

Understanding flexibility

About the HWF project



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The HWF is a complex study that looks at the relationship between home and work in different countries in Eastern and Western Europe and the impact that flexibility has had upon this in different contexts. The countries covered are: the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria. These countries present a range of experiences of flexibilisation and policy initiatives with regard to flexibility. The methods of research used include a sample survey in each country and an analysis of labour market and policy trends. The results of the survey analysis and the labour market and policy trends for each country will be available from April 2002 whilst the comparative analysis will take place mainly in the last year of the project and will be available from April 2003. This summary of results is based upon a description of the discourse of flexibility and home-work relations in each country.

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HWF Research Consortium

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Objectives of the study

The main objective of the project is to understand the impact of work flexibility upon households in different European contexts. That is, flexibility in terms of **time** (part time work, short term work etc.), **place** (where the work takes place) and **conditions** (what sort of contractual arrangements pertain, formal and informal arrangements etc.).

In particular to:

1. Describe and analyse the kinds of regulations and policies governing flexible work in different countries, including the impact of EU and national policies in this respect.
2. To describe and analyse the patterns of work and household behaviour in general in the target countries using national statistics, expert interviews and contextual knowledge.
3. To analyse the impact of different patterns of work upon household organisation through implementation of a standardised sample survey which will be used to compare countries.
4. To consider variations between an within countries according to gender, generation, socio-economic status as well as work cultures and values.
5. To compare the impact of changing working patterns in Western and post-communist Eastern Europe.



Interpreting flexibility

- ▶ Flexibility means different things in different European contexts – especially between Eastern and Western Europe.
- ▶ Different kinds of flexibility are emphasised in different European contexts.
- ▶ Eastern Europe has the highest flexibility in practice, even though in these countries flexibility is not so much of a policy preoccupation as in Western Europe. Much of this flexibility might be in the informal rather than the formal economy.
- ▶ In some countries flexibility is embraced as a way of improving the quality of working life, in others it is seen as mainly threatening the quality of working life.
- ▶ Some groups of workers – women, younger and older people, ethnic minorities – are more flexible than others.

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Discourses about Flexibility:

Main outcomes of the HWF Literature Survey

The HWF Literature Survey has been a first study of the whole HWF project. All the partners undertook a thorough critical review of literature sources available in their countries to catch up the discourses about flexibility as these are represented in discussed in their countries.

The main conclusions of the cabinet study are that:

- ▶ **Flexibility means different things in different countries.** For example, in the *Netherlands* flexibility is about changing the hours of work without eroding security of contracts. In the *UK* it is also about the hours of work but with less security of conditions. In *Sweden*, flexibility has been absorbed into the protected labour market policy enabling people to work in different ways in order to manage family life. In many countries flexibility means short term and precarious employment – that is, it is about conditions of work (contracts). In the *Czech Republic*, *Hungary* and *Slovenia* there is a preoccupation with place of work – the fact that the places where jobs are found are not the same as where the workers are living. In *Romania* and *Bulgaria* there is little discussion of flexibility even though these countries probably have the most flexibilisation in practice. Hence ...
- ▶ **The role of the state and social partners** make a difference to the extent that flexibility can benefit or threaten people in the labour market. Controlled flexibility, regulated by the state or social partnership is regarded much more positively than uncontrolled flexibility where de-regulatory policies simply remove social and job protection in the labour market. This also depends upon the economic conditions in the country. Those countries whose economies are in a state of crisis (such as *Romania* and *Bulgaria*) are unable to control the flexibilisation taking place there. This is partly because...
- ▶ **In Candidate countries, there may be little formal flexibility** but a great deal of informal flexibility. For example, in the candidate countries with the most economic problems, *Romania* and *Bulgaria*, there is probably the most flexibilisation but this has taken place as a result of the need for workers to do any kind of work under any conditions. In *Romania* this has resulted in huge expansion in the number of people employed in agriculture (mainly subsistence style) as people return to the land (which has been restituted to them). In *Bulgaria*, young people prefer precarious jobs in cities whilst older people retire to the land to practise peasant style agriculture and support the family. In these countries a large part of the workforce is absent from national accounts. In the more successful candidate countries such as the *Czech Republic*, *Hungary* and *Slovenia* there are still between 10% and 30% of jobs estimated as being in the informal economy and these are very flexible. However, the flexibilisation of the formal labour market has not got very far and even where reforms have been introduced, their take up has been disappointing. This is partly because ...
- ▶ **Expectations of work vary between different countries.** Whilst in the *Netherlands* the part time work of women is seen as an alternative to their full time residence at home to look after families, in *Sweden* there is an expectation that everyone will work for most of their careers (with protected and subsidised breaks for looking after children). In the *UK* it is also increasingly the case that both men and women expect to work in the labour market. In the Candidate countries, by contrast, the tradition of two full time workers in the labour market is reinforced by the need to earn money and make ends meet during the transition crisis. Therefore, there is not much interest in reducing hours. This is related to the fact that ...
- ▶ **The role of part time, precarious and self employed work differs considerably in different contexts.** For example, some “self employed” workers may be entrepreneurs, but for others it is a kind of forced, casualised employment. This leads us to conclude that there seems to be voluntary, advantageous flexibility controlled by the worker to suit their needs and forced, disadvantageous flexibility where the worker has to work where and when they can, often at considerable inconvenience. We might also add that there is a difference between professional workers who can command high salaries for flexible work and low paid, low skilled people who may earn very little or nothing during the periods that they are not required. This means that...
- ▶ **The control that the worker has over hours and conditions is therefore very important.** It is not so much flexibility which is advantageous or disadvantageous as the extent to which the employee/self-employed worker can control them to fit their own needs. *Sweden* and the *Netherlands* had the most progressive experiences in this respect.
- ▶ **The public discourse ranges from positive embracing of flexibility** as a way of modernising the labour market and creating employment or enabling the integration of work and life to downright hostility and resistance. In most countries, flexibility is mainly seen negatively, as an erosion of working conditions.

