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Justice

Exchange of good practices on gender equality

New forms of work

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Summary report

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1. The good practice of the host country

The Dutch labour market is characterised by the 'one-and-a-half-earner' model, with most men holding full-time or long part-time jobs (23% in 2010) and a large majority of women (72% in 2010) holding part-time jobs, with an average of only 25 working hours per week, relative to the EU27 average of 34 hours. The one and a half earner model supported women's part time employment. But this model becomes inadequate to tackle the current challenges posed by ageing trends and increased international competition.

With the prospect of future labour shortages, coupled with mobility and environmental issues, there is a new need to increase, on the one hand, the working hours of women in their jobs and, on the other hand, the time spent by men in unpaid care activities. There is also a growing demand for organisational and employment flexibility, as well as for more innovative cost reduction strategies in companies.

In the current debate, flexible working is viewed as a way to answer these challenges and as a 'win-win' strategy for organisations, employees and society at large. It is expected to reduce overhead costs by increasing efficiency in the use of resources, such as time, energy and buildings, to lower absenteeism and to increase the job satisfaction of workers.

The recent Dutch Gender Equality Policy Plan 2011-2015 introduces the *Nieuwe Werken* (**New Forms of Work**) programme supporting a new work philosophy and management practice. All kinds of flexible working are involved: part-time work, flexi-time, tele-(home)working and intensified use of ICT, allowing employees to potentially work outside of centralised workplaces. The adopted approach is focussed on individual scheduling, with workers gaining more control over "how, where, when, with what and with whom to work". This approach is supported by a **legal framework** which states the right for workers to make agreements on their working hours, for example by asking for a reduction or an increase in their working time.

To motivate companies to adopt this new approach, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science's launched the '**Customised Working**' initiative in April 2011. The aim of this is to promote a new business culture in the private and public sectors and a cultural shift in the social perceptions of men's and women's roles in society, by supporting their participation in work and care activities. This Initiative is carried out through the implementation of communication initiatives, including a *Quality Mark Award* named "The Modern Employer", similar to what is done in other countries, and a magazine addressed to mothers and fathers (*Lof Magazine*). It also includes the support of a consultancy company and the creation of a learning centre, as well as an interactive web site providing counselling services and tool kits to employers and employees.

The *Lof Magazine* is aimed at raising awareness on the benefits of increasing working time among mothers, fathers and companies, by changing role models and shifting the attention from work life balance to work life integration. The *Quality Mark Award* is meant to reward those employers at the forefront in implementing flexible work arrangements to support their employees in creating their own balance of work, family and care. It aims to stimulate employers and human resource managers to adopt and foster flexible working and a healthy work-life balance as an integral part of companies' organisational objectives. Employers awarded the quality mark of 'The Modern

Employer' are selected by an independent committee of government representatives, employers and trade unions (on a range of 1 to 5 stars, with 5 being excellent). After three years the rewarded organisations are re-assessed. Each year, employers should monitor achievements and, if necessary, further develop their policies and practices. The award is considered an incentive for organisations to address human resource improvements and gender equality issues. This increases the visibility and reputation of the awarded companies which become more able to distinguish themselves from competitors and to attract the best qualified workers in a labour market characterised by an increasing scarcity of skills. Moreover, it may also have indirect spill over effects on other companies and act as an incentive to the development of innovative human resource management practices.

In 2011, 80 companies participated to the programme and three companies (TNO, Microsoft and Achmea) were awarded the Quality Mark in October 2011. In 2012, 750 companies should follow and the goal is to award more than 1,000 organisations over the next three years. The ultimate aim is that the award will become a 'must have' for companies.

