

Flexible Working Patterns and Equal Opportunities in the European Union

Conflict or Compatibility?

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INTRODUCTION

Within the European Union policy discourse, flexible employment represents a means of reducing unemployment, increasing economic and social cohesion, maintaining economic competitiveness and enhancing equal opportunities between women and men. These issues, together with economic integration, are key objectives of the European Commission. They are to be achieved, however, without undermining the overall growth strategy (European Commission, 1996a). The main purpose of this article is to consider whether one of the key employment strategies (flexible working) is compatible with one of these policy objectives – equal opportunities – both conceptually and in practice.

The article begins by discussing the role of flexible working in EU policy-making. Flexible working is said to facilitate the reconciliation of paid work and family life and by so doing, contributes to equal opportunities. To evaluate this claim the meanings of the two main concepts, flexible working and equal opportunities, are explored in the first section. The second section explores the scale, dimensions and gender balance of numerical flexibility in EU labour markets. In the third section, which forms the main part of the article, a case study of flexible working in the retail sector in six European countries is presented. The purpose of the

case study is to explore whether flexible working in practice contributes towards achieving equal opportunities as it has been understood within the official discourse of the EU. In the final section, some recommendations are made about how flexible working might be developed, so that the equal opportunities objectives have a greater prospect of realization.

FLEXIBLE WORKING AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Employment flexibility is particularly associated with neoliberalism and deregulation and thus with Britain, rather than member states more closely associated with corporatism or social democracy (Esping-Anderesen, 1990). During the 1990s, however, employment flexibility has been more widely advocated and it is expanding in all EU countries. Although different national working time regimes exist and employers face very different constraints on the ways they can organize working time (Rubery et al., 1998), it is important to recognize that legislation has been introduced in many European countries in order to increase flexibility. For example, changes to employment legislation were made in France (from 1982), Greece (from 1992), Spain (from 1980 with further reforms in 1997) and Germany (from 1994) (Perrons, 1998). There is, accordingly, some convergence in labour market policies in this respect. Most of this legislation permits employment flexibility by allowing variations in weekly hours. Measures to facilitate part-time work in Greece and temporary work in Spain have also been introduced and expanded. In the UK, legislative changes have not been necessary owing to the low initial level of regulation (Hakim, 1990; Bruegel and Perrons, 1998).

Furthermore, current EU economic policies and policy statements in relation to competitiveness, expanding employment and equal opportunities all emphasize the importance of employment flexibility, sometimes referred to as 'employability' and 'adaptability' (European Commission, 1993, 1996a, 1997a). However, flexible working practices must be differentiated and analysed before any general statements about their desirability or impact on employment, competitiveness and equal opportunities can be made.

Meanings of Flexible Working

There are so many different kinds of flexible working, that what is meant by flexible working is itself flexible. Nevertheless, two analytically distinct forms can be defined: numerical or defensive flexibility and functional or adaptive flexibility (Atkinson, 1985; Bosch, 1995). Numerical flexibility refers to the ability of an organization to match its labour force to the scale of consumer demand, while adaptive flexibility refers to the

ability of firms and their employees to respond to the changing composition of consumer demand. The former requires numerical adaptation which is obtained by using a wide variety of working patterns, including part-time, flexi-time, annualized hours, zero hours, temporary and seasonal contracts¹ (see Dex and McCulloch, 1995). Adaptive flexibility, by contrast, requires employees to be polyvalent and able to switch between different tasks and adapt to new products and processes in response to changing consumer tastes. This form of flexibility has progressive connotations, as it implies a varied working life with continuous retraining and life-long learning, and it is this form of flexibility that is often implicitly referred to in official discourse (see European Commission, 1997a). Functional flexibility also increases the possibility of numerical flexibility, as employees with polyvalent skills are able to substitute for one another. This form of flexibility is difficult to identify in practice and measures on a comparable European scale do not exist. What is clear, however, is that numerical flexibility, with more ambiguous connotations, has been increasing in practice. Furthermore, it is this form of flexibility that has been associated with increasing feminization and precariousness in the labour markets of the EU (Rodgers and Rodgers, 1989; Meulders et al., 1994, 1997; Casey et al., 1997).

