

# Chapter Four

## ►► HOUSEHOLDS, WORK AND FLEXIBILITY Survey Comparative Report (Volume 2: Thematic Reports)

### **Are Swedish workers less flexible than the Dutch and British workers or are the three labour markets just characterised by different patterns of flexibility**

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## INTRODUCTION

Flexibility is frequently mentioned in the on-going transformation of work organisation and is seen as a main instrument in reducing labour costs, boosting employment and increasing productivity. Typically, the need for flexibility in work organisations and different types of employment is emphasized by both politicians and researchers as a necessity in adjusting the national labour markets to the intensified competition. At the general level flexibility is in labour market literature defined as the capacity of firms and workers to adjust to changes (OECD 1989: 13). This capacity means greater ability and readiness of firms as well as individual workers to respond to the fluctuations in demands caused by growing international competition as well as in adapting to the changing technologies and consumer preferences (see Boje and Grönlund 2003).

Seen from the employers' perspective introduction of flexibility in work organisation and employment is a convenient instrument in making the companies able to cope with the growing uncertainty in markets through giving the employers the possibility of transferring this uncertainty onto the employees. For the employees the introduction of flexible work organisations and types of employment seems more dubious. On the one hand it might release the employees from the most rigid forms of organising the work process and thereby give them greater possibilities of combining work and family responsibilities (see Boje 2003). On the other hand it typically also means more insecurity and irregularity of em-

ployment contracts and consequently greater vulnerability in their position in the labour market (Carnoy 2000; Carnoy and Castells 1997).

In the public debate, both on a national level and on a European level, the extent of such flexibility on national labour markets (or on European labour markets as compared to the US labour market) is often assumed to relate directly to competitiveness. With this line of thinking there should exist clear and measurable hierarchies of flexibility between different countries that would indicate competitiveness and the need for labour market reform. What we will try to do in this article is to investigate if it is possible to easily delineate such hierarchies between European labour markets, using both simple standard measures of labour flexibility and more nuanced measures that might better take into account the actual flexibility content on the labour market. The article makes use of a large comparative data set collected within the 'Household Work and Flexibility' (HWF) project, financed through the EU's fifth framework program and includes data on working and employment conditions in three Northern European countries representing different labour market models – the corporatist Netherlands, the social democratic Sweden and the closest thing Europe has to a liberal (and therefore flexible) labour market, the United Kingdom. We will not go into details with all types of flexibility but primarily focus on three kinds of flexibility in work organisation and employment. The working time flexibility measured by the number of hours

worked by the employees, how these hours are changed and distributed during the working day or week. The location of the work place measured by job rotation or non-standard work place – i.e.

work at home or at different places. Finally we will look at the type of employment contract held by the employee and the number of current economic activities held by the individual employees.

## 1. FLEXIBILITY IN EMPLOYMENT AND WORKING TIME BY GENDER – AN OVERVIEW

Flexibilisation of the work organisation and the changing working time regimes have been analysed extensively but mostly in narrow national case studies and few large-scale quantitative surveys. There is however no doubt the transformation of the industrial structure as well as the work organisation has changed the employment conditions for large groups of the labour force. This development has caused a strong pressure for more flexible use of labour and a more flexible organisation of firms (Sennett 1998). The traditional forms of work based on full-time employment and long tenure has been slowly eroded and instead different types of non-standard or atypical employment contracts have been introduced.

The definition of atypical employment contracts usually includes temporary work, contract work, part-time employment, certain categories of self-employed persons, sub-contracted work and work at home (see Dex and McCulloch 1997; Purcell 1999). The level of flexibility accomplished by introducing these new types of employment contracts varies, however, tremendously depending upon which measure of flexibility is being used and takes different forms depending on the system of employment regulation. In table 1 we have

given a statistical overview based on the EU labour force survey of the proportion of the labour force employed in the three most frequently mentioned types of atypical work. All three types of atypical employment are gendered. Self-employment is primarily male-dominated and part-time employment is overwhelming a female type of employment while temporary employment seems to be slightly more gender-balanced.

Self-employment as a whole has dropped substantially in all three countries during the recent decades. Self-employment traditionally has been connected with the agricultural sector, a sector that has lost its importance in all three labour markets. On the other hand, during the 1990s a slight increase in the proportion of self-employed has taken place in the non-agrarian sector. This recent growth in self-employment has primarily happened in the service industries and especially in the producer services where a large number of small IT-firms and firms providing services for business have been established (see Boje 2003). In Sweden there has thus been a continuous rise in non-agricultural self-employment from 5 per cent in the early 1970s to about 10 per cent in the mid 1990s.