Other Dutch programmes support flexible arrangements regarding employee control over time, place and duration of work:

- The '**Work & Informal Care**' initiative established in 2007 encourages companies to adopt work-life initiatives supporting workers with care responsibilities. The network is subsidised by the national government and is promoted by the Dutch national association for carers and voluntary help, with the technical support of a consultancy firm.
- The '**Taskforce Mobility Management**' was also established in 2007 by the social partners, local governments and business representatives. Among measures aimed at environment protection, the Taskforce provided a platform to coordinate, support and stimulate the promotion of teleworking due to its potential effects on reducing traffic mobility. The aim is one million teleworkers in 2012. Local initiatives supported by provinces and municipalities promote new ways to work by giving (free) information, advice and financial support to companies to introduce more flexible working and setting out their mobility plans in order to reduce traffic congestion. The social partners are also encouraged to include teleworking in collective labour agreements (CLAs).

Assessment of the measures

The Dutch discussion paper¹ assesses the measures adopted by the Dutch government on flexible work.

- "Flexi-time"

According to the paper, a growing number of Dutch workers have control over the structure of their daily working hours: in 2010 35% worked flexibly and 75% of these had *flexi-time* (i.e. a say in the timing of their working hours). In addition, 60% of those who did not work flexibly would be inclined to take up flexitime, should the opportunity arise. The (limited) data available show that employees are generally

¹ Pascale Peters (2011), Flexible Working Time Arrangements - Discussion Paper, The Netherlands. http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/tools/good-practices/review-seminars/new_forms_of_work_en.htm

satisfied with this flexible work practice, as it results in better work-life balance. Also, employers tended to gain higher efficiency and flexibility from this practice.

- Teleworking

Teleworking is also widespread: in 2010 almost one third of Dutch workers (including those working for less than 12 hours per week) teleworked at least one hour per week. Men are given more access to teleworking than women and research has shown that teleworking is more often used by highly educated men (either married or cohabiting) with children and long commuting hours to work. The highest percentage of teleworkers is among employees working in the ICT sector (47%), whereas only a relatively low percentage (7%) of employees in the health-care sector did some teleworking.

The evaluation of the activities of the Taskforce Mobility Management revealed that telework arrangements are still little addressed in collective labour agreements, even if increasing: in 2009 only 22% of the collective labour agreements under study (covering 15% of workers) mentioned telework arrangements, up from 6% in 2007. Most of these agreements are in the public sector or non-governmental organisations.

According to the discussion paper flexible working time could be a *win-win* strategy both for employers and employees also from a *gender equality perspective*. The results of various studies show that flexible working arrangements enable women to:

- gain more control over their working time;
- work longer hours;
- improve their labour market opportunities; and
- increase their economic independence in a context of growing divorce rates and lone motherhood.

Furthermore flexi work appears to be preferred both by workers and by companies over long-term parental leave as a work-life balance strategy, because it reduces the negative effects of long parental leave on careers' development.

The paper also presents the *shortcomings* associated with flexible working times which may penalise women more than men. Women, younger workers and the lower educated are less likely to access working time flexibility than men. Furthermore, flexible work environments are often very demanding and may lead to involuntary flexible working, due to its possible negative consequences such as: long working hours, work-home conflict, unpredictable working hours, and permanent availability. Evaluation results show, indeed, that 40% of Dutch employees do not want flexible work.

In this respect, initiatives such as the 'Customised Working' could be important to monitor the gender effects of flexible working practices and penalise organisations if they fail to improve their policies and practices in a gender equality perspective. However, whether organisations are responsive to this persuasive approach is not known yet.

Achmea (an insurance company which won the Quality Mark Award in 2011) and Microsoft presented their concrete experiences with customised working. They

emphasised that a cultural shift is needed meaning more trust between employer and employee, more mutual flexibility leading to better business outcomes. Their experience with this new approach resulted in:

- improved relations with unions and employee-representatives;
- higher workers' satisfaction and productivity;
- longer service hours;
- reduction of the fixed costs associated with office space and of commuting costs, due to the greater diffusion of tele (home) working;
- increased visibility and reputation of the companies, thanks to the award.