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▶ **The relationship between home and work** is very varied in different European countries both with regard to the culture of care. In the *Netherlands* and the *UK*, part-time work is a response to the expectation that women will look after families – they have to develop “do it yourself” solutions to child care. In *Sweden*, the state is seen to be important for the care of children. In the Candidate countries the extensive support provided by the socialist states for women with children has been eroded and the extended family is now the most common solution for care of children on the basis of a strong solidarity between the generations. In *Slovenia*, however, extensive state support continues because of the relative affluence of this country in comparison to other post-socialist countries.

▶ **The policy responses** range mainly along the following continuum: pro-active (actively espousing flexibility to enhance job opportunities) as we see in the *Netherlands* and *Sweden*; de-regulatory (as in the *UK*) but also adopted to some extent in some candidate countries; resistance with relatively strong economies enabling resistance to the introduction of what are seen as negative trends (as in *Czech Republic* and *Slovenia*); partial formal flexibilisation in *Hungary*; and default flexibilisation which takes place without any active policies but in response to labour market crisis (*Romania* and *Bulgaria*).

Trends and dimensions of flexibility

Who is most affected by flexibilization? The literature study suggests the following preliminary conclusions:

1. **Women are more likely to be flexible than men.** This reflects their disadvantaged situation in the labour market as well as the fact that they shoulder most domestic burdens.
2. **Young people and older workers** are more likely to be flexible than prime aged workers. In some cases this is because they can find no other port of entry into the labour market. However, flexible jobs are also a way of supporting increasing numbers of students as well as the early retired.
3. **Ethnicity/citizenship.** Members of ethnic minorities and those without full citizenship (or with no

citizenship) such as guest workers are most likely to be found in the flexible sector.

4. **The stage of the life-cycle affects flexibility.** Women with young children are more likely to be found in flexible work. For people at certain stages of their careers (such as entering employment, studying or preparing for retirement) flexible work can seem a more desirable option.
5. **The role of the informal economy affects flexibility.** If the formal economy is rather rigid, flexibility may be displaced into the informal economy. However, formal and informal workers may be the same people at different times of the day so there is not necessarily a polarisation between the two.

Flexibilisation and the modernization of the labour market

Flexibilisation can be seen as part of the modernisation of the labour market and as a way of improving employment.

This is certainly the spirit in which it has been embraced in the *Netherlands*, *Sweden* and the *UK*.

However, it can also be a solution to the crisis in the labour market and represent a kind of demodernisation of employment relations, taking place in a rather uncontrolled way, often through the informal econo-

my, as is the case in *Bulgaria* and *Romania*. Other countries have flexibilisation thrust upon them (the *Czech Republic*, *Hungary*, *Slovenia*), partly through foreign interventions including the EU policies and despite some tendencies to resist these tendencies (possible due to their better economic conditions), there has been some attempt to make reforms.

Otherwise the informal economy provides much of the necessary flexibility.

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Order Form and Detailed Publication Prospectus is enclosed as a separate sheet inside this FF Newsletter. These can be also downloaded from < www.hwf.at >

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Gathering new data: HWF Cross-Country Survey

Whilst there is considerable information regarding the flexibility for Western European countries, the information for Eastern Europe is much poorer. In order to gather data allowing reliable international comparisons, we have designed and carried out a unique **HWF Cross-Country Survey** of 11,664 individual respondents in 8 European countries.

The **HWF Questionnaire** includes five sections: (1) detailed information of on individual respondents, (2) information of household members, (3) work values, (4) potential for flexibility, (5) economic resources of households.

First outcomes of the analysis of the **HWF Survey** shall be available in Summer 2002 and published in subsequent issues of the series of **HWF Research Reports** in 2002–2003.

	Sample size	Type of interview
UK	945	Face to face
NL	1,007	Telephone
SE	2,292	Telephone
SI	1,008	Face to face
CZ	1,556	Face to face
HU	1,166	Face to face
BG	1,806	Face to face
RO	1,864	Face to Face
total:	11,644	

(A **representative sample survey**: at least 1,000 individuals in each country; based upon a randomly selected samples according to standard international conventions; fieldwork accomplished in Spring 2001.)

Be informed on findings!

The HWF research consortium publishes a newsletter **Flexy-Findings (FF)** that informs you about main findings and events of the 8-nation study. **FF** is published at a conclusion of every important stage of the HWF study and is widely distributed (free of charge) among the subscribers to the HWF Research Reports and other interested parties.

FF can be requested from the HWF Project Coordinator or downloaded from the project home page. **FF** is available in printed and electronic (PDF) formats.



The **FF issue 2** is expected in the Fall 2002 and shall be devoted mainly to the main findings of the HWF Contextual Studies as well to preliminary results of the large-scale HWF Survey.

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