Flexible Employment and European Union Objectives

Flexible employment is said to contribute to the broader objectives of growth, cohesion and equal opportunities of the EU. The EU has three key objectives (or 'three pillars'). The Single Market, Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion (European Commission, 1997a). The first two objectives are designed to increase economic growth by increasing efficiency and competitiveness. The cohesion objective, including equal opportunities between women and men, is designed to ensure that all member states and citizens benefit from the anticipated welfare gains deriving from the increased growth. By increasing firm competitiveness, reducing unemployment and by enabling parents to reconcile paid work and family life, flexible working is expected to contribute to the realization of all these objectives (European Commission, 1996a).

The EU tends to look towards the US model of development, where undoubtedly flexible employment has contributed to the expansion of employment. However, less attention is paid to negative aspects of flexibility, such as the nature of the employment being created and how flexible labour markets are also associated with an expansion of the working poor.² Although the contradiction between employer demands for flexibility and workers' needs for security has been recognized as a policy challenge, the adverse implications of flexibility for equal opportunities have been less widely recognized in the EU. Some forms of

flexibility, such as annualized hours and term-time only working, can provide certainty over annual incomes, but for those on extremely variable hours and temporary contracts, incomes can be both low and insecure. This could be one reason why these forms of flexibility are disproportionately female, since implicitly, dependency on a second source of income (whether the state or a primary [male] breadwinner) is assumed. However, there are also negative implications for male employment, because flexible employment increasingly becomes the main source of new employment (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1995; European Commission, 1997b).

In the light of these issues it is important to examine flexible employment in practice and to consider the longer-term implications, rather than just assume that flexibility, in all its forms, will necessarily contribute towards the EU objectives. The emphasis in this article, however, is to consider the extent to which flexible employment, in practice, is compatible with the EU's equal opportunities objective.

Equal Opportunities Policies in the European Union

First of all it is important to consider the place of equal opportunities policies within EU policy discourse and, specifically, the meaning of equal opportunities policies under the EU's mainstreaming initiative. Equal opportunities is one of the issues covered under Agenda 2000, which specifies the main goals and expenditure requirements of EU policy for the period 2000–6. This document, and the policies contained within it, is due to be approved by the Commission towards the end of 1999. Agenda 2000 draws upon issues raised in the Cohesion Report of 1996 (European Commission, 1996a) and consolidates many of the previous objectives under the Structural Programmes. Specifically, equal opportunities forms part of Objective 3, which is a horizontal objective concerned with expanding labour market opportunities for excluded groups, including women, and with fighting unemployment (European Commission, 1997b; Hall, 1998). Within this objective, adaptive flexibility is implicitly assumed. Emphasis is placed on training and life-long learning which are assumed to promote adaptation to labour market changes through occupational mobility (European Commission, 1997b).³

Equal opportunities is also included within one of three remaining EU initiatives, the human resources initiative. These initiatives have been reduced from thirteen to three, the other two being concerned with border areas and rural areas (European Commission, 1997b; Hall, 1998). Furthermore, equal opportunities is one element of the action plans that each member state has to put forward under the European Employment Strategy consolidated by the Employment Title in the Treaty of Amsterdam (European Commission, 1998). The other elements

were entrepreneurship, employability and adaptability, the last being interpreted as working time flexibility with security (Trades Union Congress, 1998). Thus the concept of equal opportunities has been present in EU treaties since the very beginning and continues to be emphasized as a key objective. The high profile given to equal opportunities was strengthened when it was mainstreamed in 1996. It is important therefore to examine what is understood by equal opportunities in this policy discourse.

In relation to equal opportunities, mainstreaming is said to involve not only the promotion of measures to assist women but the application of a gender perspective and analysis to all policies, programmes and actions of the Commission (European Commission, 1997b). The objective is to 'introduce measures aimed at adapting the organisation of society to a fairer distribution of men's and women's roles' (European Commission, 1997b: 15-16). Specifically 'by adapting the organisation of work to help women as well as men reconcile family and working life and to *provide more flexible employment solutions, again for both men and women*' (European Commission, 1996b: 5; emphasis added). Thus 'the promotion of equality must not be confused with the simple balancing of statistics: . . . but it is a question of promoting long lasting changes in parental roles, family structures, institutional practices and the organisation of work and time' (European Commission, 1996b: 5).