However, the presentations showed that the companies give little attention to the consequences for women and men of new HR practices. The new forms of work are mainly seen as a way to increase labour productivity and reduce fixed costs. In this respect the difficulties of ICT companies in attracting women may be related to the very long working hours prevalent in the sector. Moreover the requirement of total availability which often entails unpredictability of working time and blurring boundaries between work and family life makes those jobs also less attractive for women.

2. The situation in the countries participating in the seminar

The degree of acceptance of flexible work is very different across European countries. Especially in Southern, Eastern and candidate countries, flexible work and teleworking are less widespread than in the Netherlands, and the work-life balance has been mainly dealt with part-time jobs and parental leaves. However, part-time work is largely involuntary in these countries, due to the low income and marginality associated with it. Women's segregation in part time jobs is considered as a negative effect of these policies rather than a way to improve their work-life balance.

Part time work

In all the countries participating in the seminar part time work has been traditionally supported by governments to raise women's participation and employment rates. However, in many of them (e.g. France, Portugal, Spain and Eastern and candidate countries) part time working is largely involuntary, often associated with short hours and marginal, low paid jobs, with a higher incidence among low skilled women and those with family care obligations. Furthermore, in most countries part time jobs display a higher hourly gender pay gap than full time jobs, leading to lower social and pension benefits. Part timers are also often seen by employers as lacking commitment and this can result in lower career opportunities.

As in the Netherlands, recent trends in most of the participating countries show *an increasing public support to long part time and/or full time employment for women* to reduce the poverty risk and help avoid the labour shortages which may derive from an ageing population. However, the recent economic and financial crisis is dampening this trend due to the lack of resources for care services and the need to reduce working hours as a way to tackle the employment effects of the crisis. This has occurred for

example in **Slovenia**, where the number of workers on reduced time has increased with the crisis, following a policy measure aimed at reducing working hours in order to preserve jobs.

There are large differences across countries in the incidence of *voluntary part time work*. In the Netherlands, the proportion of women working part-time involuntarily is very low (less than 10 per cent), and 24 hours is the preferred average working week. In many of the participating countries part time is, however, often involuntary. Most often part time is not widely accepted by workers (even women) because of the low income associated with it. For example in **Spain** part-time is not a voluntary decision in 52% of the cases and it is not considered as a measure to improve work-life balance or a flexible use of time but rather a way of entering the labour market. In **France** one third of part timers would like to hold a full time job and the quality of part time jobs is very heterogeneous. In the public sector and in the financial sector, it is often voluntary and reversible, with long (80% of a full-time) and regular hours. This type of good quality part time represents about one third of all part time jobs. In **Austria** the average hourly wage of women with part-time jobs is 14% less than that of women working full time and in many countries the low income associated with part time jobs explains why it is not considered favourable by workers and unions.

In countries which moved from a centrally planned economy to the free market, the acceptance of part time jobs is even lower due to the low wages and the worsening of women's position in the labour market that occurred during the transition from the socialist period. In recent years, the proportion of women either working part time involuntarily or working with temporary contracts or not working at all has increased. In **Croatia**, for example, the principal reason for part-time employment is a lack of full time work, and higher part time employment may therefore indicate higher involuntary underemployment in the country. In **Estonia**, only 27.3% of those working part time do so by choice and about half of the people working part time are obliged to do so for reasons beyond their control². Moreover 67% of employees who would like to shorten their working hours do not do so because lower income would not be sufficient for living.

In **Southern and Eastern European** countries the lower acceptance of part time working is shared by workers and employers, the latter put off by higher organisational costs (especially for SMEs) and in some countries higher labour costs. The reluctance of employers to provide part-time jobs and the lack of affordable care facilities explain why in some of these countries women with children tend to drop out of employment. For example in the **Czech Republic** the employment rate of women aged 20-49 without children is almost 50 percentage points higher than that of women with children under six years of age³.

