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Flexible working time in Austria

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1. Background of flexible working time

1.1. Increase of female part-time work

In Austria the part-time rate has steadily increased among female employees. On the one hand, this development makes for the increasing employment rate of women in general, on the other hand part-time work is often linked to low income and leads to other disadvantages such as low unemployment benefits or low pensions.

The part-time rate of women has increased in the last 15 years from 27.2% (1995) to 44.3% (2010). The part-time rate of men has increased as well, from 2.8% (1995) to 7.3% in 2010, but is still on a comparatively very low level (Statistik Austria 2011). In the last decade the increase of the female employment rate has been solely driven by the increase of part-time work whereas the number of full-time workplaces has been reduced since 1995. Compared to other EU-countries, with 69.3% (2010), Austria's female employment rate is among the highest.

It is important to consider what types of women comprise the group of female part-time workers. There is a study analysing the quality of part-time work in Austria and investigating positive examples of the implementation and promotion of high-quality part-time employment (Bergmann et al. 2009). The analyses of the data produced the result that part-time jobs are often marginal, short-hour jobs, below the qualification level and with a low income.

The rate of female part-time employment is highest for women who either have completed an apprenticeship (46.1%) or a technical school education (43.5%), and it is only marginally lower (about 41%) for women who have completed the nine years of compulsory schooling or a higher school education. The rate of part-time work is lowest among women with a college or university degree (32.9%). This distribution is also reflected by women's occupational status. The rate of female part-time work is higher among blue-collar workers (46.2%) than among white-collar workers (43.2%) and only 27.6% for civil servants. Additionally, women performing unskilled and semi-skilled labour tend to work part time more often than more highly skilled women.

When it comes to age the data shows that women mainly work part-time at an age when childcare is most relevant. Thus the proportion of women working part time is highest among those who are between 30 and 44 years of age (45.9% to 53.6%). Childcare as one of the main reasons for women working part time is also highlighted by data showing women's motives for taking up part-time work. The part-time employment of women who give childcare and/or elderly care as their motive for working part-time hours amounts to 39.2%.

Important for the quality of part-time is also the duration of part-time employment. The analysis of working-hours shows that the largest group of female part-timers work from 20 to 24 hours (2009: 29%), the second largest group from 30 to 35 hours (28%).

Concerning income, the survey revealed that part-time workers do not only earn less than full-timer workers due to the reduced number of weekly working hours but also earn less on the basis of their gross hourly wage. Women who work part time earn €9.11 an hour, while those working full time are paid €10.36. Full-time employed women thus earn 14% more than women working part time.

Legal background of part-time work

Entitlement to part-time work for parents (“Elternteilzeit”) has been introduced in February 2004. This regulation is applicable to parents working at companies with more than 20 employees if they have been employed for more than three years without interruption. Such entitlement is applicable until the seventh birthday of a child and enables parents to re-arrange working hours and return to full-time work. Parents working at a company with up to 20 employees may agree on part-time work arrangements with their employer for up to the child’s fourth birthday. During parental part-time there is special dismissal protection. The company size and duration of employment with the company restrict the number of potential users.¹

Another important legal regulation regarding part-time work concerns supplements on overtime. In 2008 statutory supplements to the wages of part-time workers on overtime became law. Under specific conditions, part-time workers doing overtime are entitled to a supplement of 25%. There has not been an evaluation yet, but estimations of union representatives reveal that only a small part of employees make use of this regulation, partly because the regulation is quite complex.

1.2. Overtime

In 2010 an average 8.1 overtime hours were carried out per week and per person with at least one overtime hour. Related to all employees, 1.7 additional hours were registered. In 2010 21.1% of all employees (731 000 persons) worked overtime in their main job. Ten or more overtime hours were accomplished by 6.9% of employees. Looking at the gender segregated data we can see that more men than women work overtime. In 2010 25.9% of male employees were working overtime in 2010 while 11.9% of female employees worked overtime. When only using the data for those who work more than 9 overtime hours, the gender gap is even higher, with 9.7% of male and 3.7% of female employees (Statistik Austria 2011).

Not all overtime hours were paid or compensated. In 2010 6.2 overtime hours (about a quarter less than the actually done hours) were indeed paid per week. The proportion of unpaid overtime is noticeably higher for women (28%) than for men (21%) (Statistik Austria 2011). In a European context it seems that Austria (together with the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) has a relatively high level of overtime and fairly high rates of unpaid overtime (e.g. Statistics in Focus 2004). The gender gap in the percentage of employees working overtime makes up 10 percentage points.