By referring to the promotion of 'long lasting changes in parental roles', the EU is expressing a very radical position, well beyond the liberal agenda. It seems to imply that some of the structural barriers to gender inequality will be addressed and thus overcomes some of the limitations that have been identified in relation to past EU initiatives. For example, they have been criticized for being concerned only with rights of people in employment (Hantrais, 1995; Duncan, 1996) and for ignoring the interests of migrant women in the EU (Sales and Gregory, 1996; Rees, 1998). Furthermore, they have been criticized for being formulated around the lowest common level of rights, which, in some cases, ironically has led to national and regional states having to abandon their more progressive equal opportunities measures under the EU equal opportunities legislation (Hoskyns, 1996).

It is certainly fair to point out that despite the intention to bring about a more even division of paid and domestic work between women and men and to bring about lasting changes in parental roles, the only policy measures introduced so far are very limited. The Parental Leave Directive was ratified in July 1996. It specifies that a minimum period of three months can be taken until a child reaches a certain age (the recommendation is eight years) and that further leave should be made available for urgent family circumstances. However, there is no requirement that this leave is paid and there is no specification as to how it should be treated for

social security reasons (European Commission, 1997a). Similarly, the idea that the leave be non-transferable, so that some has to be taken by fathers, is at the discretion of the member states. So far there has been no directive on childcare. The Directives on Part-Time and Working Time indirectly relate to equal opportunities issues within paid employment and are progressive in this respect, although they do not directly address the wider goals of the mainstreaming initiative.

The objectives of this article are simply to examine the extent to which flexible employment contributes towards equal opportunities, given the meaning that equal opportunities has within the European policy discourse. This article is not really concerned with addressing the wider limitations of the equal opportunities policies. Having set the context, the next section outlines the quantitative extent of flexible working practices in the EU, and experiences of flexible workers are discussed in the subsequent section.

FLEXIBLE WORKING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Since the 1980s, the female employment rate, especially among prime age workers, has increased dramatically, and at a faster rate than men's, throughout the EU, with the exceptions of Sweden and Finland⁴ (Rubery et al., 1996; Gonäs, 1998) and so in one sense gender inequalities have narrowed. However, much of this employment growth is flexible (Rubery et al., 1998). Part-time jobs increased by 9 percent while full-time and the overall number of jobs fell by 6 percent and 3 percent respectively. Women, who now account for over 40 percent of the European labour force, are overrepresented among the flexibly employed; 83 percent of part-time workers, 70 percent of family workers⁵ and 50 percent of the temporary workers⁶ in the EU are women. Part-time work accounted for 32 percent of female, but only 5 percent of male, employment in 1996 (Eurostat, 1997).

Flexible work and precarious working practices are particularly associated with economic restructuring and the relative expansion of the service sector.⁷ One-third of women employed in service jobs in the EU work part-time. In the Netherlands, where the highest rates of part-time working are found (67 percent of all women who work), 68 percent of all service jobs are filled by part-time women workers (European Commission, 1997a). However, flexible working takes different forms between the different EU countries, and the extent of women's overrepresentation among the flexibly employed also varies. Furthermore, both the extent and meaning of part-time work, one of the main forms of flexible working, also vary significantly between the EU countries (Plantenga, 1997).

Taking the workforce as a whole, part-time work is increasing but it is

still much less prevalent in the Mediterranean countries (5 percent in Greece, and no more than 10 percent anywhere else in the Mediterranean, as compared to 38 percent in the Netherlands [Eurostat, 1997]). Until recently in these countries, the cost of employing part-time labour was comparatively high, and formal part-time work was strongly resisted by the trade unions. Even so, female part-timers exceed male part-timers, with Spain having the highest proportion of female workers working part-time (18 percent in 1996) among these countries (Eurostat, 1997). Nevertheless, family and informal⁸ work are also widespread (Stratigaki and Vaiou, 1994; Vaiou, 1996; Baylina and García-Ramon, 1998), and, where formal employment is highly regulated, as for example in Spain, there has been an increase in fixed-term, temporary working. Fifteen percent of women workers are on fixed-term contracts in Spain compared with 10 percent in 1990 (European Commission, 1997a).

In Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg, female part-time employment is about 10 times the male figure but, even so, the proportion of women working part-time is lower than in the Netherlands, Sweden or the UK. Part-time workers in the EU are also more likely than full-timers to be on temporary contracts (19 percent as opposed to 10 percent for full-time employees). Furthermore, part-timers, especially in Denmark and Sweden, are more likely to be working at the weekend than full-timers, but there is considerable variation between member states on the link between part-time work and unsocial hours. In Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK, between 25 percent and 28 percent of part-timers work fewer than 11 hours a week, although, in contrast to the UK, a relatively high proportion of Dutch and Danish part-time workers also work over 30 hours (Eurostat, 1997). In Sweden, part-time work tends to be longer (43 percent working between 21 and 30 hours) and many part-time workers simply work a reduced working day to which all parents with dependent children are entitled, although women disproportionately take up this entitlement (Jonung and Persson, 1993). In France parents are also entitled to work a reduced day, but this opportunity has not been institutionalized to the same extent as in Sweden, so workers are often discouraged from doing so, especially in the private sector (Fagnani and Déscolonges, 1998).

Women's overrepresentation in flexible work is consistent throughout the EU member states, albeit to different degrees. There is no a priori reason why these new forms of employment should be predominantly female. In the context of a childcare deficit, flexible working arguably facilitates the reconciliation of paid work and family life, by providing jobs of varying hours and at varied times, when children are in school or when family help might be available. In reality, whether flexible working contributes towards equal opportunities in this way depends very much on the specific terms and conditions of employment for any employee.

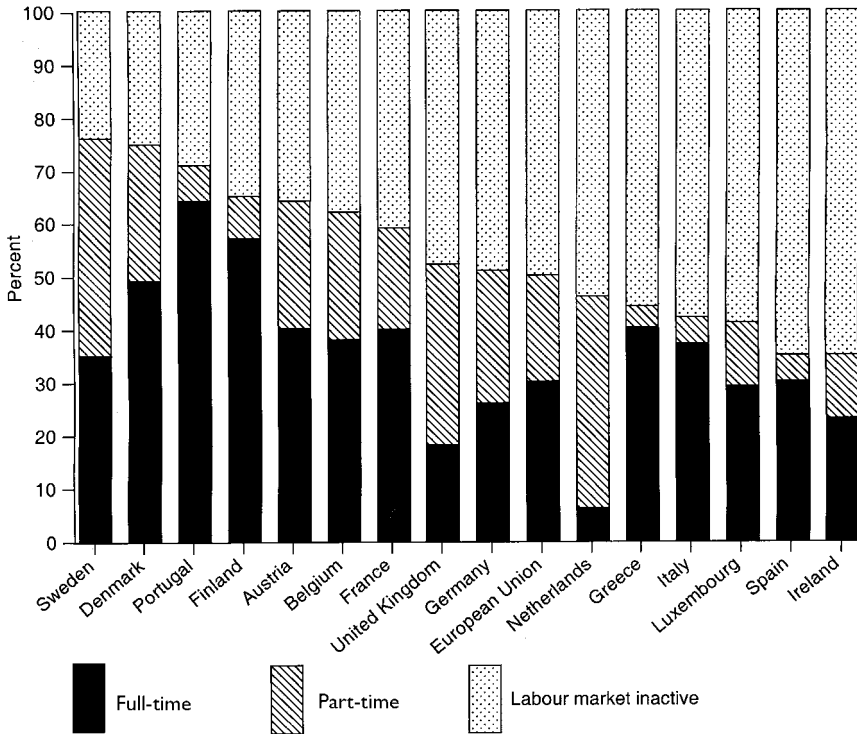
These conditions not only vary considerably between countries (Plantenga, 1995) but also within countries and within the same firm. Furthermore, whether flexible working contributes to reconciling paid work with family life also depends on the meaning of 'family life'. For two-parent households, flexible working patterns sometimes permit both partners to carry out paid work. However, increasingly, for at least one partner, this means working unsocial hours (see Ferri and Smith [1996] and Harkness [1999] on the UK), which have also been increasing throughout the EU (Rubery et al., 1998).