The *two full time earners model* is increasingly predominating in many of the participating countries such as **Estonia, Croatia, Iceland, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden and Slovenia**. This results in low gender gap in what concerns participation and employment rates even for women with children. In **Estonia**, the average working week is 37 hours for women and 49 for men. In **Serbia** many women prefer to work overtime to increase labour income. In **Portugal** the dual earner model is prevalent and 80% of women work full time without dropping out after childbirth. Constraints to the development of flexi time include low wages, traditional work organisation and industrial relations systems. Only 3 out of 72 collective agreements have included the regulation of flexible working time. In **Sweden** the strong increase in the participation and employment rates of women between end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1990s

² Data from 2005.

³ Data from 2009.

was associated with an increase in part time work, largely driven by labour shortages but also by the growing acceptance for female labour in general and women in part-time work in particular. Part-time work is still common in Sweden but the average hours per week have gradually increased and the two breadwinner model is widespread.

Parental leave and care services

Most countries support the work-life balance with parental leaves and, in some cases, the provision of child care services. Less attention is given to other care needs, such as the care for the elderly and people with disabilities. Furthermore the crisis is in many countries putting these measures under pressure. In **Iceland**, for example, the dramatic crisis of 2008 has worsened gender equality, inducing a lower take up of parental leave by fathers due to reduced leave payments. Furthermore, a debate is growing about how long children should stay in day care, an issue which is inducing mothers to reduce their working time. **Belgium** is characterised by an well developed system of subsidised leaves (including parental leave) since the mid-eighties and an extensive system of childcare facilities which are coming under pressure due to budgetary constraints in recent years.

In other countries parental leave is a way to compensate for the lack of child care facilities. In the **Czech Republic**, for example, parental benefits are available only if the parent or another adult ensures a proper whole-day care. The very long parental leave in **Estonia** (three years) is considered a way to compensate for the lack of childcare services. Parental and maternity leaves have been introduced also in candidate countries, like **Croatia, Serbia and FYROM**, in the process of alignment with the EU legislation on gender equality.

In some countries special provisions have been introduced *to guarantee access to part-time work for parents*. Examples include the **Austrian** entitlement to part time work for parents (Elternteilzeit) introduced in February 2004, and the **Slovenian** Parental Protection and Benefits Act of 2001. In **Spain** changes have been introduced in the labour law in 2007 to support part-time for care reasons and improve the conditions and legal support to employees who use it. In **France**, parents of young children are entitled to a part time parental leave of one year which can be renewed twice, though working time must be at least 16 hours a week. In the **UK** part time work is a way to support the work-life balance in the absence of extensive childcare services. Since 2000, legislation requires that part-time workers be treated equally to full-time workers (in terms of wages and working conditions). Many women are employed part time (42 per cent of employed women versus 11 per cent of men), with an average of 18 hours per week, compared to 37 hours for men.

Flexible working time

Flexible working time arrangements usually involve staggered working hours⁴, flexitime, overtime and working time banks. These arrangements are more widespread in Austria, Ireland, the UK and Nordic countries. They are less applied in countries characterised by a large presence of small firms as in Eastern and Southern European countries, due to their comparatively high organisational costs. Furthermore, the use of flexible work in these countries tends not to be so much aimed at facilitating the work-life balance of workers as it is in the Netherlands.

⁴ This means a system in which the employees of an organisation do not all arrive and leave at the same time but have large periods of overlap.

In **Austria**, more than one third of men and women have access to flexible working time schedules. Overtime working is comparatively low (26% among men and 12% women), though can often be unpaid. In the **UK**, flexible working is often used as a way to promote a better work life balance in the absence of child care facilities. Reduced working hours for a limited period, flexitime and job sharing are available to about a half of all employees, whilst a compressed working week and term-time working (i.e. giving parents the right to unpaid leaves during school holidays) is available to about 35% of workers. Since 2002, parents have the right to request flexible working and this was extended to those caring for an adult. To avoid the risk of women's discrimination the provision was extended to all workers. A wide range of flexible working models is available to workers also in **Ireland**, including job sharing, career breaks, term time working (taking the summer months off during the school holidays and having 10 months of salary spread over 12 months), flexible hours, teleworking, and personalised hours. However, none of these is available on a statutory basis. **Iceland and Sweden** also adopt some forms of flexitime to support the work-life balance. In Iceland the *Act on the equal status and equal rights of women and men* requires employers to take the necessary measures to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational and family commitments, for example by promoting increased flexibility in organising work and working hours, and facilitating a return to work after parental leave.