**Table 1. Proportion of self-employed, fixed-term and part-time employment by gender in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom in percentages of the total labour force 2000**

	Self-employment		Fixed-term employment		Part-time employment	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
The Netherlands	16	12	11	17	19	71
Sweden	8	3	12	16	10	36
United Kingdom	15	7	6	8	9	45
EU-15	18	11	13	15	6	33

Source: Employment in Europe, 2002: 173-180

Another important form of atypical employment is employment on fixed-term contracts. This group has been relatively stable in Sweden covering about 12 – 14 per cent of the labour force. In the Netherlands fixed-termed contracts have increased significantly from about 7 per cent in 1990 to 14 per cent of the total labour force in 2000 and this type of employment is primarily frequent among Dutch women. Finally the level of fixed-term employment is low in the UK. Here it is only about half the level in the EU as a whole. In the UK employment regulation is so weak that it is not necessary for the employers to hire employees on fixed-term contracts to avoid ending up with employees on permanent contract, normally all types of employees can be laid-off anytime without notice (OECD 1996).

For the third type of atypical employment, employees working in part-time jobs, the pattern is and has been highly gendered in all three labour markets. Only a small proportion of men work anything other than full time whereas the proportion of women working part time is high. In all three countries less than 10 per cent of the male labour force works part-time defined by 30 hours or less per week. Instead the overwhelming majority of men work 40 hours or more and in the UK a significant group of men – 30 per cent – works even more than 50 hours per week while it is the case for about one-fifth in both Sweden and the Netherlands (see Cousins and Tang 2002; Visser 2000).

The proportion of women working part-time is as mentioned markedly higher than for men. The pattern of women's part-time employment differs, however, strongly between the three countries. In both United Kingdom and the Netherlands the large majority of women work part-time. In Sweden most women work 40 hours per week or more and the number of female part-times is thus remarkably lower than in the other countries. The proportion of Swedish women working part time has declined over time from almost 40 per cent in 1987 to less than 20 per cent the first quarter of 2001 (Wallace 2003).

Looking at flexibility – not from the individual worker's position – but from how the employers have organised the workplace the Dutch sociologist Laura den Dulk has compared flexible work arrangements in the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom – see table 2.

**Table 2. Flexible work arrangements in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom, 1999, percentage of employers**

Type of work arrangement	Netherlands	Sweden	United Kingdom
<i>Most or all employers provide:</i>			
Part-time work	96	93	100
Flex-time	70	92	64
Compressed working week	30	47	40
Tele-work	20	39	25
Work a day from home	10	16	12
	<b>N = 113</b>	<b>N = 100</b>	<b>N = 67</b>

Source: Dulk 2000: 135

Swedish employers provide flexible work arrangements more often than employers in Netherlands and the UK. This is especially the case when looking at variable working hours - flexi-time or a compressed working week – but also the possibilities for telework and work at home are more widespread in Sweden than in the other countries. This means that Swedish employees have greater possibilities for reconciling work and family responsibilities. They have more alternatives in organising their working week and in choosing between working at home or in the company organisation. All together it may be a reasonable conclusion that the Swedish labour market seems more flexible and adaptable to the needs of families than most other labour markets despite the tight regulation of the employment relations.

The pattern of flexibility is different in the three countries. Self-employment is most widespread in the Netherlands and among men. Part-time employment is again most frequent in the Netherlands and obviously primarily a female phenomenon. Finally fixed-term employment is

higher in the Netherlands and Sweden than in the United Kingdom. All together we find a very mixed picture of flexibility comparing these three countries and this picture becomes even more mixed when the employers are asked about the prevalence of flexibility in their work organisations. Here the three countries show a very similar

pattern, with the Swedish firms slightly more flexible than Dutch and British firms. To get a more profound knowledge about flexibility in work organisation and employment we want to go more in detail measuring the type and level of flexibility based on the HWF – dataset.

## 2. THE HWF SURVEY – DESCRIPTION OF THE DATA-SET

The HWF survey used a common questionnaire on random samples in eight participant EU and transition countries: Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania. In this study only three of these countries are included – the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom. The questionnaire was designed to cover the different types of employment and especially the survey focused on the pattern of flexibility measured by flexibility of working time, working place and working condition. Furthermore, the survey includes questions on satisfaction on job and working conditions, different types of income earning by the respondents, the organization of the household, how the household members combine of paid and unpaid labor and how they combine different forms of work such as housework, voluntary work, and casual work, along with the various kinds of regular employment. A particular aim of the questionnaire was to get an idea of the activities of household members and how these fit together. Here we shall primarily concentrate on the questions aimed at describing the level of flexibility in the work organization and in employment conditions.

The survey was conducted in the spring of 2001 using face-to-face or telephone interviews. The response rate varied, but was in all countries in line with what was normal for the individual country. The response rate, the number of interviews, and the type of survey for these countries are presented in Table 3. For more information on the HWF questionnaire and survey, and for detailed descriptions of the HWF survey in a respective country, see Wallace (2002).