In reality, however, the rationale for flexible working and the relative balance of benefit between employer and employee varies between countries. In 1994, a European-wide survey carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions found that part-time work was introduced in response to employee wishes in 36 percent of establishments; in only 2.3 percent of cases could the same be said of fixed-term contracts. In 41 percent of cases, the firm initiated part-time work (Bosch, 1995). Nevertheless three-fifths of female part-time workers (compared to one-third of men) in the EU in 1994 expressed a preference for part-time work (European Commission, 1997a). In the UK, for all part-time employees over 25 years old, 84 percent said that they did not want a full-time job in 1996 compared with 12 percent in Belgium and 4 percent in Spain. However, part-timers in Sweden (57 percent), Denmark (69 percent) and the Netherlands (88 percent) expressed a similar preference to those in the UK (Eurostat, 1997). Although employee preferences for part-time work are often made in the context of inadequate and/or costly care provision and with little awareness of the adverse effects on lifetime earnings, the desire to carry out care work should not simply be dismissed. At the same time there is no a priori reason why the 'choice' for reduced hours should simultaneously, if not intentionally, also be a choice for limited job opportunities. Despite legislation and equal opportunities policies, promotion opportunities, in reality, seem to be limited for part-time workers. Ways of reconciling paid work and family life need to be found which do not rest on and reinforce women's subordinate position in the workplace.

Whether or not flexible working is necessary for the reconciliation of paid work and family life depends on the availability of care, which varies considerably throughout the EU. There are also considerable differences in the extent to which mothers with dependent children participate in paid work, although in all countries this figure is increasing. However, there is no direct relationship between the amount of care available in any society and the employment patterns of carers (Meulders et al., 1993; Rubery et al., 1998).

Figure 1 portrays the working patterns of mothers with dependent children in the EU. The Netherlands has the highest rates of part-time

FIGURE 1
Working Patterns of Mothers with Dependent Children



Source: European Commission (1997a).

work, followed by Sweden, Denmark and the UK. In Finland and Portugal, although the employment rate of mothers is high the main form of working is full-time. In Sweden, Denmark and Finland the presence of children seems to make little difference to women’s participation in paid work (Jonung and Persson, 1993). In these countries there are comparatively generous levels of parental leave, shorter working days for parents, as well as subsidized childcare. Other conditions supporting high rates of female participation have been linked to late industrialization in the case of Finland (Pfau-Effinger, 1995)⁹ and the general welfare framework – high taxation and individualized taxation systems (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lewis, 1997). In both Belgium and France, childcare provision is also comparatively high and the participation rate of mothers in France declines only when there are three or more dependent children (European Commission, 1997a).

Thus, the detailed picture of the nature of work taken up by women and mothers is complex and varied throughout the EU. What is clear,

however, is that the scale of participation in the labour force by mothers is increasing, and so too is flexible working. In order to consider whether these aggregate patterns represent a movement towards equal opportunities, through the reconciliation of work and family life, and through promoting 'long lasting changes in parental roles', it is necessary to go beyond examining aggregate patterns and explore the implications of these new working practices in specific contexts. The remainder of this article discusses the findings of a comparative study of flexible working in the retail sector in six EU countries with different welfare regimes, childcare provision and employment regulations – Spain, Greece, UK, Germany, France and Sweden.

A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF FLEXIBLE WORKING IN THE RETAIL SECTOR¹⁰

The retail sector was chosen for analysis because flexible employment practices have been widely developed and women, currently the principal carers, are overrepresented. The purpose of the study was to consider the extent to which flexible working facilitates the reconciliation of paid work and family life and the extent to which it represents a new form of precariousness. A further purpose of the study was to identify best practice working arrangements, namely ones that provided employees with some security, predictability and control in their working arrangements, a regular and reliable source of income and equal access to training, promotion and benefits.