In the other participating countries, working flexibility responds mostly to meet employers' needs rather than workers' needs. The principal exception to this is in the spread of *flexible entry and exit hours*. Some examples:

- In **Belgium** almost 8% of men and women can start and end their day within a specified time band, while 6.4% of men and 7.2% of women start and end at varying hours following an agreement with their employer. Only 2.1% of women (relative to 5.2% of men) are free to determine their work schedule, and 8.9% (relative to 10% of men) have the time banking option.
- In **Slovenia** it is possible to have flexible entry and exit hours for family reasons and about 28% of women and 29% of men had access to these provisions in 2004.
- In **Estonia** 42% of women and 47% of men said it was generally possible for them to take days off for family reasons in 2010. However, in most cases flexible time is not negotiated due to the low incidence of collective agreements covering it and currently flexitime is not among the government's policy priorities.

In **Southern and Eastern European countries**, as well as in the candidate countries, characterised by the predominance of SMEs and segmented labour markets, the regulation of working time is often very rigid and flexibility mainly involves flexible or atypical employment contracts, informal working, self-employment and multiple job holding with little or no employment rights. In these countries women are usually over-represented in flexible employment, and only a minority have access to flexitime provisions or have a say in the organisation of their working time. Here flexible working time often means holding more jobs or very long working hours, part of which is in the informal sector.

In **Lithuania**, for example, the regulation of working time is still very rigid: the share of employees working 39-41 hours per week is almost 20% higher than the EU27 average. In **Spain** working time is often included in collective agreements but flexible options are not usually introduced. Moreover, despite the recent introduction of measures to help guarantee the use of flexitime as a work-life balance measure, there is little evidence of it being monitored and encouraged. Similarly in **France** working time flexibility rarely corresponds to work-family needs. One quarter of French workers have flexible

working time but it is often *involuntary*. Furthermore, only 16% of French workers were involved in choosing their working hours, mainly comprising high skilled and independent workers. In **Malta** the government is trying to encourage firms to adopt family friendly policies but there is little take up and the employment rate for women remains the lowest in the EU 27.

Tele (home)working

Tele(home)working is much less common across the countries participating in the seminar than in the Netherlands. This is largely because only some types of work can be carried out from home using ICT, further limited in some countries by inadequate broadband penetration or speed, and of skilled ICT workers. As a result, teleworking is often the preserve of the more educated workers in certain occupations that lend themselves to remote working. Furthermore, in all the participating countries teleworking is more common among men than women.

In **Estonia** telework and/or home working is available only to around 5% of employees. Also, remote working in Estonia is not considered so much a measure to improve the work-life balance but more as part of a regional policy to support the decongestion of urban areas by freeing up people to move to rural areas. In **France**, according to a recent survey 2% of employees practice teleworking at home, and 5% “on the move” and mainly men with the highest levels of education and in white collar jobs are involved (such as in banks, insurance companies, and business services). As a result it is not considered as a work family reconciliation tool and, furthermore, is usually associated with extended hours. In **Iceland**, surveys in 2000, 2006 and 2011 showed that teleworking was more accessible to men than women; to managers than regular workers; to the highly educated, high wage workers; and to those working 45-54 hours a week. The surveys also revealed that teleworking was used as an addition to regular hours but not as a means to accommodate personal needs and on average, teleworkers worked three hours more per week than non-teleworkers.

3. Summary of the discussion at the seminar

The seminar discussion was aimed principally at assessing the gender effects and transferability of the flexitime measures adopted in The Netherlands. As such, the main issues focusing the debate were as follows:

- the different gender effects of flexible working and ways to prevent any unintended side-effects;
- the prerequisite needed to launch initiatives such as 'customised working' in other countries;
- the role of the different actors (government, social partners, employers, employees, other parties) in promoting and implementing flexible working policies.