**Table 3. Response rates, number of completed interviews, and type of survey in the countries presented in the article**  
([http://www.hwf.at/project\\_questionnaire.html](http://www.hwf.at/project_questionnaire.html))

	Response rate	Completed interviews	Type of survey
Sweden	69%	1,287	Telephone
Netherlands	20% <sup>a</sup>	1,008	Telephone
United Kingdom	58%	945	Face to face
Note:	<sup>a</sup> Low response rates in surveys are and have been a problem in the Netherlands for some time. The rates in the HWF survey are therefore quite normal. The falling-off analysis indicates that the results should be representative for the country using a weight designed by the Dutch partners in the project.		
Source:	HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection		

### 3. ALTERNATIVE MEASURES OF FLEXIBILITY – COMPARING THE NETHERLANDS, SWEDEN AND UNITED KINGDOM

Most labour market researchers use the three above-mentioned types of non-standard employment as the main indicators of flexibility – see e. g. Rubery, Smith and Fagan 1999; Dex and McCulloch 1997. This approach might however be too narrow for discovering real differences in flexibility between the countries, and we would like to

argue for the need of a more balanced and realistic picture of what actually implies flexibility in a labour force. Therefore, we will now turn towards exploring what such a broader perspective on flexibility will show in our three North European countries.

#### 3.1. Working hours and how they are scheduled

Here we will start with looking at indicators of working time flexibility in the labour force. Often short working hours are considered as the most important indicator of flexibility but it depends highly on who decide the number of hours to work and who plan the working time schedule of the employees. Furthermore working longer hours than the standard weekly hours might actually be considered as more of a flexible working time pattern because working overtime is a way to accommodate either to the firms' demand or to the employees' need of earning extra money. We have in this analysis defined standard working hours as the weekly working hours between 35 and 44 hours - see table 4.

Table 4 shows the number of hours worked totally by men and women in the three countries. This table repeat a well-known pattern with high

rates of shorter working hours and consequently assumed higher working time flexibility in the UK and the Netherlands than in Sweden. For men the flexibility defined by working shorter than standard hours it is greatest in the Netherlands while flexibility defined by longer than standard hours is substantially higher in the United Kingdom. For women the pattern is the same when looking at shorter than standard hours. As many as two-thirds of Dutch women totally work less than 35 hours a week, substantially more than in the United Kingdom (49.8 per cent) and more than twice as many as in Sweden (31.6 per cent). When it comes to longer than standard hours, however, the proportion of women in Sweden is somewhat higher (19.5 per cent) than in the United Kingdom and especially compared with the Netherlands.

**Table 4. Number of hours totally worked by men and women in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom in 2001 – HWF-data**

	Men			Women		
	-34	35-44	45-	-34	35-44	45-
Sweden	6.2%	57.8%	36.1%	31.6%	49.0%	19.5%
Netherlands	13.6%	52.3%	34.1%	65.5%	26.2%	8.3%
UK	6.2%	44.2%	49.6%	49.8%	35.2%	14.7%
	Chi2=***			Chi2=***		

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection



Measured by the total number of worked hours per week the Swedish labour force is more concentrated around standard weekly working hours for both men and women, something that should indicate a lower level of flexibility among Swedish employees compared with employees in the other two countries. However, we would like to argue against this conclusion and to look a bit more closely on what the numbers mean. As discussed previously it is in most cases questionable that working shorter than standard hours actually means flexibility. It depends on who decide the working time schedule of the employees. Furthermore it has been found in several surveys that tenure among full-time and part-time workers is nearly the same when considered for age and gender (Boje and Grönlund 2003; OECD 1999). A strong argument against the relationship between shorter working hours and flexibility could be that working shorter than standard hours implies inflexibility for the employee dependent of who decide the working time – see table 5.

**Table 5. Indicators of flex-time working arrangements and voluntary part-time in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom 1995/98**

	% of employees with flex-time work	% of female employees in voluntary part-time
Netherlands	35.8	44.8
Sweden	32.3	20.3
UK	31.8	30.1

Source: John E Evans OECD Occasional Papers No. 48, 2001: 51

Looking at table 5 we find that the level of flexibility in scheduling the working time seems to be at nearly the same level in all three countries but significantly more Swedish women consider their part-time job as involuntary than it is the case for Dutch and British women. The Swedish women are looking for full-time employment even though a large proportion is working more than 30 hours already (OECD 1999:39). This means that for a majority of the Swedish women working part-time is definitely not considered as a flexible type of employment. From the employees' perspective we can only be sure that those working longer than

standard hours are the really flexible part of the work force. This would – according to table 4 – mean that it is actually the British men and the Swedish women that stand out as being somewhat more flexible.

This brings in another aspect of being flexible in the labour market – the access to gainful employment. So far we have only looked at those who are in the labour force and in gainful employment. Everybody who is working is regardless of the length of the working time showing some degree of flexibility towards the labour market. The truly inflexible it might be argued would actually be those who are in working-age and are looking for a job but prevented from being active in the labour market. In table 6 the number of working hours is shown as in table 4 but with the difference that the whole working age population is included.

