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Flexible Working Time Arrangements in Belgium

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1. Introduction

In Belgium and its regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels), the policy discussion on the flexibility of work has mainly been focused on the flexible succession of periods of part-time and full-time work during the life course. The policy discussion on flexible working hours and other forms of flexibility, comparable with the Dutch “customised working project” is more situated on an organisational and sector level.

Part-time work

In 2010, in Belgium the proportion of working women (working at least one hour) aged 20-64 was 61,6%, while the proportion of working men was 73,5%. Due to different economic circumstances, there is a difference between Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia:

Proportion of women working in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels (age 20-64, LFS, 2010)

	Women	Men
Flanders	66,7%	77,4%
Wallonia	55,5%	68,9%
Brussels	52,5%	66,1%

There has been a considerable increase in the participation rate of women over the past decades, while the participation rate of men remained stable. Compared to the Netherlands, the female participation rate in Belgium is lower, both for men and women, especially in Wallonia and Brussels. Part-time work is more widespread in the Netherlands than in Belgium: in 2010 8,4% of the men and 42,1% of the women worked part-time in Belgium (compared to 24,2% of the Dutch male and 76,2% of the Dutch female workers). The situation in Flanders and Wallonia is similar, while the proportion of female part-time workers in Brussels is lower than in the other regions.

Proportion of part-time work in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels (age 15-64, LFS, 2010)

	Women	Men
Flanders	43,5%	8,2%
Wallonia	42,6%	8,1%
Brussels	30,8%	11,1%

Part-time work is influenced by the family situation of the female workers: in Flanders for example, more than 60% of the women with a partner and 3 or more children work part-time. The average working weekly working hours of Dutch women working part-

time is lower (19,7 hours a week in 2008) than the average weekly working hours of Belgian women (23,5 hours a week).¹

Flexible work

A 2004 time use survey revealed that 10,9% of workers in Flanders worked at least one day a week from home. So, the share of 'substantial telehomeworkers' is less than in the Netherlands. In Wallonia, telework is less used than in Flanders (Regarding temporal flexibility a report of Meulders and O'Dorchai (2008) states that in 2004 67% of Belgian men and 70% of Belgian women start and end work at a fixed time. The remaining proportion of the work force has some form of flexibility in working hours: 7.8% of men and 7.6% of women can start and end their day within a time band; 6,4% of men and 7,2% of women starts and ends at varying hours because they have settled an agreement with their employer; 5,2% of men and 2,1% of women are free to determine their work schedule without any formal boundaries and, finally, 10% of male and 8.9% of female workers have the option to bank working time in order to take either hours or full days off in compensation afterwards.

Flexible childcare to align with demand-side flexibility

In the discussion paper, flexibility has mainly been discussed as an advantage for workers. But, the increase in atypical and flexible work can also be explained by demand side trends, i.e. increased competition, just-in-time production, and the tertiarisation of the economy. This demand-side flexibility complicates instead of facilitates the combination of work and family life. Atypical work does not rule out very long working days/weeks, staggered working hours and a higher frequency of weekend work.

In Flanders, there are some pilot projects to align childcare facilities both for pre-school and school aged children with these demand-side forms of flexibility. The debate on the desirability of this policy is still ongoing.

2. Policy debate

From redistribution of labour....

The Belgian policy has not been to promote part-time work as a long term career option, but instead to offer workers who work full-time the possibility to work less during a certain period of their working life or to stop working during a certain period. The aim is to keep women with caring responsibilities in the labour force instead of leaving the labour market. This is combined with an extensive system of childcare facilities and a subsidised system to outsource household work². In 2006, about 30% of 0-2 year olds were covered by formal child care provisions. However, there are considerable differences between the regions: in Flanders, 34.2 %, in the French community this was only 23.4% (Meulders & O'Dorchai, 2008a). In recent years, we see also in Flanders a shortage of pre-school childcare provisions. Moreover, the federal

¹ The statistics are based on the labour force survey, compiled by Steunpunt WSE (www.steunpuntwse.be)

²² The communities (and not the federal government) are responsible for the policy regarding childcare.

subsidised system of household work also comes under pressure due to budgetary problems.

Next to the three thematic leave systems (the parental leave system, leave for medical assistance and palliative leave) that are limited to certain categories of workers, for example parents of younger children, there are a number of other leave systems that are not tied to certain conditions of life, a system that is unique in Europe. Workers who take up these leaves get an allowance from the federal government. The Flemish Government offers an extra incentive, but there is no extra incentive in Wallonia. On the one hand, these systems are intended to allow for a better combination of work and family life and on the other hand, they must make it easier for older workers to remain active on the labour market.