Gender assessment of flexible working practices

Most interventions acknowledged the pioneering role of The Netherlands in introducing and encouraging new working arrangements. However, many contributors also underlined the *drawbacks of part time and working time flexibility* and the need to consider gender equality in the implementation of new forms of work.

Working time flexibility may have a positive impact on women's participation in the labour market and enhance their work-life balance but it is not clear whether it will have a positive impact in terms of gender equality. In fact, there is danger that flexible working might reinforce the gender gap in employment, labour income, working conditions, social security rights, etc. as well as labour market segregation, both between men and women and between 'atypical' and 'standard' workers. It was emphasised in the debate that part time jobs and atypical employment are often less secure for workers (due to lower salaries and future pensions, limited entitlement to unemployment benefits, training, etc.) and that persons working part time or at home are often isolated and excluded from the social life, contact networks and decision-making processes available in the conventional working places. This could worsen women's already slower career progression.

Cultural differences in women's preferences were also discussed, and their relation to earnings levels. In many of the participating countries the low income levels and a tradition of full time employment for women (as especially in Eastern and candidate countries but also, to some extent, in France, Portugal and Spain) explains the greater preference for full time work also among women with care responsibilities.

In The Netherlands, women's greater control over their working time could reduce their use of short part-time work and inactivity when children are small and it could increase their economic independence. Also, the effects of flexible working time on fathers was outlined, with Dutch younger fathers showing an increased preference to stay with their children and exchanging a day less of work for more time with them. Thus the 'new' labour market category of part-timers, i.e. those working four days per week, is no longer exclusively female and this broadening across genders could improve the labour market perceptions and career outcomes of (long) part time work. However, those working no more than three days per week are still almost exclusively mothers. They are likely to be penalised by the detrimental career consequences of part-time work which is still little accepted in most organisations, especially in relation to managerial jobs.

The *high poverty risk* of women, and especially single mothers, with part time jobs were also outlined in the discussion. In the Netherlands, despite the relatively high labour market participation rate and the possibility to combine work and personal life, most women are not economically independent, although those with financial independence have increased from 44% in 2006 to 48% in 2009. However, while in Sweden concerns on economic independence have supported the right to full time jobs, The Netherlands instead aims at supporting a shift towards a longer part-time and flexible working time to increase labour income for women, thus reducing the poverty risk in case of family breakdowns.

The Dutch approach stresses *flexibility and job autonomy* as key factors persuading women to work full time. Flexible working allows women employees to increase their contractual working hours, to develop their career potential, as well as stimulate their upward mobility. However, currently flexibility in working time is more common among men rather than women. According to some of the seminar participants, gender differences in the take up of flexible working time arrangements might reinforce the notion that unpaid dependent care is primarily a woman's job. Furthermore, evidence suggests that career progression is more limited for women working flexibly.

Flexibility in working time is also shown to affect women differently than men. Flexitime in the Netherlands appears to have improved women's work-life balance (less strain from work) but it also blurred the work-life boundaries. The discussion underlined that when dealing with flexibility issues an acceptable definition of flexibility is essential to

address the different interests of employers and employees. Both for women and men with caring responsibilities, *working hours have to be predictable* regarding their length and the location.

Substantial *teleworking* (one day per week or more) was shown in the Dutch case to have the potential to reduce women's feelings of time pressure but only when accompanied by a reduction in work-home conflict. This approach requires employers and employees to set (new) boundaries between work and private life. However, the discussion underlined the fact that teleworking, like any other form of work, is not gender neutral. The drawbacks of telework were also discussed, with the results of cross-sectional studies carried out in different countries (for example Iceland and The Netherlands) showing that teleworking is associated with a high risk of spill over effects on family time and longer working hours which may increase the work-home conflict, particularly amongst women. It was also discussed that there is a danger that the costs of creating a home office might be shifted on employees.

