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Households, Work and Flexibility (HWF)

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Research questions

Flexibility has become a key issue in discussions of work in Western European countries. It is felt that there is an inevitable 'need' to have more flexible employment in order for European countries to become globally competitive (see for example the European Union Employment Strategy 1998–2001). However, flexibility can have very different implications depending upon how it is introduced and in association with what kind of labour market and social policies. For example, it can lead to greater insecurity, the undermining of wages and working conditions or it can lead to improvements in the quality of working and family life (Beck, 2000). The European 'social model' implies that policies incorporating models of gender equalization and social partnership should form part of such implementation tending towards the latter alternative (European Commission, 2000). It also has different implications for different segments of the labour market: contrast, for example, the work of high paid consultants with that of Asian women in the United Kingdom doing piece work at home. Whether it is one or the other depends upon dimensions such as age, gender, life-cycle stage, education, labour market position, ethnicity and citizenship. It also depends upon the region in which someone lives. Furthermore, as our project is indicating, flexibility can be regulated or unregulated, legal or illegal.

In many respects, the pressures towards flexibility, such as increased global competition, the introduction of just-in-time production, the restructuring of older formerly dominant 'Fordist' type industries and the rise of the service sector, coupled with new technologies have impacted upon all the countries that we are considering (Castells, 1996). However, they have impacted in different ways and the responses in terms of policy have been very different. Policy responses can make a difference as to whether flexibility can offer opportunities for an improved quality of working and family life, or a deteriorated one. In the United States, for example, some studies have tended to describe the latter tendency (Hochschild, 1997; Sennet, 1998), whereby flexibility is a response to declining wages, and both partners in the family work longer and longer hours to maintain the living standards of the household. Most European countries, however, represent a more policy-led model of flexibility depending more on national level policies and, to some extent, on the European Union. In Central European accession countries flexibility is introduced mainly in response to policies from external agencies such as the European Union, OECD and World Bank.

A range of employment and demographic trends have tended to create pressures towards flexibility from the supply side as well. In particular, we find a general trend towards more women working in the labour market, whilst more and more men are economically inactive. Two-earner families are now the norm in most countries, even if one of the earners is part time. Also, falls in the birth rate and the postponement of family formation tend to lead to longer periods for women in the labour market. Rising costs of education mean that children have to be supported for longer, requiring more women to work and men to work more hours. High youth unemployment (in some countries) and non-linear transitions into work, whereby young people support themselves with casual jobs through periods of study or move in and out of the labour market, have also contributed to youthful flexibility. Even though youth unemployment has fallen and may be negligible in some countries (such as the Netherlands), many young people nevertheless work in casualized jobs. The presence of foreigners or ethnic minorities means there are always people prepared to work for worse conditions and lower pay than protected native workers. Some studies have indicated that both men and women might opt for more flexible hours and more flexibility of place in order to improve their quality of life (Hörning *et al.*, 1995). The search for improved quality of working life and its compatibility with other life activities has been a continuing

theme in studies carried out in Germany and elsewhere over the last 20 years. Studies carried out in EU member states have found that the majority of women prefer to work part time in order to manage domestic activities, whilst for men this was more often forced upon them for lack of alternatives (European Commission, 2000). However, in the British literature the debate has focused on issues such as whether women prefer part-time work to fit with family responsibilities. Or are they simply forced to do it due to lack of childcare facilities and other opportunities? What do 'choice' and 'constraint' mean under these circumstances?

In Central European countries, women always worked full time, but unemployment is new. In these countries, most women prefer secure, full-time traditional jobs rather than insecure flexible ones. Full-time, secure and standardized employment for both men and women is still the dominant model both in behaviour and in attitudes, so that demand for part-time or flexible work is low.

Some evidence can be found of family-friendly policies being introduced by firms who see it as being in their interest to retain personnel that way. However, take-up of such policies seems to be very low. Other initiatives come from the state or from social partners, as is the case, for example, for New Labour in Britain, the European Union, social partners in the Netherlands and by the state in Sweden. In the Netherlands, a special task force was introduced to consider such issues and, there, flexibility forms part of the tripartite negotiations between different social partners, which has affected the way policies are introduced.

