

# The labour market: is the unemployment rate a good indicator?

By [Bruno Ducoudré](#) and [Pierre Madec](#)

Considering the euro zone on the one hand and the United States and the United Kingdom on the other, changes in unemployment rates are a reflection of the divergences in growth highlighted in our [last fiscal year forecast](#). While between 2008 and late 2010, trends in unemployment reflected the sharp deterioration in growth and did not differ much between the euro zone, the UK and the USA, differences began to emerge from 2011. In the United Kingdom and the United States, unemployment has been falling since 2011, whereas, after a brief respite, a second phase of rising rates took place in most euro zone countries (Table 1). It was only more recently that the unemployment rate has really begun to fall in Europe (late 2013 in Spain and early 2015 in France and Italy). Overall, for the period 2011-2015 the rate rose overall (+2.7 points) in Spain. In Italy, this deterioration in the labour market even worsened (+4.5 points in this period, against +2.2 points from early 2007 to late 2010). France, though to a lesser extent, was not spared.

An analysis of the unemployment rate does not however convey the full dynamics at work in the labour market (Tables 2 and 3), in particular in terms of underemployment. Thus during the crisis most European countries reduced the effective working time [\[1\]](#) to a greater or lesser degree, through policies on partial unemployment, the reduction of overtime, or the use of working-time accounts, but also through the expansion of part-time work (especially in Italy and Spain), including on an involuntary basis. Conversely, the favourable trend in the US labour market is partly due to a significant decline in the

participation rate, which stood in the first quarter of 2015 at 62.8%, 3.3 points lower than eight years ago.

**Table 1. Changes in the ILO unemployment rate**

In % points

	Q1 2007 - Q4 2010	Q1 2011 - Q1 2015	Q1 2007 - Q1 2015
Germany	-2.4	-1.4	-4.2
Spain	12.1	2.7	+15.0
France	0.7	1.3	+1.9
Italy	2.2	4.5	+6.4
United Kingdom	2.4	-2.2	0.0
United States	5.0	-3.5	+1.1

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations.

**Table 2. Changes in the labour force participation rate**

In % points

	Q1 2007 - Q4 2010	Q1 2011 - Q1 2015	Q1 2007 - Q1 2015
Germany	+1.5	+0.7	+2.2
Spain	+1.3	-0.7	+0.7
France	+0.5	+1.3	+1.8
Italy	+0.1	+1.8	+1.9
United Kingdom	-0.2	+1.3	+1.1
United States	-1.9	-1.4	-3.3

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations.

**Table 3. Changes in working time**

In %

	Q1 2007 - Q4 2010	Q1 2011 - Q1 2015	Q1 2007 - Q1 2015
Germany	-2.0	-2.1	-4.1
Spain	+0.5	-3.5	-3.0
France	-0.9	-0.8	-1.7
Italy	-2.9	-2.4	-5.3
United Kingdom	-0.9	+1.4	+0.5
United States	-0.7	+0.8	+0.1

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations; Scope: total employment.

In order to measure the impact of these adjustments (working time and participation rate) on unemployment, it is possible, subject to a number of assumptions [\[21\]](#), to calculate the unemployment rate at constant employment and control for these adjustments. Except for the United States, where the participation rate has fallen sharply since 2007, all the countries studied experienced an increase in their labour force (employed + unemployed) that was greater than in the general population; in many countries this was due to pension

reforms. Mechanically, in the absence of job creation, the impact of this demographic trend is to push up the unemployment rate in the countries concerned. For instance, if the participation rate had remained at its 2007 level, the unemployment rate would be lower by 1.6 points in France and 1.1 points in Italy (Table 4). Conversely, without the significant contraction in the US labour force, the unemployment rate would have been more than 3 points higher than what was seen in 2015. Also note that since the crisis Germany has experienced a significant drop in unemployment (-4.2 points) even though its participation rate grew by 2.2 points. Assuming an unchanged participation rate, Germany's unemployment rate would be 3.1% (Figure 1).

In terms of working time, the lessons seem quite different. It thus appears that if working time had been maintained in all the countries at its pre-crisis level, the unemployment rate would have been more than 3 points higher in Germany and Italy and about 1 point higher in France and Spain, countries in which working time decreased sharply only from 2011. In the US and UK, the situation is very different: working time has changed only very little since the crisis. By controlling for working time, the unemployment rate thus changes along the lines observed in the two countries.

The tendency for working time to fall is a familiar story. Since the late 1990s, all the countries studied have greatly reduced their working hours. In Germany, between 1998 and 2008, the reduction was on average 0.6% per quarter. In France, the transition to the 35-hour week caused a similar reduction over the period. In Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States, the downward shifts in average working hours were respectively -0.3%, -0.4% and -0.3% per quarter. In total, between 1998 and 2008, working time fell by 6% in Germany and France, 4% in Italy, 3% in the United Kingdom and the United States and 2% in Spain, which was *de facto* the only country that during the crisis intensified the decline in

working time that started in the late 1990s.