Effects of the crisis

The financial and economic crisis and increased international competitive pressures have changed the terms of the debate in most countries, with the issues of gender equality in employment and of the work-life balance often downgraded in the policy priorities. Instead, demand-side flexibility is returning as the main driver for change, a flexibility which is not aimed at facilitating the work-life balance but at reducing labour costs for firms. In this case flexible work usually means very long working days/weeks, staggered and unpredictable working hours and a higher frequency of weekend and evening work. Public budget constraints are also challenging expenditure on care facilities and parental leave (as in the case of Iceland, for example), increasing the burden of care on women. Moreover, in many countries (including The Netherlands), the crisis has increased the share of involuntary part-time working as a way to contain the employment effects of the crisis.

Prerequisites for effectiveness and transferability

Another issue highlighted in the discussion was related to the prerequisites for the implementation of flexible forms of work supporting gender equality, and the potential transferability of the Dutch approach to countries with different socio-economic and institutional frameworks. Here the level of wages and the system of industrial relations, the industrial structure and the distribution of SMEs, the care and work organisation culture as well as the general cultural background are all considered very relevant.

As shown in the previous paragraph, in many Eastern (Baltic countries, the Czech Republic and Slovenia) and candidate (Croatia, Serbia and FYROM) countries low wages account to a great extent for the low interest of workers in part time and flexible work and, consequently, the low coverage of flexible working time and part-time issues in collective bargaining. Further constraints relate to the fact that in most of the countries participating in the seminar, the traditional forms of work organisation still dominate.

The Dutch case shows that the *cultural shift* associated with flexible working, such as mutual flexibility and trust, requires time, financial support, and on-going attention from policy makers and employers if its full potential is to be realised. The discussion emphasised that:

- Workers should be encouraged in getting control on their working hours with the support of collective bargaining on flexi-time, individual scheduling and telework.
- Part time arrangements should be reversible and a life-course approach towards working time flexibility should be developed using more intensive time saving accounts, training accounts, etc.
- Initiatives that involve companies can only be effective when embedded in a bundle of measures supporting more family friendly working times in public services, the provision of good quality care services and a more balanced division of care work within households.

Flexible and customised counselling services are essential to improve working carers' work-life balance and to prevent them from leaving the labour market. The adoption of working carer support, including flexible working, is not only driven by Corporate Social Responsibility but also by business-case arguments. However, it requires a strong trusting relationship between workers and employers and among workers themselves. From a business case perspective, work-life balance policies or flexible work arrangements can have a positive impact on individual work outcomes since they can affect job satisfaction, retention and organisational commitment, as well as reduce work-life conflict.

The *role of the media* in influencing cultural attitudes towards parental leave and working time was also underlined in the discussion. It is needed to focus more on specific awareness raising measures targeted towards men, illustrating the convenience of having a partner working longer hours and becoming more economically independent.

The *role of social partners and collective bargaining* is important in order to facilitate the adoption of flexible working time patterns supporting the work-life balance. In **The Netherlands**, the legal framework stresses the right to make agreements on working hours and collective agreements may regulate working time arrangements, while individual informal agreements may also be implemented. Also in **Belgium** the social partners pay attention to the quality of work as a way to attract and retain people with caring responsibilities in the labour market and to improve the organisational performance of companies. The discussion underlined the possible constraints related to the main form of collective bargaining agreements; decentralised social dialogue is not common in many countries, although it could favour the implementation of flexible working time arrangements, adjusted to the needs of both employers and employees. The negotiation (not the imposition) of working time is a central condition for workers' satisfaction with their jobs, their well-being and better organisational performance in the medium and long run. Predictability is even more important than flexibility to facilitate work-family balance.

The discussion also stressed the need to accompany flexi-work measures with the availability of *care services* with longer opening hours in order to give women a real choice in their working time. In **Slovenia**, for example, a 2005 survey conducted among the population aged 22-35 showed that 65% of the respondents opted for childcare centres to remain open until 5 or 6 p.m. and about a third also wished to have childcare centres open also on weekends.

