 1992, substantial financial incentives to alleviate social contributions have been offered to employers who hire part-time workers. These incentives combine with other forms of financial incentives offered to employers for their low-wage employees. These measures have contributed to the increase of part-time work at the demand of employers in France. More modest examples, aimed at encouraging unemployed people to take part-time jobs while maintaining their social protection coverage, include the structure of the PPE (*Prime pour l’emploi*) tax credits in France, designed to improve the financial incentives for those who are unemployed to take part-time jobs (Anxo et al, 2007).

**Germany**

The German policy to promote ‘mini jobs’ is perhaps one of the most significant of such policy drives for job creation, whereby nearly seven million mini jobs had been created by May 2006, 70 per cent of
which are taken by women. These jobs involve short, part-time arrangements, which are low paid and not covered by social protection (Anxo et al, 2007).

**Sweden**
In many European countries, parents have a statutory right to work part-time during parental leave periods, or to work reduced hours following parental leave. Sweden has the most generous and flexible parental leave system. In addition, parents can reduce their normal hours to 75 per cent until their child has completed the first year of school. As a result, many mothers in Sweden use these parental entitlements to secure part-time arrangements, with working hours which are typically longer than those worked by mothers in part-time jobs in countries such as the Netherlands, the UK and Germany (Anxo et al, 2007).

**Belgium**
In Belgium, the statutory parental leave provisions are a specific component of a broader statutory package of time credit and ‘career break’ schemes, which include the right for eligible employees to reduce working time to part-time hours for a limited period (either a 50 per cent or 20 per cent reduction in working hours). The 20 per cent reduction in working time (typically from a five-day to a four-day week) is the most popular option for those taking parental leave (Plantenga and Remery, 2005, cited in Anxo et al, 2007).

5. Sources

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**Key websites**
European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions
http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/
European Work and Employment Research Centre
http://research.mbs.ac.uk/european-employment/
International Labour Organisation
http://www.ilo.org

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