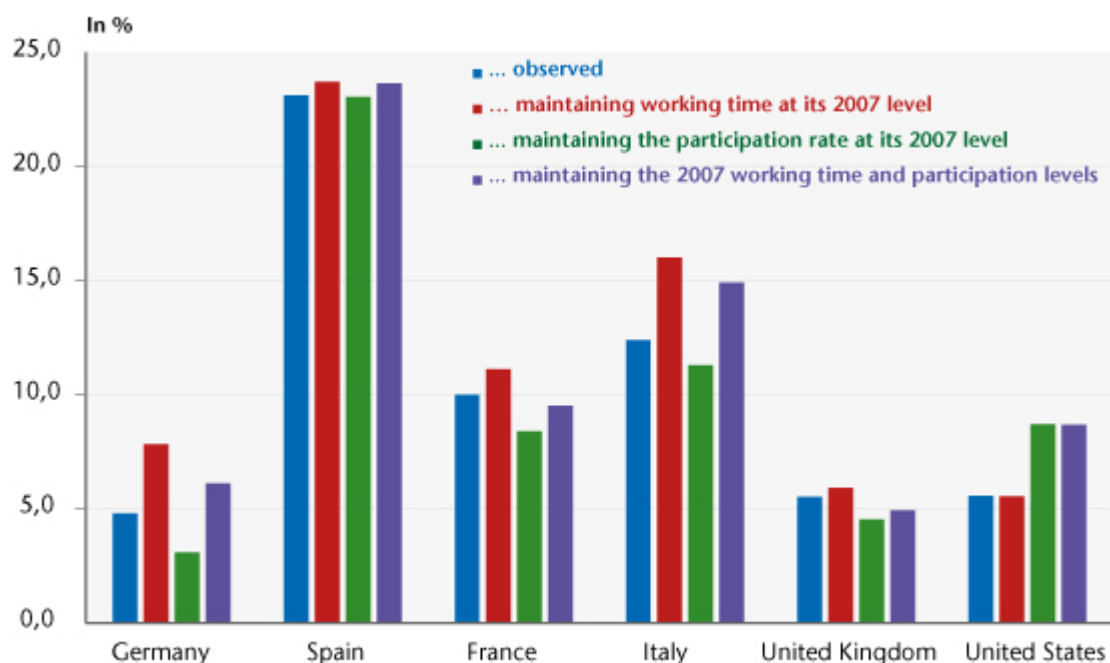
**Table 4. Difference between the unemployment rate observed in the first quarter 2015 and the unemployment rate observed in case of ...**

In %

	... maintaining working time at its 2007 level	...maintaining the participation rate at its 2007 level	...maintaining the 2007 participation rate and working time levels
Germany	+3.1	-1.7	+1.4
Spain	+1.0	-0.1	+0.9
France	+1.2	-1.6	-0.4
Italy	+3.6	-1.1	+1.5
United Kingdom	0.0	-1.0	-1.0
United States	0.0	+3.1	+3.1

Sources : National accounts, OFCE calculations.

**Figure 1. Unemployment rate in first quarter 2015 in the case of ...**



Sources : National accounts, OFCE calculations; Scope: total employment.

[1] Working time is understood here as the total number of hours worked by employees and the self-employed (i.e. total

employment).

[\[2\]](#) It is assumed that, at constant use, a one-point increase in the participation rate leads to an increase in the unemployment rate. Employment and working time are not considered here in full-time equivalents. Finally, neither the “halo of unemployment” nor any possible “bending effects” are taken into account.

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## Women's Day

On the occasion of 8 March, we would like to remind our readers that, together with Sciences-Po, the OFCE has developed the specialist Research Programme for Teaching and Knowledge on Gender Issues ([PRESAGE](#)).

A number of posts on this blog have taken up the subject of [occupational equality between men and women](#).

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## Competitiveness at the expense of equality?

By [Hélène Périvier](#)

Working time has made its appearance in the presidential

campaign, and the idea that people work less in France than elsewhere is gaining ground. This is the subject of a report by [COE-Rexecode](#), which unfortunately does not take into account the sexual division of labour.

The employment policies being implemented by European governments are not, however, gender neutral, and ignoring this gives a distorted view of the reality of how work is divided up in our economies: an integrated approach to equality (or “gender mainstreaming”), which requires thinking about the differential effects of public policies on women and men, is far from automatic.

The counteranalysis to the Coe-Rexecode report proposed by [Eric Heyer and Mathieu Plane](#) emphasises the importance of not just looking at full-time workers when trying to compare working hours and their impact on the labour market dynamics of the major European countries. Indeed, part-time workers represent 26% of all employees in Germany, against 18% in France, so it is misleading to exclude them from the analysis.

It is well known that the distribution of full-time and part-time jobs is gender-biased: throughout Europe, women work part-time more than men do. While in France about 30% of women employees work part-time, the rate is 45% in Germany, and in both countries the part-time rate for men is below 10%. The gendered nature of part-time work is a factor in inequality: recall for example that in France working time explains about half of the wage gap between men and women (see in particular [Ponthieux, Meurs](#)). The issue of working time is central to the promotion of occupational equality.