ICT developments, broadband penetration and ICT knowledge are also very important to support the introduction of teleworking. In particular the representatives of candidate countries (Croatia and Serbia) have underlined that the insufficient development of ICT

forms a serious constraint for the implementation of these forms of work in their countries.

Measures to support the diffusion of new work organisation practices that give more attention to work-life balance, and similar to the Dutch Quality Mark, have been implemented in some of the participating countries. Since 2000 in **Portugal** the *Equality is Quality Award* is given to companies and organisations that promote gender equality in work organisation. In **Slovenia**, the *Family-Friendly Enterprise certificate*⁵ includes both a consulting and an audit procedure. Similar pilot projects have also been implemented in **Ireland** and showed that flexible working gave positive outcomes in work-life balance and wellbeing for working parents, older people and people with mental health problems. The **UK** also has a tradition of initiatives which exhibit some of the main characteristics of these approaches such as employer exhortation, the identification and emphasis on business benefits and quality marking. For example, major programmes of quality marking have been undertaken by government (e.g. Investors in People) and by voluntary organisations (e.g. Stonewall's Diversity Champions, assessing employers' gay-friendliness). Furthermore, Employers for Carers, an employer group (supported by Carers UK) promotes carer-friendly employer policy and practice, emphasising the business benefits and providing advice and support.

4. Conclusions

The seminar discussion acknowledged the potential positive effects of flexible working time for workers (i.e. improving the work, family and private life balance), employers (i.e. increasing productivity and efficiency) and society at large (i.e. higher labour force participation for women and reduction in traffic congestion). However, it has also been stressed that flexible working time arrangements are not gender neutral and that there may be risks associated to their implementation when the gender dimension is not taken into account. In this respect, flexible working arrangements should be negotiated and the changing lifecycle needs of workers should be taken into consideration. Thus, the issue of flexible working time has to be addressed together with that of care services.

The main **shortcomings** highlighted in the discussion are the following:

- *Low lifelong income and pensions and high poverty risk*, especially in the case of short, non-reversible part-time work, usually involving mainly women;
- *Blurring boundaries between working and family time* which may worsen working and living conditions for workers, especially in the case of tele(home)working.
- *The individual costs of tele/home-working*: financial costs for workers related to the setting up of office space at home and the risks of longer working hours, as well as the personal costs due to isolation, loss of visibility and lower career perspectives which appear to be more relevant for women rather than men. Lack of adequate broadband may also prevent take up in some countries.
- *Lower predictability of working time* is particularly negative for workers with care responsibilities.

⁵ Introduced in 2007 under an EQUAL Project.

- *Quality mark* as a formality checking exercise rather than real commitment to its principles.

The discussion of **transferability issues** underlined the great differences between the Dutch labour market and labour markets in other participating countries. The implementation of gender sensible flexible working arrangements is particularly difficult in those countries characterised by:

- lack of adequate and good quality child care facilities (in relation to opening hours, accessibility and quality of care provided), reducing the possibility of real choices in working patterns;
- high unemployment and low income conditions which stimulate the take up of jobs with very long working hours and with potentially little attention to the work-life balance;
- predominance of SMEs which makes it more difficult to introduce innovative and gender sensible HR management culture;
- absence or limited role of collective bargaining which reduces the possibility to negotiate working time arrangements;
- predominance of the male breadwinner model.

As for the **effects of the crisis**, on the one hand, the occupational uncertainty and changing family patterns have highlighted the need for double income households to avoid poverty risks. On the other hand, the lower resources available for care services and parental leave may increase the care workload for women and decrease public support for the development and consolidation of good practices in working conditions. Also, the current crisis could further reduce the attention to workers and women needs in the development of new forms of work. The role of trade unions may be weakened with the crisis, reducing the room for negotiation on these forms of work. Furthermore, in many countries shorter working hours have been introduced as a way to reduce the employment effects of the crisis, rather than as a work-life balance measure.