In order to consider how flexible working practices enabled people to combine paid work with caring responsibilities in practice, qualitative techniques of analysis were used. In-depth interviews were carried out with employees, managers and trade unionists in different kinds of retail organizations, in each of the countries studied. Furthermore, a structured questionnaire was distributed to a wider number of employees. Overall, 217 interviews (182 with employees) and 418 fully completed structured questionnaires were obtained.¹¹ All the empirical research was carried out and completed in 1997 by researchers in the different countries. The interviews were taped (with the exception of Greece) and the researchers also translated some of the transcripts into English (extracts of which appear in European Commission, 1998). The transcripts were analysed using a grounded theory approach – an inductive approach, which tries to identify concepts, categories and themes as they emerge from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

In the discussion which follows the findings are divided into a number of sections. First of all, the rationale for increased flexibility is discussed, specifically whether flexibility is employer led, employee led

or a complementary combination. Then, attention turns to the question of whether flexible employment encourages change in the gender division of labour in domestic work and childcare. Finally, the question of whether flexible working contributes to equal opportunities in paid work is considered.

Rationale for Flexible Working in the Retail Sector

Employer-Led Flexibility? In the retail sector, extended opening hours, including Sunday opening, mean that labour needs cannot be met from a full-time workforce working standard hours. As a consequence, a wide variety of different forms of flexible working have been introduced, including part-time, rolling contracts,¹² zero hours, term-time only working, unsocial hours, time-bank schemes, flexible contracts (with varied numbers of hours), split shifts and temporary contracts. The balance between these different forms of flexible working varies between the countries. Temporary contracts are more prevalent in Spain and Greece. In contrast, a wide range of almost individualized part-time contracts are evident in Sweden and especially the UK, which, at an aggregate level, has also been found to have the greatest diversity of working hours in the EU 12 (Rubery et al., 1998). In all countries, however, there has been an increasing use of flexible working of some form. Besides enabling the stores to extend their opening and operating hours, a variety of efficiency gains can be derived from these working patterns (Scott, 1994; Neathey and Hurstfield, 1995; Gregory and O'Reilly, 1996).

Investment in new technology, such as EPOS (electronic point of sales systems), provides detailed information on both trading patterns and employee availability. The information enables employers to match labour supply with customer demand as it varies throughout the day, the week and the year. As a consequence, employees are increasingly employed only when there is work to be done and thus the intensity of work is increased (Neathey and Hurstfield, 1995). Employees working short hours (about four hours in a shift) also tend to have higher levels of productivity because individual output tends to fall towards the end of a shift. Interestingly in Greece, the greater intensity of part-time work has been recognized in the trade union proposal for a higher hourly compensation of 25 percent (Kyriazis, 1998).

Further savings are made from employing part-timers because social security charges often do not have to be paid or are paid at a lower rate. In Germany the recent extension in opening hours has mainly been met by 'marginal' workers, on short-hour contracts, who fall below the social insurance threshold. These account for about half a million retail workers,

the figure having doubled between 1985 and 1995 (see Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998).

Some activities, such as supermarket shelf filling, can be more efficiently carried out when the store is closed. Given ever lengthening opening hours this activity increasingly takes place in the night and early hours of the morning, especially in the UK, where opening hours are not regulated.¹³ Overall, the numbers of people working unsocial hours (before 7 a.m. in the morning or after 6 p.m. in the evening) in our study was nearly 60 percent. However, the meaning of unsocial hours varies between countries. Working evenings, for example between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. is not regarded as unsocial in Greece and Spain, although several mothers expressed dislike for these hours, as they would not see their children when they returned from work. This sentiment was also expressed by Swedish women, some of who 'dreamed of office hours', although at the same time they welcomed the premium they received for working unsocial hours (Bellaagh and Gonäs, 1998).

In all cases contracts are determined in relation to the predictable fluctuations in sales. The extent of choice over the initial contract, however, varies between countries and between the stores. Overall, 39 percent of the respondents said that they had not chosen their pattern of working hours, and just under two-thirds said that they could not change their pattern, which provides some indication of the one-sided nature of flexibility. Employer objectives for flexibility are most clearly expressed by a manager in the UK: 'What we have tried to do is introduce unique working patterns so that individuals truly do come in when the function and the operation requires them to.' This manager worked in an out of town store with wide fluctuations in sales. In response, about one-fifth of the workforce were employed on a 'flexi-contract'. The contracts were permanent, but the weekly hours varied during the year, from three hours a week (January to March), nine hours (April to October) and 25 hours (November to December).¹⁴ The variation in hours, and the associated fluctuations in income, made these contracts unpopular with the employees. Even so, management pointed to some advantages of this scheme compared to temporary contracts. The flexi-contract was permanent and staff would qualify for pensions and staff discounts. There is some logic in this argument and workers may be in a more favourable situation compared to those on contractual rotation schemes in Spain. According to the unions there, employers ensured that employees failed to obtain permanent status while they (the employers) retained permanent access to a pool of experienced labour, as one shop assistant explained: 'When your contract ends they call you and tell you "remain available", that is you have to be available for them. You can't say "oh no" because if you say no there will be no more contracts' (García-Ramon and Ortíz, 1998).