Rationale for selection of participating countries

In the selection of countries for the current project (see homepage www.hwf.at), we were concerned to contrast Eastern European candidate countries with those of Western Europe. Another source of comparison would be Southern Europe (perhaps more similar in many ways to the candidate countries) and Northern Europe, but this was beyond the scope of the project. In Western Europe, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were selected as examples of different models of policy towards flexibility. The United Kingdom has a more *laissez faire* model of flexibility, the Netherlands a strongly proactive model, and Sweden has incorporated flexibility into existing strongly protected labour market policies. In Eastern Europe, we have selected some of the more successful transition countries: Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, as well as countries that are making slower progress and from much more difficult beginnings: Bulgaria and Romania. Although flexibility and family-friendly policies have been much discussed in Western Europe, this discussion has not really got underway in Eastern Europe and flexibility is seen (if at all) as a threat rather than a promise in labour market change.

As Table 1 shows, the three EU member states in the project display levels of flexible work well above the West European average for women. The general trend was towards an increase in temporary and part-time employment over the 1990s. In the Netherlands, the rise of this kind of flexible work was especially strong, on account of the proactive policies that had been introduced. Although such flexible kinds of work affect women more than men, the rise in such work for men has been greater than that for women. While the general trend is towards a rise in flexible employment of this kind, at the end of the 1990s, the numbers on fixed term contracts saw a decline (Employment in Europe, 2000).

Table 1 Trends in total part-time employment plus temporary employment 1990-1999 Netherlands, Sweden and the UK

	Total part- time plus temporary employment as % of employees			
	Female		Male	
	1990	1999	1990	1999
Netherlands	69.7	84.0	21.0	27.3
Sweden	54.5	56.6	14.7	20.6
United Kingdom	50.2	51.9	9.0	16.0
EU15	40.5	47.7	13.2	18.5

Source: European Commission (2000) pp85, 95, 99 100.

Flexibility has been interpreted in many different ways. Here, we are ignoring functional flexibility, or the movement between different skills within the workplace. Instead, we are concentrating upon individuals and households in the labour market, and how flexibility affects them, particularly their ability to combine family and work. In this context, we have defined three forms of flexibility: flexibility of time, place and conditions. Flexibility of time is interpreted as the number of hours worked and when they are worked, including various kinds of casual, part-time and irregular hours of work. Secondly, we consider flexibility of place of work, meaning if someone is working in a workplace, at home or in various locations. Thirdly, we consider flexibility of working conditions, meaning the kinds of contracts that people hold.

Under these circumstances, does flexibility lead to increasing pressure or stress as family members are forced into insecure and irregular employment or does it lead to greater opportunities to combine family and work?

Table 2 indicates some of the changes taking place. In the Czech Republic, part-time, fixed-term and self-employed work have all increased, although more for women than for men, but it is still well below the EU average. Bulgaria and Romania show relatively low levels of flexible work (as far as data are available). Of the East European countries, Hungary and Slovenia seem to approach the EU average more closely with respect to temporary work (Slovenia) and self-employment. Although all the selected EU member states have more part-time work than the EU average, fixed-term contracts are higher in Sweden and the Netherlands, and lower in the United Kingdom. Self-employment, however, is lower in our selected countries than the EU average, although on the rise in each country.

Table 2 Trend in non-standard employment in the 1990s

	Part-time		Fixed-term contracts		Self-employment	
	1990	1999	1990	1999	1990	1999
	% employees		% employees		% total employment	
Czech Republic						
Female	10.3	9.7	4.9	8.4	4.4	8.8 ¹
Male	3.0	2.4	4.0	5.7	8.0	12.5
Total	6.3	5.6	4.4	6.9	6.4	9.9
Bulgaria						
Female		12.4 ²				9.2
Male		8.5 ³				15.0
Total					0.95 ⁴	12.3 ⁵
Hungary						
Total		4.5		6		15
Romania						
Total	13 ⁶	15 ⁷				
Slovenia						
Female		7.2				
Male		5.2				
Total	5.3 ⁸	6.1	6.3 ⁹	11.2	12.2 ¹⁰	12.7
Netherlands						
Female	59.5	68.6	10.2	15.4	7.7	10.7
Male	14.9	17.9	6.1	9.4	11.3	12.6

Total	31.7	39.4	7.6	12.0	10.0	10.7
Sweden						
Female	41.8	40.0	12.7	16.6	4.8	11.0
Male	7.4	9.4	7.3	11.2	13.4	15.7
Total	23.6	23.8	10.0	13.9	9.3	11.0
United Kingdom						
Female	43.2	44.4	7.0	7.5	7.5	11.7
Male	5.3	8.9	3.7	6.2	18.1	15.8
Total	21.7	24.8	5.2	6.8	13.5	11.7
EU average						
Female	28.7	33.5	11.8	14.2	9.6	14.4
Male	4.0	6.1	9.2	12.4	19.1	18.3
Total	13.8	17.7	10.3	13.2	15.4	14.4

Source: [European Commission \(2000\)](#) and HWF literature reviews.

