

Part-time work

By [Françoise Milewski](#)

Part-time work as a share of total employment has increased significantly. This increase was limited in the 1970s and then accelerated in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s. During the 2000s and early 2010s, changes in the long-term trend were less pronounced. Overall, the share of part-time work more than doubled in the last forty years and now accounts for nearly one-fifth of employment.

This development is the result of a number of social and economic trends. It reflects both changes in the labour market – growth in the tertiary sector to the detriment of industry and the proliferation of categories of employment – and inequalities between women and men. It is also the fruit of public policy.

Part-time jobs are occupied mostly by women. They are also predominantly held by employees aged 25 to 49, although a trend towards part-time work has emerged among seniors. Part-time jobs are usually low-skilled. Although these jobs often involve working 15 to 29 hours a week, working times can vary greatly, with a trend towards a greater portion of shorter work weeks. Part-time employees generally are not on fixed-term contracts, so it is a stable form of employment. Whether monthly or hourly, wages are low, and part-time employees are overrepresented among minimum wage and low-wage workers. Work schedules that are atypical and which can involve multiple shifts, with fluctuating unpredictable schedules, generally mean poorer working conditions.

Part-time work is heterogeneous in terms of both the reasons given by employees who may request it as well as the ways businesses are organized in different economic sectors. There are thus multiple logics involved in part-time work (which in

French leads to use of the term “des temps partiels” to account for this multiplicity).

The development of the service sector has spurred the increase in part-time work. Part-time jobs in sectors such as retailing and distribution, hotels and catering, cleaning, personal services and some public services are predominantly occupied by women. This reflects the type of training women have acquired, stereotypes about the natural aptitude they supposedly have to care for others, and their overrepresentation in low or unskilled work. The tradeoffs women make between work and family tasks reinforce these trends, either because full-time work seems incompatible, or because after parental leave they prolong the reduction in work that they have experienced. After an extended leave, it can sometimes be very difficult to reintegrate the world of work.

Increasing labour flexibility in recent decades has reinforced these trends. The multiplication of forms of employment has affected women in particular, both because they work mainly in the sectors that have been at the origin of this trend and because women are at a disadvantage in the labour market and more readily accept poorly paid jobs.

During certain periods public policy has favoured part-time employment while at others it has sought to limit its impact. At the junction between employment-related goals and family-related goals, policy has sometimes suffered from being inconsistent.

There are sometimes significant differences between countries within the European Union, as a result of specific historical developments, different social consensuses, and specific regulations on the labour market.

Analyzing the current situation and identifying the changes underway provides a glimpse of the potential changes to come

and thus fuels debate about these developments and their implications for policy makers. Do part-time work and full-time work develop according to the same dynamics? Is there a trend within part-time work towards greater flexibility, or less? To what extent is women's autonomy being challenged by the development of part-time work as a stable form of employment? Is part-time work a form of underemployment or a way of getting into the labour market and full-time work? All of these are questions that influence the development of public policy^[1].

For further information, read the [*OFCE Note, no. 38 of 13 December 2013*](#).

^[1] This article summarizes a study by the Labor and Employment section of the Conseil économique, social et environnemental [Economic, Social and Environmental Council], "Part-time work ," Françoise Milewski , Les Editions des Journaux officiels, December 2013, forthcoming.