



**Full-time or**

**part-time work?**

**Different possibilities for women and men**

**Factsheet from the project Part-Time Work in the Nordic Region, 2014**

# Full-time or part-time work?

## Different possibilities for women and men

**Domestic responsibilities are an important reason why women work part time, according to a Nordic report presented by NIKK. Another reason is that many employers don't offer any full-time alternatives**

Women work part time to a much larger extent than men, with dire consequences for their economic independence. The report *Part-Time Work in the Nordic Region II* presents arguments and reasons concerning women's part-time work in the Nordic countries.

When women explain why they work part time, they frequently refer to their responsibility to take care of their families and children. Thus, policies and regulations concerning the relationship between work and family constitute one of several important pieces of the puzzle explaining part-time work among women. Labour market and family policies lead to different work expectations for women and men. Investments in child care, parental insurance and elderly care are policies that support a dual-earner model. Welfare systems may also be constructed based on the idea of a single breadwinner, for example through the introduction of home child-care allowances.

Strong state support for the dual-earner model coupled with a large share of women in the labour market can be found in several Nordic countries. Yet there are also regulations supporting the single-breadwinner model, and the balance between these two models varies among the countries. Values and norms around parenthood contribute to legitimise women's part-time work and can to some degree explain differences in the extent of part-time work across the Nordic region.

### **A part time-creating system**

Part-time work in the Nordic labour markets can be said to have undergone a normalisation process since the 1960s. In many countries, women's increased labour market participation coincided with the expansion of the welfare state. Several of the female-dominated occupational fields can be found in the public sector, and employment in this sector were often designed to be compatible with women's domestic responsibilities.

The combination of public sector employment and a high degree of unionisation has in the Nordic countries contributed to the creation of part-time jobs of high standard and to the perception that these jobs are part of the regular labour market. The quality of the part-time jobs helps explain their prevalence. This is for example a matter of to what extent laws, collective agreements and the general welfare systems facilitate or obstruct part-time employment. The existence of laws aimed to prevent discrimination of part-time workers is one factor that has contributed to making this type of employment more common.

### **Similarities and differences between the countries**

The share of women who work part time is about the same across the Nordic countries, with the exception of Finland, where part-time work is less common. This is partly due to the fact that the Finnish part-time labour market is more marginalised and concentrated to low-skill occupations. There are also historical explanations for the different situation in Finland. It seems like Finland, during this period, was not to the same extent as seen in the other countries characterised by the housewife ideal. The



Finnish economy and low wage levels after World War II can also be understood as having contributed to making full-time work an economic necessity for Finnish women.

Today, the share of part-time workers is decreasing in several of the Nordic countries, while the opposite seems to be the case in Finland. The increasing rate of part-time employment in Finland is linked to new regulations that have made it easier to combine part-time work and unemployment, caring responsibilities or reduced work ability. Thus, differences in the extent of part-time employment across the Nordic countries can be explained by factors at economic, political and cultural level.

### **Involuntary part-time work**

There are several reasons for the higher shares of part-time work among women than men. Domestic responsibilities, the way the work is organised and personal health are some important explanations.

Many female part-time workers also express difficulties finding full-time employment. The likelihood of involun-

tary part-time employment is particularly high for women, those with lower education and foreign-born individuals. Some employers in female-dominated sectors offer few or no alternatives to part-time employment, forcing job applicants who would prefer to work full time to sign part-time contracts. The discussions about involuntary part-time employment have been given a great deal of attention in the Nordic countries. Norway and Sweden are making active efforts to create more full-time jobs in for example the healthcare sector, where there is a need for more personnel. However, the efforts have mainly been guided by the wants and needs of employers, and have in many cases been obstructed by regulations and collective agreements.

### **Workplaces with a 'part-time culture'**

The way the work is organised at a workplace is mentioned as another important explanation for women's part-time work. In occupations with good opportunities for part-time employment and where such work does not

affect career opportunities, many women choose to work part time. In contrast, in occupations dominated by full-time employment, women work part time considerably less, research shows.

Workplaces with a 'part-time culture' are often structured based on the expectation that women will ask to cut down on working hours if they have children. This belief is rooted in the notion of an inevitable conflict between work and family life, a conflict experienced by women in particular. Workplaces characterised by a 'part-time culture' generally also have a higher proportion of involuntary part-time workers.

The employer perspective offers additional explanations to part-time employment. For example, part-time contracts give the employer greater flexibility in meeting varying staffing needs across the day, night and week. Economic incentives and employers' urge to reduce staff costs are other explaining factors.

### Part-time work and health problems

Women also refer to health problems and disability as reasons for part-time employment. The direct link between health problems and part-time work is rarely addressed in research. Yet part-time work and health problems have repeatedly been linked to conflicts between work and family life, as well as to a lack of time for recovery in everyday life. Part-time employment as an effect of health problems is also discussed in relation to demanding working conditions, for example in the female-dominated care sector. One theory is that part-time work becomes a way to avoid or try to handle the health problems that result from bad and inflexible working conditions.

The connections between part-time employment and health (problems) deserve further attention. Studies on part-time work without a focus on other explanatory factors than gender, such as class and ethnic background,

are also needed. The discussions around part-time employment tend to focus mainly on women in heterosexual relationships, which leads to part-time work among other women not receiving the same attention.

### Time to scrutinise the full-time norm?

The discussions around women's part-time work differ to some extent among the Nordic countries. In some cases there is a clear societal and cultural acceptance of women's part-time employment, yet the degree of acceptance varies. Part-time work is also in many cases understood in a gender equality perspective where the negative effects are emphasised.

One consequence of the discussions around the problems associated with part-time work is that full-time work, as it is organised today, is rhetorically made the only desirable form of employment. This in turn reduces the room for discussions around for example general reductions in working hours. Men's working hours tend to set the norm for women as well. As a result, some questions related to gender equality policy have become difficult to ask. For example, is it obvious that women should work more, or could it instead be that men should work less?



- ▶ **Norway had the largest share** of part-time employment among working women aged 25–64, at 36 per cent. For Denmark and Sweden, the figures were 29 and 31 per cent, for Iceland and Finland 26 and 15 per cent.

Source: *Part-Time Work in the Nordic Region I*, NIKK 2014

### About the report

NIKK, Nordic Information on Gender, has been commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers to coordinate a project on part-time work in the Nordic region. A second report from the project focused on the underlying reasons for why women and men in the Nordic countries work part and full time to different degrees. Ida Drange

and Cathrine Egeland are senior researchers at the Centre for Welfare and Labour Research, Work Research Institute (AFI), Oslo and Akershus University College. They have written the report *Part-Time Work in the Nordic Region II. A Research Review on Important Reasons*, which is summarised in this factsheet.



You can read the report at [nikk.no](http://nikk.no). We tweet about part-time work in the Nordic countries using #nikkdeltid.