Notes: 1. Among them 2.2 with employees and 6.6 without employees.
 2. Less than 40 hours, 1994. 3. Less than 40 hours, 1994. 4. 1986.
 5. 2000. 6. 1994 7. 1998.
 8. 1993. 9. 1993. 10. 1993.

Scientific methods

Our literature review demonstrated that, while a considerable body of information is available for West European countries, information for Eastern Europe is much poorer, since data have only recently been gathered in such a way as to permit international comparison and, even then, are not always available to researchers. In Western Europe too, wide variations exist in what material is available for different countries. For this reason, we have constructed a questionnaire for a representative sample survey of at least 1000 individuals in each country, and this was carried out in Spring 2001. The survey is based upon a randomly selected sample of people according to standard international conventions. As shown by Table 3, the response rate varied from between 20% and 93%, but in all cases this was apparently normal for that country. It was not possible to undertake face-to-face surveys in all countries, so in the Netherlands and Sweden, a telephone interview was carried out instead.

Table 3 Households, Work and Flexibility survey details

	Response rate	Sample size	Type of surveys
United Kingdom	≈58%	945	Face-to-face
Netherlands	≤20%	1008	Telephone
Sweden	69%	1580	Telephone
Slovenia	65%	1008	Face-to-face
Czech Republic	60%	1556	Face-to-face
Hungary	60-65%	1165	Face-to-face
Bulgaria	90%	1806	Face-to-face
Romania	93%	1848	Face-to-face
Total		10916	

The questionnaire is designed to cover the ways in which the activities of different household members combine, including paid and unpaid work, work in the formal and the informal or grey economy (a very important field in some countries). It is also designed to look at attitudes to flexibility as well as behaviour. For this reason, we have been concerned to cover all forms of work, including domestic work, childcare, work in the informal economy, self-provisioning and additional casual and occasional jobs, as well as various kinds of regular employment. Each of these issues has very different connotations in the different parts of Europe.

The main respondent is the individual. The first part of the questionnaire relates to the individual responses and in an attempt to try and understand the combination of different types of economic activity, we asked in some detail about various sources of income. Other more detailed questions were introduced about the main economic activity, including the kinds of hours worked, places worked and working conditions. Some questions were designed to elucidate not just under what conditions a person is working, but also the reasons for that particular set of conditions and whether it is chosen or forced upon them. Finally, respondents are asked about how happy they are with these arrangements and if they would want to change them. Similar, although less detailed questions, are asked about the second, third and fourth economic activity of the respondent. The assumption is that flexible work would more likely be found in the second, third or fourth activity and that this might be combined with a more stable first activity.

The second part of the questionnaire uses a series of grids to ask about other members of the household. Here the information collected is less detailed, because it is collected from only one person in the household. The composition of the household forms the topic of one grid. The different kinds of work undertaken by different household members are the subject of the second grid. The third grid looks at a variety of different domestic tasks and asks respondents which household member, or who outside the household, carries out these tasks. The next grid considers voluntary and unpaid work for others outside the household by different family members, with the intention of getting some measure of social capital in different countries. It is assumed that, whereas formal social capital in the sense of contributions to voluntary organizations may be low in Central European countries, informal help for others might nevertheless be well developed. The next grid attempts to look at how key household decisions are made and who has the most important decision-making role in this respect. Is it the key wage earner? Or is it the most senior person in the household? In this part of the questionnaire, the intention was to explore the extent to which different contributions to the household may result in different balances of power.

The third section of the questionnaire is devoted to work values. It considers the extent to which people are happy about their various economic activities and how they might impinge upon or help family life. Finally, we try to look at sources of discord and tension in the area of work and household with particular respect to flexibility. This part of the questionnaire should enable us to gain a better understanding of the extent to which flexibility may be a help or a hindrance to the organisation of family life and the extent to which it may lead to conflict.

The next section of the questionnaire considers the potential for flexibility, by asking under what conditions people would move house, move jobs or retrain. Another table considers job changes since 1989. This is particularly relevant in Central European countries and should give some indication of how flexible the respondent has been.