According to table 6 United Kingdom has the greatest proportion of inflexibility for both men (24.6 per cent) and women (34.3 per cent), while the lowest number of really inflexible men is to be found in the Netherlands (13.2 per cent) and among women in Sweden (23.8 per cent). Including the really inflexible – the non-employed in the working-age – also affects the proportions we can characterise as really flexible, those who work longer than standard weekly hours. In particular this proportion drops in Britain and the differences in proportions of real flexible employees between British men and Dutch men, who previously appeared to be the least flexible, drop substantially (from 15.5 per cent to 7.6 per cent). It is of course possible that the numbers could be affected by differences in labour market conditions at the time when the survey was conducted. In periods with bad labour market conditions it is quite possible that even very flexible unemployed are unable to find jobs, and not being in employment would then be a bad measure of inflexibility. It is however doubtful that this is the case in the current comparison as unemployment was low and the labour markets expanding in all three countries at the time of data collection (the first couple of months of 2001).



**Table 6. Number of hours totally worked by men and women in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom in 2001 – HWF-data (counting the total population in working ages)**

	Men				Women			
	Not working	-34	35-44	45-	Not working	-34	35-44	45-
Sweden	17.4%	5.2%	47.6%	29.7%	24.7%	23.8%	36.9%	14.6%
Netherlands	13.2%	12.0%	45.3%	29.5%	30.3%	45.7%	18.2%	5.7%
UK	24.6%	5.3%	33.1%	37.1%	34.3%	32.8%	23.1%	9.9%
	Chi2=***				Chi2=***			

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

### 3.2. Working time location

Flexibility of time and in access to gainful employment in the labour force is not only a question about the length of the working time. There are several others working time related dimensions that would imply a higher or lower flexibility of those in the labour force vis-à-vis their employers. In the HWF survey we have two such measures that should be able to give a picture of time flexibility in the labour force in addition to the number of working hours. The first measure is the proportion of employees working non-traditional working hours. Traditional working hours is here defined as weekly working hours between Monday morning and Friday afternoon. According to this definition having non-traditional working hours will thus be a rather broad array of working time arrangements from shift work of different kinds over regular schedules including weekends to very irregular schedules. The common denominator for all these different forms of working time arrangements is that they to a degree allow the employer a higher level of freedom in organizing the labour in accordance with market demands, and thus implying labour force flexibility – see table 7.

Table 7 shows that flexibility measured as non-traditional weekly working hours is lower for both men (33.3 per cent) and women (40.6 per cent) in the Swedish labour force compared with the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The United Kingdom has the highest proportion non-traditional weekly working hours among men

(47.6 per cent) and the Netherlands the highest among women (52.9 per cent).

**Table 7. Proportion of employees by gender with non-traditional weekly working hours in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – HWF data**

	Men	Women
Sweden	33.3%	40.6%
Netherlands	36.6%	52.9%
United Kingdom	47.6%	45.4%
	Chi2=***	Chi2=**

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

The other indicator available in the HWF survey that might show an important aspect of time flexibility besides the number of working hours is that the respondents have to take work home in order to get it finished. This measure indicates the degree of spill over of working life into other areas of life such as family life or more broadly what could be labelled as 'free time'. Taking work with you to finish at home could indicate a high level of employee flexibility and it could be argued that it represents an alternative route to the desired flexibility in relation to market demands than we find in the normal scheduling of working time – see table 8.

**Table 8. The proportion of employees by gender who have to take work with them home to get it finished in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – HWF data**

	Men	Women
Sweden	40.6%	33.5%
Netherlands	37.9%	27.6%
United Kingdom	28.4%	29.1%
	Chi2=***	Chi2=(*)

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

What we can see from table 8 when looking at the proportion having to take work home in order to get it finished comparing our three countries is quite a different picture from the pattern of working time flexibility shown in the previous tables. Here Sweden stands out as having the most flexible labour force both among men and women (among women the differences between the coun-

tries were only significant at the 0.1 level). The findings oppose strongly our previous result showing Sweden as having the least flexible labour force when looking at non-traditional weekly working hours. In Sweden 40 per cent of men and one-third of women from time to time have to take work home to get it finished. The United Kingdom had the lowest proportion of such work life spill over for men (28.4 per cent) and the Netherlands for women (27.6 per cent). That we here find a completely reversed picture of the relationship between the three countries on scheduling the working time flexibility might indicate that employees' responsibility and flexibility in relation to work tasks indeed might represent an alternative flexibility route for employers solving the same market demands.

### 3.3. Location of working place

The proportion having to take work home to get it finished is presented here as an indicator of flexibility of time but it could also function as an indicator of flexibility of working place of the employed. This is the case if people in paid labour have to perform work tasks somewhere else than at their regular workplace. Such a measure of flexibility – as we showed in table 7 – indicates that Swedish workers are not less spatially flexible (rather more) than the Dutch and British workers. However, flexibility of place in the job is probably more appropriately measured by looking at the proportion of non-standard workplaces, which are the measure provided in the HWF survey. Employees at non-standard working places mean here those employees who have their working places at least partly at home or who are working at varying places. This would imply a spatial flexibility in relation to having a traditional working place separated from the home – see table 9.