The extensive system of career breaks in Belgium was first introduced in 1985 in a context of high unemployment rates. It was initially established as a policy instrument to redistribute labour since each leave taker had to be replaced by an unemployed person (Vandeweyer & glorieux, 2010). The system was reformed in 2002 and the emphasis shifted towards (1) the reconciliation of work and family life and (2) the prolongation of the working life, given the early actual retirement age in Belgium.

... to quality of work

Like in the Netherlands and other EU-countries, the current debate on flexibility, part-time work and female participation rates has been framed in a broader debate on the increase of labour market participation rates. Labour market policy is mainly situated on the level of the communities. In Flanders, for example, the Flemish social partners and the Flemish government have made it a priority to prolong people's working life and to increase participation rates. This was agreed in the so-called "Toekomstpact voor Vlaanderen 2020" [Pact on the Future of Flanders 2020]. The goal for the female participation rate in 2020 is 75%. To achieve the ambition to increase the labour market participation the social partners and the Flemish government set targets to increase the quality of work as a means to attract and retain people. Moreover, they are convinced that a better quality of working life leads to better organisational performance. This focus on the quality of work is less evident in the description of the Dutch case, where the economic advantages for organisations and society at large are more on the foreground of the debate.

To assess the progress, a quality of work monitor was developed and administered three times already (2004-2007-2010). The combination of work and family life is one of the four indicators in this monitor. According to the monitor around 10% of employees experience a problematic combination of work and family life, a number that is relatively constant. Not surprisingly, women experience more problems than men. Unfortunately, there are no measures for flexibility included in this monitor.

The Walloon region has its "Marshall plan pour la Wallonie". The second version of this plan contains a chapter on the reconciliation of work and wellbeing. The main objective of this chapter is the creation of extra child care places.

Ongoing discussions

In Belgium, there is a strong tradition of a social dialogue between the government, the labour unions and the employer organisations. The career break system has been anchored in collective labour agreements. However, since its start in the 80-s, the

career break system has been criticised for its budgetary consequences (Vandeweyer & Glorieux, 2010). The recent economic and financial crisis, together with a large increase in the number of people who opt for career breaks, has intensified this debate. However, career breaks aimed at balancing work and family life generally seem to be more accepted than career breaks by older workers.

3. Transferability issues

The aim of the Dutch good practice is to “stimulate women (particularly those holding part-time jobs of less than 24 hours per week) to extend their working hours“. This has to date not been the goal of the policy in Belgium, where the increase in the participation rate of women has been the main focus. At the same time, the Belgian policies aimed at achieving a better balance between work and family mainly focus on career breaks. These policies are focused on women and men who are already active on the labour market. The Dutch policies used to increase the number of working hours in the Netherlands, could be potentially more interesting to make labour force participation more attractive to women. More attention to the integration of flexible working can be used to achieve the quality of work targets set by the Flemish government in Horizon 2020.

4. Issues for debate

- Communities of practice on the implementation of work-life policies in organisations

From a business case perspective it has been expected that work-life policies or flexible work arrangements can have a positive impact on individual work outcomes, e.g. job satisfaction, retention and organisational commitment, because they reduce work-life conflict. These policies have emerged as a way for organisations to attract and retain the best qualified employees in a labor market characterised by a growing number of qualified women and dual career couples with caring responsibilities. Nonetheless, few research is available on the hypothesised link between work-life policies, work-life conflict and individual work outcomes. It has been argued that the individual outcomes are likely to depend heavily on the way formal work-life policies are actually implemented in organisations (Ollier-Malaterre, 2010) and in particular on how this implementation is perceived by employees (Mc Donald et al, 2007). The mere presence of the opportunity to work part-time may not lead employees to be more motivated or satisfied with their job. The policy's effectiveness is likely to depend on, among others, the supervisor's support for the policy, the consequences on the individual of making use of this opportunity (e.g. lower career opportunities), and the way the individual's workload is handled (e.g. spreading the workload among the co-workers or new employees). In Belgium, for example, the career consequences of part-time work are heavy. In general, there is no acceptance of part-time work in managerial functions. Communities of practice of human resource experts could help discuss these implementation issues. Awards, like in the Dutch good practice, are useful when organisations are convinced of the business case of flexible working, but there is always the danger of “doing the documents instead of doing the policy”.

- Social dialogue on different kinds of flexibility

An important prerequisite to achieve the goals of improving the balance between working life and private life is an intensive debate between unions and employer organisations, on the reconciliation between demand-side and supply-side flexibility. Flexible work in part reproduces the gender gap in employment in terms of income, working conditions, social security rights, etc. as well as labour market segregation both between men and women and between atypical and traditional workers. A policy debate on the use of flexible work to increase the participation rates of women has to include a debate on the downside of this from an equal opportunities perspective.

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