The final questions measure the economic resources of the household, including not only income but also other resources such as consumer goods, land and domestic animals owned, access to telecommunications, and so on. Again, we have tried to take a rather comprehensive view of what is meant by household resources.

The surveys were conducted between February and June 2001. The results were not available at the time of writing.

Another strand to the project is an examination of labour market, social policy and demographic trends in each country, which will lead to a series of reports during 2002. In the final stages of the project, the policy and labour market analyses will be brought together with the analysis of the survey results to provide an overview of households, work and flexibility in Europe.

Problems encountered

One problem that the project encountered was in the different understandings of flexibility in different countries. In the academic literature alone, there are many different meanings for this concept, but they also tended to vary from country to country. Thus, whilst in the Western European countries this has been a topic of some discussion, in Eastern European countries it has hardly emerged at all, except in the rather negative terms and as a result of external pressure. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of flexibilisation in these countries (increasing job changes, short term contracts etc.) which is not discussed in these terms. Some of the flexibilisation taking place there could be more like the Italian example, where the informal economy was the vehicle through which some post-Fordist changes in the labour market were introduced. In Sweden and the Netherlands, this took place much more through the formal economy, whilst in the UK many part-time and short contract jobs are not subject to social security payments anyway, so there was no need for them to be undertaken informally.

The survey also turned out to be more complex than we had originally anticipated and took some time to design, field and standardise because we were using different agencies in each country. In some countries (Sweden and Netherlands) the interviews were carried out by telephone, necessitating some modifications in the questionnaire, because it was not possible to undertake them in a face-to-face situation. Designing questions which were appropriate for the subsistence-level peasants in Romania and also for the urbanised and affluent respondents in Sweden proved to be a big challenge. However, often insights drawn from different contexts could be applied to other contexts with surprising results: household self-provisioning was important to Swedish families with their holiday homes as it was to Romanian peasants with Dachas - if for different reasons. Similarly, 1989 was not a significant year for Western Europeans, but CEE partners wanted to know how household strategies had changed since that time.

Preliminary findings

Comparisons based on the national literature reviews point to interesting differences between East and West. While in Western Europe flexibilization has been seen as a policy priority, mainly to combat rising unemployment, in Central European countries it takes different forms. The crumbling of the rigid and secure labour market of the Communist era has been replaced by rising unemployment and welfare cuts, especially in unemployment benefits and social security. Some of the flexible employment that previously existed in the underground, or second economy, including part-time and additional self-employed work, has emerged into the white economy, but large areas of economic activity have also sunk underground. This is particularly the case in Romania and Bulgaria, where the on-going crisis of reforms has left many people with no means of livelihood and in search of any kind of casual or occasional work to make ends meet. On the other hand, the continuation and even introduction of elaborate rules and procedures for registration of businesses, and so on, discourages the emergence of many activities into the formal economy. In these countries, self-provisioning (or the subsistence economy) plays an increasingly important role for some families. In other Central European countries, flexibilization has taken place without the topic being debate. Fixed-term contracts, frequent layoffs and occasional work have all become familiar to Central Europeans as part of the changes since 1989. They have become flexible by necessity. Nevertheless, the ideal model for both men and women in these countries is for a full-time, permanent job. Anything else is seen as a poor substitute.

Differences within Central Europe are also important. Whereas in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, flexibility has been incorporated into formal changes in the labour market, in Romania and Bulgaria much of it takes place in the informal economy.

Factors that emerged as important in all of the reviews, but of variable importance in different contexts, are the following: gender, age, ethnicity/citizenship, life-cycle stage, stratification of labour markets, informalization and childcare arrangements (Cousins and Tang 2001, Jager 2001, Boje and Strandh 2001, Vecernik and Stepankova 2001, Stanculescu 2001, Kovatcheva 2001, Sicherl and Remec 2001, Sike and Medgyesi 2001).

Gender

One of the most important factors is gender. Flexibilization without policy direction seems to lead to increasing pressure on women to find their own solutions for childcare and to resort to part-time work, resulting in them being disadvantaged in the labour market. However, family-friendly policies in the Netherlands and Sweden seem to have the same effect in reinforcing gender inequalities. According to the Swedish report 'A new gender order based upon differential working time is being offered as an institutionalized solution for women combining paid and unpaid labour. Although written in gender neutral language, these policies are predicated on the assumption of a gendered division of labour.' (Boje and Strandh, 2001). However, while in Sweden and Netherlands (and perhaps now the United Kingdom as well) considerable attention is being devoted to improving the quality of life through family-friendly flexible policies, in other countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania), this is not an issue under the present regimes at all, although more women are continuing to participate in the labour force. The priority is just to restructure the labour market in the interests of economic efficiency.