In both cases, however, it is a very one-sided form of flexibility, with the

employees bearing the cost of the efficiency gains made by the companies. A German manager commented that he would 'love to be able to introduce flexi-contracts', but was prevented from doing so by the employment regulations. At the same time, some of the German regulations and agreements, designed to protect employees as a whole, militated against the interests of people with caring responsibilities, especially single parents. Several employees expressed a preference for morning-only work, to fit in with the hours of the kindergartens. Employers refused these requests because the shops were busier in the afternoons, even though women with young children represented a relatively small percentage of the workforce. Further difficulties arose when employees sought to work long days and/or Saturdays on a regular basis in order to minimize travel time and to simplify the logistics of childcare, because it conflicted with the works council agreement. There was concern that precedents would be established (Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998). This example presents a very interesting quandary in the sense that regulations, designed to protect workers in general, may not meet the specific requirements of those with caring responsibilities. This is not to argue for a relaxation of regulations but to recognize that adaptations may be required to enable the complex needs of the contemporary worker, with caring responsibilities, to be taken into account.

Employee-Friendly Flexibility? Both employers and employees, with varying degrees of frequency, seek flexibility around their contracted arrangements owing to unforeseen circumstances. In some cases, it is clear that employers keep a basic minimal staff, and rely on the willingness of employees to work additional hours, to meet 'unanticipated' demands. This staffing policy is particularly invidious in those countries where unemployment is high and where temporary contracts are widespread, because it builds on the employees' insecurity and fear. If they refuse employer requests for additional hours, they fear that their contract will not be renewed, as in the Spanish case cited earlier. Employees in the former East Germany expressed similar sentiments. Likewise in France, where, although schedules are generally made in advance, in practice there are often last-minute changes, which pose enormous problems for employees with caring responsibilities (Fagnani and Déscolonges, 1998).

At the same time, some reciprocal flexibility – 'give and take' – was also evident, either between the company and the employee, or between the employees themselves. Longer-serving employees were more likely to have their requests for flexibility met. Informal flexibility of this kind, however, depends largely on the attitudes of line managers and immediate supervisors, and can be arbitrary. In Germany, for example, an employee described how the situation deteriorated following the appointment of a new manager (Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998). In Sweden

working schedules were determined on an annual basis, but employees were permitted to exchange times with each other. Here it was evident that in one store, linked to a cooperative, the schedules were decentralized to the supervisor level, which gave the employees much greater scope to influence their initial working patterns (Bellaagh and Gonäs, 1998).

In Germany and the UK, more formal schemes, to permit greater employee flexibility, had been developed. In the German stores there was a time-bank system, which enabled employees to accumulate a number of plus- or minus-hours over the year. The extent of the margin varied between the different stores, but in principle employees could work fewer hours in one period and more in another, and even build up to 30 hours deficit with no financial penalties. The scheme was clearly employer driven, and employees were not permitted to reduce their hours in the period leading up to Christmas. Nevertheless, it provided some scope for employee-initiated flexibility. However, as one manager (in the former West Germany) commented, departmental managers did not make optimal use of the scheme, nor did they make it sufficiently well known to the employees. When the store was not busy, this store manager argued that department managers should encourage their employees to take time off: 'They should say – what do you think, Ilse, why don't you just go home. Nice weather today, swimming-hall . . .? You can make minus-hours without any problems' (Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998). This manager's comment is also revealing about his understanding of how part-time workers spent the rest of their day, which did not correspond to the complex and busy lives reported by respondents throughout the study. A contrasting comment on the time-bank system came from an employee in the former East German department store, when she said that: 'We should work plus-hours and minus-hours. But to be honest, we have never had a minus-hour so far, we only have plus-hours and there is nothing one can do about it' (Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998).