According to table 9 using non-standard workplaces as a measure of flexibility in the labour force will change the ranking of our three

countries. Then United Kingdom seems to be characterized by the highest level of spatial flexibility. For men 17.7 per cent of working men in United Kingdom had non-standard working places followed by 14.6 per cent in Sweden and 12.2 per cent in the Netherlands (the differences were only statistically significant on the 0.1 level). The differences among women were greater however with 13.1 per cent of the British working women having non-standard workplaces, followed by 7.7 per cent in the Netherlands and only 4.6 per cent in Sweden.

**Table 9. The proportion of employees by gender working at non-standard workplaces (at least partly at home or in varying places) in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – HWF data**

	Men	Women
Sweden	14.6%	4.6%
Netherlands	12.2%	7.7%
United Kingdom	17.7%	13.1%
	Chi2=(*)	Chi2=***

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

### 3.4. Types of employment contract

A completely other type of worker flexibility is related to the conditions under which the job is undertaken. Here questions about the type of employment contract and the prevalence of alternative and multiple forms of employment in the labour market define the level of flexibility of the employee. The probably most often used indicator is the prevalence of a traditional permanent employment contract or not in the employees' main job. Non-permanent contracts would here indicate flexibility as it will give the employers increased possibilities of adjusting the workforce in accordance to market demands. Table 10 shows the proportion of the employed labour in the three countries without a permanent employment contract.

What we can see using this measure of flexibility is that Swedish workers for both men and women indeed seem to be less flexible than is the case for Dutch and British workers. The United Kingdom has the highest proportion of both men (33.3 per cent) and women (30.1 per cent) without permanent employment contracts followed by the Netherlands (with 24.7 per cent for men and 29.7 per cent for women). The proportions in Sweden are markedly lower with 21.3 per cent of men and only 17.8 per cent of women lacking a permanent employment contract in their main job.

**Table 10. The proportion of employees by gender without a permanent contract in their main job in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – HWF-data**

	Men	Women
Sweden	21.3%	17.8%
Netherlands	24.7%	29.7%
United Kingdom	33.3%	30.1%
	Chi2=***	Chi2=***

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

Does this however mean that the employment conditions under which Swedes are working work are less flexible than in the other two countries? As we saw looking at flexibility of time and to some extent at flexibility of place there are different approaches in pursuing flexibility. This also concerns measuring flexibility of conditions and might result in different flexibility hierarchies between the three countries.

The HWF survey covers in addition to the type of employment contract a couple of other important aspects of flexibility of conditions. Flexibility of conditions could for instance be measured as the proportion of the labour force, which is working as self employed or participating in casual labour. Both of these measures would indicate alternative solutions to temporary employment for potential employers getting the work done with a high level of numerical flexibility. By all three measures – no permanent employment contract, self-employment and casual employment – it is possible for the employer to avoid tying 'employed' workers to the company without a permanent employment contract, which is regulated under labour law.

In table 11 the proportions of respondents in the working age population having done any work as self-employed or having done casual work during the last 12 months is shown. The table shows, as was the case with permanent contracts that the United Kingdom seems to be the most flexible labour market, although there are some changes in the ranking of the countries. For men there is more flexibility in United Kingdom on both measures than in the other two countries, with 18.2 per cent having done some work as self-employed and 15.4 per cent having done casual work during the last 12 months. The ranking of Sweden and the Netherlands has changed, however, and it becomes clear that including these two measures of flexibility Swedish men are not less flexible than Dutch men. They are rather more flexible even though the differences are small. Among Swedish men 12.9 per cent have

done work as self employed and 10.5 per cent have done casual work during the last year, as compared to 11 per cent having been self employed and 7.8 per cent having done casual work in the Netherlands. Looking at women we also found that the United Kingdom has the highest proportions in flexible employment relations with 8.5 per cent having done work as self-employed and 17.8 per cent having done casual work in the

last 12 months. Almost the same proportions of Dutch women have, however, been working as self-employed (8.4 per cent) with Swedish women are lagging behind (4.9 per cent). On casual work there is a substantially greater proportion among the United Kingdom women, but the proportion of Swedish women (8.8 per cent) having done casual work during the last year is significantly higher than for Dutch women (5.6 per cent).

**Table 11. Proportion of the population with self employment incomes and proportion having done work on very short (including agency distributed work) or no contract during the last 12 months by gender in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – HWF data**

	Men		Women	
	Self employment	Casual/short term jobs	Self employment	Casual/short term jobs
Sweden	12.9	10.5	4.9	8.8
Netherlands	11.0	7.8	8.4	5.6
United Kingdom	18.2	15.4	8.5	17.8
	Chi2=**	Chi2=***	Chi2=*	Chi2=***

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

So far we have analysed the different types of employment contract and assumed that flexibility is increased by implementing fixed-term contract, out-sourcing and through using casual/short-term jobs. Flexibility is, however, not only an issue of the external relationship between employees and employers defined by the employment contract but even more dependent on how the internal organisation of the work takes place. Looking at the internal flexibility among the employees an OECD-study found that the Swedish labour market was characterised by a high level of job rotation and team based work organisation compared to most other European countries – see table 12.