Age

It is very clear in all countries that the most radical restructuring has been in the opportunities for young people. Instead of going from school to work along well-established rail tracks, young people have longer and more indirect transitions, going from school to training, to education, to temporary jobs and in and out of unemployment. In the United Kingdom, low-paid and flexible work affects the ability of less-skilled young men to establish a family and maintain families/households. In Bulgaria and Romania, very large numbers (maybe most) are without regular employment and are dependent upon the home of origin. In all countries, it is not clear under what circumstance this represents simply a temporary 'clearing' in career tracks and to what extent it may just lead some young people into permanently marginalized positions. In some countries, it is also workers at the other end of the life-course who are likely to be most flexible: the retired and early retired.

Ethnicity/citizenship

In all countries, ethnic minorities and foreigners are doing a lot of flexible work. In those countries with permanently settled ethnic minorities (as in the United Kingdom), cultural and discriminatory barriers in the labour market create a pool of low-paid (often women) workers prepared to work for less money and worse conditions than other workers (even illegally). In other countries foreigners perform the same role.

Life-cycle stage

For women especially, but also for men, it is the stage in the life-cycle, especially with regard to childrearing, which is important. Men work more hours when they have families, women less.

Stratification of labour markets

In all countries, flexible workers fall into a number of categories. Some are low paid and disadvantaged. Some are highly educated and highly paid. The labour market is increasingly segmented between core and secondary labour markets on the one hand, and within in each sector according to pay, human capital and conditions, on the other. An overview of Europe as a whole indicated that, while about one third of flexible jobs were held by low educated and low skilled workers, graduates were also over-represented, implying both top and bottom levels of the labour market were affected by flexibilization (European Commission, 2000).

Informalization

The role of the informal economy is very variable, and much depends upon the way in which different kinds of work are classified. In the United Kingdom, for example, informalization is low on account of the de-regulation of employment and exemption of part-time work from social insurance payments, which means that what might be illegal in some countries is legal there. In the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia informal work may have declined with the gradual marketization of the labour force, but in Bulgaria and Romania its role has increased dramatically.

Childcare arrangements

Since flexibility seems to impact upon working mothers more than many other groups, a crucial issue is the extent to which childcare arrangements can be made. The extent of state involvement in this respect is very varied, but we can also assume that private arrangements are culturally defined, with extended families taking over in some countries, private commercial arrangements in others and state or public nursery provision in others.

Policy implications

A range of policies impact on flexibilization, including the role of social partnership, social policies, labour market policies and childcare policies. Other factors, such as taxation, training and education and retirement policies, may also affect the kinds of flexibilization taking place. However, we especially interested in policies explicitly introduced for flexibility and what implications these might have had. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe are considering what models work in the European Union and how this will affect them. The partners in the Central and East European countries will present their findings publicly in order to add to or stimulate the debate. The EU partners, on the other hand, will be able to contribute to the on-going discussions about the way to introduce flexibility in a humane and socially inclusive way and how to combine family and work in the coming years. Since flexibilization is something that is caused to a great extent by international or global pressures, and since the EU has been concerned to develop a European response to such pressures, it would be important to engage with actors and organizations at a transnational as well as a national level.

The literature shows that, while all countries have experienced similar pressures towards flexibilization, the impact is very different. The differences derive from the social, cultural and economic circumstances of the different countries. But they also stem from the different policy responses. In the next phase of the project these different policy responses will be explored, and their impact on individuals and households, as shown by the responses to our questionnaire.

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This material for this overview of the project is drawn to a great extent from the literature reviews carried out by each of the partners:

- Cousins, C. and Tang, N. (2001) Households, Work and Flexibility: literature review. The UK
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- Boje, T. and Strandh, M. (2001) Households, Work and Flexibility: literature review. Sweden
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Kovatcheva, S. (2001) Households, Work and Flexibility: literature review. Bulgaria
Sicherl, P. and Remec, M. (2001) Households, Work and Flexibility: literature review. Slovenia
Sik, E. and Medgyesi, M. (2001) Households, Work and Flexibility: literature review. Hungary
These can be found on the homepage www.hwf.at, or in hard copy from Alexander Chvorostov, Institute for
Advanced Studies, Stumpergasse 56, 1060 Vienna Austria.