According to the methodological note to the Coe-Rexecode report, “The annual data provided by Eurostat and published by Coe-Rexecode in the paper, “La durée effective du travail en France et en Europe” [“Average effective working time in France and in Europe”] are the only data on average annual hours of work that is comparable between European countries.”

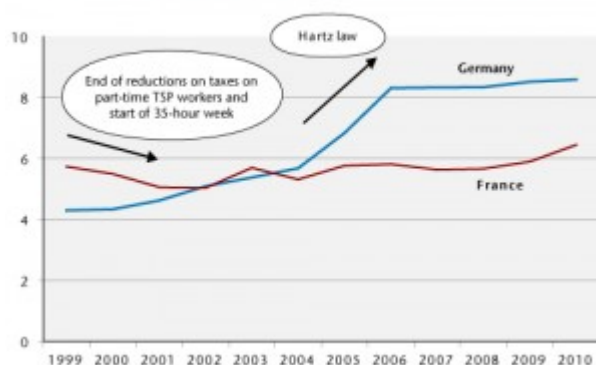
It is unfortunate that in its order to Eurostat, Rexecode did not see fit to ask for a gender breakdown of its data. This would have provided a cost-effective way of determining trends in working hours by gender in both countries. Despite this omission, is there anything that can be said about changes in working hours from a gender perspective in the two countries during the last decade, based on the data available to us? How were the adjustments in the labour market divided between women and men?

The changes over the period studied are instructive in terms of the employment policy approaches adopted in the two countries. In the early 2000s, the introduction of the 35-hour work week in France put an end to the reductions in charges that had made hiring part-time workers attractive and which had been driving the ramp-up of part-time employment in France, without significantly affecting the employment conditions of men. Since then, the rate of part-time employment has been stable for women as well as for men (see figure). In Germany, the implementation of the Hartz law (effective as of April 2003) introduced “mini-jobs” [\[1\]](#), which basically meant the creation of part-time precarious employment. This affected both men and women, but while the part-time rate of German men rose by 4.3 points, the rate of German women rose by 8.2 points (Figure). German women were thus significantly more affected by part-time employment than were German men, or French women. Furthermore, the average working time for part-time jobs was slightly over 4 hours less in Germany than in France (according to the Eurostat data).

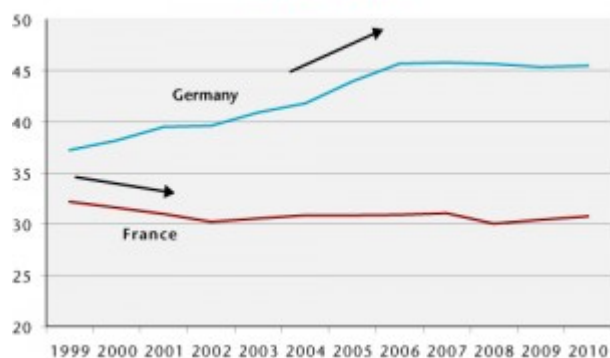
French women were of course more affected by the increase in part-time work than were French men, but this increase has been limited, since new part-time jobs accounted for only 21% of the total jobs created between 1999 and 2010. In contrast, in Germany, part-time work has been the driving force in employment during the period, with German women being the main ones concerned by the individual reduction of working time:

they represent 70% of the battalion of part-time workers added during this period. Thus, not only did France create more jobs than Germany between 1999 and 2010, but the choice of a collective rather than an individual approach to reducing working time led to a more balanced distribution of employment between men and women.

Change in the rate of part-time work among men aged 15-64 (in %)



Change in the rate of part-time work among women aged 15-64 (in %)



Source : Eurostat [\[lfsa\\_eppga\]](#)

Share of part-time jobs in the growth of employment between 1999 and 2010 in France and Germany, by sex

	Change in employment	Share of part-time jobs in the growth of employment	Share of female part-time jobs in the growth of employment
Germany	6,1	130	93 (or 70 % of 130 %)
France	12,2	21	15 (or 76 % of 21 %)

Source : Eurostat [lfsa\_eppga].

# Working hours and economic performance: What lessons can be drawn from the Coe-Rexecode report?

By [Eric Heyer](#) and [Mathieu Plane](#)

Do people work less in France than in the rest of Europe? Is France the only country to have reduced working hours in the last decade? Is the 35-hour work week really dragging down the French economy? The report published on 11 January by the [Coe-Rexecode](#) Institute provides fresh material for answering these questions.

We have produced [a note on the main conclusions of the report](#), which can be summarized as follows:

## **1. People work fewer hours in France than in the rest of Europe.**

- TRUE for full-time employees,
- FALSE for part-time employees,
- FALSE for non-salaried employees,
- UNDETERMINED for the total.

## **2. Working hours have fallen more in France than in Germany over the last 10 years.**

- FALSE

## **3. “The shorter work week has failed to meet the goal of job creation and work-sharing” in France.**

- FALSE

## **4. “The shorter work week has undermined per capita purchasing power” in France.**

- FALSE