Job rotation is in table 12 defined as a work design that allows employees to rotate between different jobs while team working achieves flexibility by pooling the skills of a number of workers. Both type of flexibility increases the level of adaptability in the firms' work organisation. Measured in this way the employees' flexibility is

high in Sweden despite more regulated employment contracts. Where internal or functional flexibility is used to increase the adaptability in Sweden primarily United Kingdom seems to use the external or numerical flexibility in achieving the same goal.

**Table 12. The proportion of workplaces reporting job rotation and team based work-organisation in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom in 1996**

	Job rotation	Team based work-organisation
The Netherlands	9	9
Sweden	38	29
United Kingdom	13	33
Average for EU-10	15	27

Source: OECD 1999: 54

A third dimension of the respondents labour market conditions, which can tell us something about the flexibility of conditions, is the number of labour market activities that the respondents are undertaken. To look at only the main job which has been done in analysing permanent or non-permanent contracts might to some extent underestimate the flexibility as it is possible for the respondents to have more than one job at the same time. Having multiple current economic activities would thus indicate a flexibility of conditions that needs to be taken into account. In table 13 the number of current economic activities among all respondents in the three countries is shown.

This table presents a radically different hierarchy of flexibility compared to the measure previously used in describing the type of employment contracts – non-standard contract, self-employment and casual jobs. As could be expected from our analysis of working time flexibility in the total working-age population United Kingdom stands out as having the largest propor-

tion economically inactive and thereby the highest proportion of respondents with no income activities at all (and as argued above, truly inflexible) for both men and women. Somewhat more surprising is, however, that the Swedish population has the highest proportion with more than one job, which means being the most flexible labour market measured by this indicator of flexibility. Roughly twice as many Swedish men (16.2 per cent) and women (16.7 per cent) hold multiple jobs as in the Netherlands (9.4 per cent of men and 8.8 per cent of women) and United Kingdom (7.2 per cent of men and 5.6 per cent of women). From this aspect of flexibility of conditions Swedish workers thus are the most flexible and United Kingdom workers the least flexible, which is the opposite conclusion to what we found when looking at employees having a permanent contract or not but a result which neatly fits into our findings concerning the level of job rotation and team based work organisation described in table 12.

**Table 13. Proportions of the respondents who have different numbers of current economic activities by gender in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – HWF data**

	Men			Women		
	None	1	2-	None	1	2-
Sweden	8.0	75.8	16.2	11.8	71.5	16.7
Netherlands	11.8	78.7	9.4	27.6	63.6	8.8
UK	27.6	65.2	7.2	38.9	55.6	5.6
	Chi2=***			Chi2=***		

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

#### 4. A COMPOSED INDEX OF FLEXIBILITY

This paper has tried to provide a broad picture of flexibility by using a wide number of indicators. A major problem with this approach, however, is that the great number of indicators is showing complete different results in measuring flexibility what makes it extremely difficult to conclude on the relatively simple question that started out the chapter: is the Swedish labour

market less flexible than the Dutch and British labour market? In order to answer this question properly we need to provide some kind of combined measure of flexibility that uses all the indicators that have been introduced in the chapter. For that reason a composed flexibility index has been constructed where the prevalence of the flexibility in the working-age population has been



counted as a single composed score. The different variables included in this composed index of flexibility are:

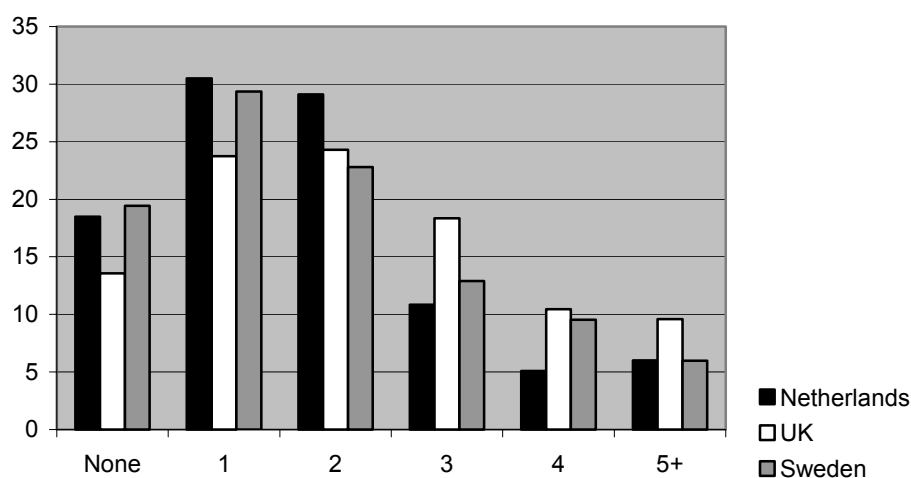
- working long hours (more than 44),
- having a non standard work week,
- having to take work home to finish,
- having a non standard place of work,
- having done casual or short term work during the last 12 months,
- having had self-employment incomes during the last 12 months,
- not having a permanent work contract for the main activity and
- holding more than one job.