1.3. Flexibility

A review carried out by the European Commission defined flexibility regarding the length of working hours by three indicators: Part-time work, working over-time and

¹ Estimations of Synthesis Research showed that 77% of all employees between 20 and 45 years are not entitled to this option, mainly because they work in micro-enterprises or have just started their careers (Lehner / Wagner-Pinter 2003).

working long hours. The most flexible countries regarding the length of working hours seem to be Austria and the United Kingdom, which have a high ranking on all three indicators.

The legal possibilities for flexible working hours are already quite broad. In 2008, an agreement of the social partners on a scheme for the flexibilisation of working hours became law. Since then a maximum of 12 working hours per day and 60 hours per week are possible during a period of 24 weeks (previously 12 weeks). However, eight weeks of overtime have to be followed by two weeks with regular working hours. Moreover, standard working hours of 10 hours daily can be agreed on at company level or individually, e.g. in the case of a four-day week or a flexitime system. Previously, overtime regulations were subject to collective agreements.

Flexibility in the organisation of working time comprises a flexible matching of labour inputs over the day (European Commission 2010: 24). One example is the annualisation of hours, where actual working times are averaged over a specific period of time. Other examples are a four-hour working week or swing-time arrangements. The study of the European Commission (2010: 26) on flexible working time arrangements and gender equality analyses the data of the LFS ad hoc module 2004, which contains three types of categories for variable working hours: Staggered working hours, flexitime and working time banking. In Austria, 37.6% of male employees and 36.3% of female employees have access to flexible working time schedules. The data for homework shows that in Austria 2.7% of male employees and 5.7% of female employees are usually working from home.

1.4. Unpaid Work

The unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women is often taken for granted and this attitude enforces inequality and inhibits a positive development of gender equality. Therefore it is essential to look at the gender specific division of paid and unpaid work. Unpaid work makes up a great amount and the proportion is 51%, beyond the proportion of paid work which is 49%. Two third of housework, childcare, care for sick and elderly people or voluntary work are spent by women and one third by men. For paid work the rate is inverse: it is 39% done by women and 61% by men (Statistik Austria 2009).

2. Policy Debate

In recent years the working time debate has changed. In a political and economic context unfavourable to employees and trade unions, employers have been pushing for working time extensions without offering compensation. Employer representatives demanded a further relaxation of the collectively agreed working time regulations for competitive reasons. Content of these demands were new working time schemes that would allow a more uneven distribution of working hours within longer reference periods (Adam/Pernicka 2006).

In 2010 the Austrian Industrial Manufacturing Union (PRO-GE) together with the Union of Private Sector Employees, Graphical Workers and Journalists (GPA-djp) launched a new discussion on a general reduction of working hours. Starting point of this discussion was the world economic crisis and a relevant number of (mainly male) employees working shorter hours primarily in the industrial sector due to the economic

situation. The issues of work-life balance seem to be more in the background than they were a few years ago.

Regarding working hours the minister of women's affairs as well as the women's department of the Austrian employment service took initiatives to demonstrate the negative effects of part-time work on the income of women.

3. Transferability Issues

One of the most obvious developments in Austria regarding working time is the fact that an increasing number of women are working part-time which leads to a gap in effective weekly hours worked by men and women. Part-time employment is combined with a bundle of negative aspects and is one of the decisive factors of a segregated labour market and the consistently existing gender wage gap. The persistence of the high gender gap in work hours is also an evidence of differences of time use patterns between women and men. As Mutari and Figart (2000: 234) conclude "Discussions of long hours and short hours jobs therefore must be linked in order to fully appreciate the gendered nature of contemporary flexibility strategies".

This background has to be taken into account when trying to estimate the impact of good practices from other countries, in our case from the Netherlands. Studies on "Work-Life-Balance" have revealed that suggestions are seized hesitantly by companies (Kersley 2006, quoted in European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2007). On the other hand evidence shows that a change in the work culture is needed to face the unbalanced division of work and care. Therefore initiatives that are trying to involve companies have to be seen positive but can only become effective on a broader base when embedded in a bundle of initiatives on legislative and socio-political level.

When dealing with flexibility issues we have to define what flexibility means and to address the different interests of employers and employees. Especially for women with caring responsibilities working hours have to be predictable regarding the length and in particular the location. Hence the tendency to an extension of reference periods has to be appraised negative when it comes to gender equity.

Working time reduction and a redistribution of paid and unpaid work seem to be off the agenda. We need to launch this discussion and to create a new consciousness and awareness about the importance of time and time use and its link to the allocation of power in society. To reach gender equality we need to have an arrangement of working hours that supports the access of women and men to all occupational fields and that secures equal opportunities for career and income. Solely with working time policy equality of women and men in the spheres of paid work and reproduction can't be achieved. For that we would need a sum of political, social, economic and sociocultural changes. But reduction of working hours (for women AND men) in connection with self-determined work arrangements and a state financed public care system provide a basis for an equal allocation of duties.

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