The result has been an index ranging from zero if the respondent had no flexible traits in their working life to eight if they fulfilled all the above-mentioned flexibility criteria. It has to be noticed that such an index will have a major drawback that all the flexibility indicators carry the same weight in terms of importance for flexibility in the labour force, an assumption that probably is a bit simplistic. The simplicity is however also an advantage as it makes the measure easily understandable and avoids the theoretically difficult and to some extent normative exercise of weighting the items depending on their importance for the overall level of flexibility.

If we look in figure 1 and 2 where the flexibility index are presented for the working-age population divided by gender we can see that respondents in the United Kingdom seem to score higher on the flexibility index than in Sweden and the Netherlands. This appears to be especially marked among men, but the tendency is clear also among women. The difference between the Neth-

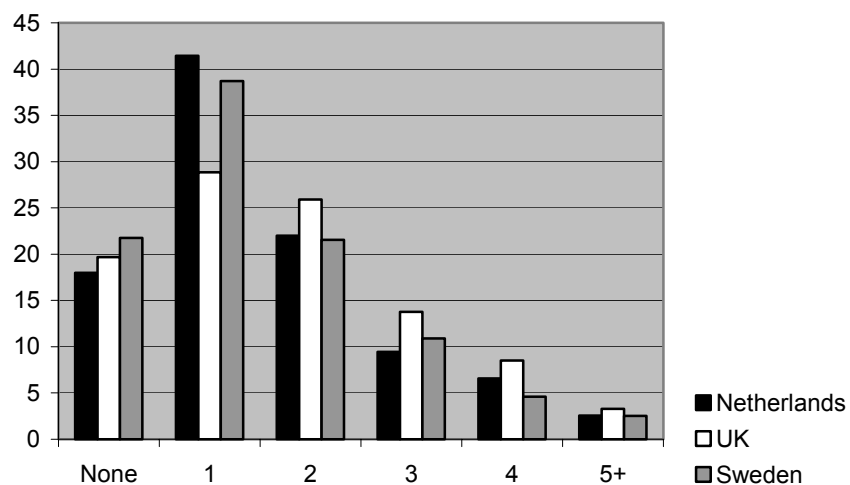
erlands and Sweden is however very small both among men and women. The answer to the initial question if Swedish employees are less flexible than the Dutch and British employees thus appears to be both yes and no. Swedes are less flexible than their British counterparts, but they appear to be just as flexible as the Dutch. This conclusion is however only based on the proportion of the working-age population, which is currently in paid labour, something that we above have argued might present a skewed picture of the actual flexibility of the whole working-age population in relation to the demands of the labour market. In order to take this into account the flexibility of the total working-age population an alternative flexibility index was constructed which is presented in figures 3 and 4. This index is basically constructed in the same way as the original flexibility index but here we try to take in to account that those outside the labour market actually are those who can be counted as the most inflexible. This measure is achieved through including the whole of the working age population and awarding those who currently are not in gainful employment a score of -1. Here it has to be noticed that with this construction it is still possible for some individuals who are not currently in gainful employment to get a score higher than -1, because a couple of the indicators relate to economic activity during the last 12 months. Most of these individuals not in gainful employment will only have fulfilled one of the flexibility criteria in the index thus receiving a total score on the index of zero. This is however a very small group and the great majority of those scoring zero on the index will be those holding what could be labelled a standard job without flexibility traits see figure 3 and 4.

**Figure 1. Index of flexibility for the working-age population in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – proportion of men with different number of flexibility indicators. HWF data**



Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

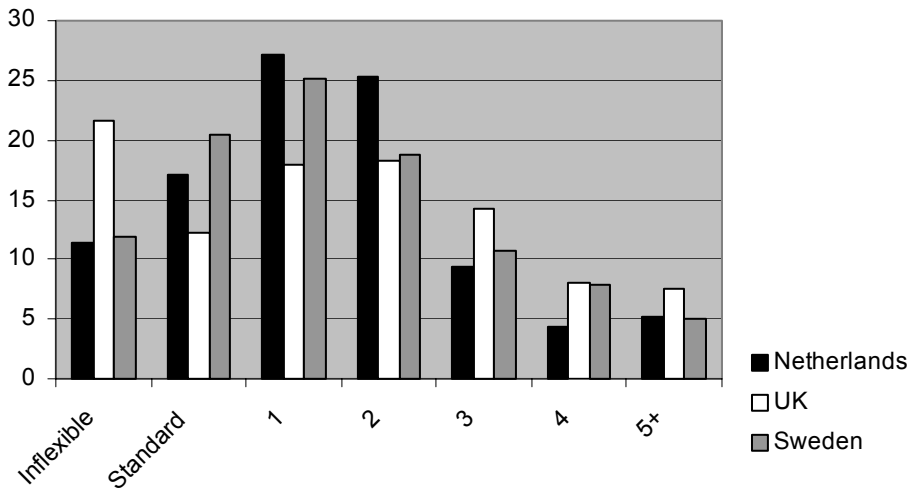
**Figure 2. Index of flexibility for the working-age population in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – proportion women with different number of flexibility indicators. HWF data**



Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

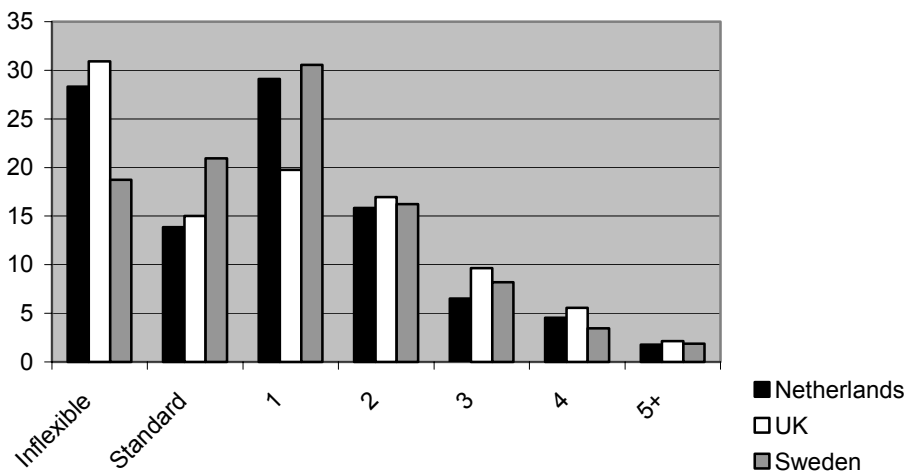


**Figure 3. Alternative index of flexibility counting the whole population in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – proportion men with different number of flexibility indicators. HWF data**



Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

**Figure 4. Alternative index of flexibility counting the whole population in the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom – proportion women with different number of flexibility indicators. HWF data**



Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

Using the alternative flexibility index in Figures 3 and 4 we do get a result that seems to be a bit different from what we found in relation to the original flexibility index. Starting with a look at the men in figure 3 we instead of a clear picture of greater flexibility in the United Kingdom vis-à-vis Sweden and the Netherlands find what could be labelled a dualistic picture. On the one hand there is a somewhat greater proportion in the United Kingdom fulfilling multiple flexibility criteria (although it is lower than in the original flexibility index). On the other hand the proportion men outside the labour market (and thus truly inflexible) is twice as big in the UK as in Sweden and the Netherlands. This leads to the paradoxical conclusion that for men the population in the United Kingdom thus appear to be both the most flexible and inflexible among the three countries. The picture among women also changes somewhat as can be seen in figure 4. Here the clearly higher proportion totally outside the labour market in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands is remarkable. Swedish women thus seem to be less inflexible than their counterparts. This does however not

mean that the Swedish women fulfil more flexibility criteria, rather that they instead of representing complete inflexibility in the labour market to a higher extent are holding standard jobs than the Dutch and British women.

Taking into account the findings from figure 3 and 4 including the total working-age population it does not appear as if Swedes are characterised by less flexibility than British and Dutch. In the same way as there might be different routes to flexibility it might be possible to conclude that flexibility in the Swedish working-age population might be somewhat differently structured compared with especially the United Kingdom. With a lower proportion totally inflexible and a lower proportion showing multiple flexibility the final result might well be that the flexibility registered in the total Swedish working-age population is at the same level as we find in United Kingdom. This can be exemplified by looking at the mean values of the original flexibility index and the alternative flexibility index shown in table 14.

**Table 14. Mean values on the original flexibility index and the alternative flexibility index by gender for the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom**

	Original flexibility index		Alternative flexibility index	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Netherlands	1.75	1.53	1.41	0.79
UK	2.21	1.74	1.48	0.86
Sweden	1.85	1.47	1.43	0.93
	p=***	p=*	Not sig.	Not sig.

Source: HWF Survey 2001 – Unified international data collection

Here we find as expected a clear and statistically significant difference on the original flexibility index, where the United Kingdom stands out as being more flexible than Sweden and the Netherlands. On the other hand, including the whole working-age population as done in the alternative

flexibility index shows that there are no significant differences between the three countries. The final answer is thus that they probably have nearly the same level of flexibility when considering the total working-age population of the three countries.

## 5. CONCLUSION

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What these analyses of different areas and aspects of flexibility show is that not even the most simple and standard measure necessarily provide a straight picture showing the inflexibility of one country (here Sweden) vis-à-vis other countries (here the United Kingdom and the Netherlands). For instance taking into account the kind of non-standard working hours, which actually represent flexibility will provide a different picture than just stating that non-standard hours are flexible. In the same way we have seen that flexibility in the labour force is a broad concept not only in the sense that it covers distinctive areas such as time, place and conditions. Here we have seen that these dif-

ferent areas contain distinctive aspects of flexibility that do not necessarily provide the same hierarchy of flexibility between the countries, as was shown with flexibility of conditions and time. In fact it is possible that these different aspects of flexibility will by necessity provide different hierarchies as they might indicate different routes to flexibility for employers in different institutional contexts. In order to assess the actual flexibility of the labour force in a country in relation to other countries it is thus necessary to provide measures that take into account this broad and varying picture of flexibility.

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