In the UK supermarket, employees were thought to be taking time off unofficially or leaving unnecessarily, which created significant costs for the firm. The managers realized that greater foresight, and more imaginative working practices, might enable employer and employee needs to be reconciled. As a consequence, a number of employee-focused flexibility schemes were introduced, designed to enable employees to combine paid work more easily with the other demands on their lives. Two schemes were targeted at students; study leave and store swapping. A third category, parental leave, was aimed mainly at parents to enable them to vary their working hours during the school holidays, but was, in principle, available to all employees. The fourth – the shift-swap scheme – allowed employees to exchange shifts. These are examples where employee-led flexibility and company efficiency were potentially

complementary. The schemes formally negotiated with top management appeared to be more successful than shift swapping, which in practice required assistance from the line managers and supervisors, and the employees felt that this help was not always forthcoming. However, employees taking leave had to manage on reduced or zero incomes. Thus the employers, in effect, allowed their employees to adjust to the 'family-unfriendly social context', but at their own expense. In practice these costs were met by a partner or by the state. That it was women who disproportionately took the leave, flexibility, in these cases, reinforced dependency as much as it contributed to equal opportunities.

Interestingly, this UK store had recognized that negative economies arise from extreme forms of flexibility, particularly very short-hour contracts, in terms of higher recruitment and training costs. Employees on very short hours tended to have higher turnover rates and the company was also concerned about the ability of these workers to maintain quality levels. Similarly, the French hypermarkets had also paid some attention to giving workers more control over the determination of their working patterns, at department or branch level, in order to reduce staff turnover. Elsewhere, however, managers were not very responsive to employees' needs for flexibility; even when workers chose to work part-time there was often little or no choice over working patterns. As a French shop assistant said:

I asked to work mornings. I was refused – there is no choice at all. We have not got *à la carte* working hours here. We sort ourselves out – between colleagues. The only thing that is possible is to refuse to work overtime. I don't do any of that. (Fagnani and Déscolonges, 1998)

Overall the different stores have developed a variety of forms of flexible working to cope with the extended opening hours and the fluctuations in sales. However, a common feature was that the employers retained control over the parameters of flexibility. Even when there were sustained differences between the actual and contracted hours, employers were reluctant to change the contract, leading employees on temporary contracts to work involuntary overtime in the context of high unemployment.

Flexibility, Childcare and Domestic Work – 'Long-Lasting Changes in Parental Roles'?

In all countries, partners or parents of employees, and to a lesser extent friends, were sometimes called upon to take care of children, while the employees were working. There were several reasons for this. In some countries there was simply little or no collectively provided childcare. Second, even where childcare did exist, there was often discontinuity between the opening times and the unsocial hours worked by retail

employees. Third, as retail wages were comparatively low paid, it was difficult to afford formal childcare. Furthermore, a preference for family care was frequently expressed. The 'inflexibility' of working hours together with the structural deficit in care provision meant that people made complicated, flexible and ad hoc caring arrangements. Clearly discussions about working time flexibility need to be integrated with those of care provision.

In France, Spain and Greece, employees still lived fairly close to their extended families. What also became apparent was that quite elderly people, rather than requiring care themselves, are care providers, as a Greek male worker explains:

My mother is 70 years old. She is a pensioner. She has raised three children and five grandchildren. She is very energetic. She is in charge of our daughter (two-and-a-half) as well as the housework. She is an enormous help and never complains. (Kyriazis, 1998)

In Greece, in the absence of a strong welfare state, care was seen as a family obligation, which formed part of a chain of interdependencies (Kyriazis, 1998). Here, and in Spain, the younger generation, and more specifically, the women, were expected to care for their parents if they became ill or infirm, so constraints on their working opportunities remained even when the childrearing years were over. However, where grandparents did not live in the same apartment, or apartment building, this form of care led to complex journeys being made, which lengthened the working day.

In the UK, it was the lack of formal childcare that was often instrumental in the choice of working times and, simultaneously, the choice to work in retail, where a wide range of working times was offered. One of the attractions of twilight and night working, for example, was that partnered women could rely on partners to take care of the children. A pattern of shift or serial childcare was widely practised among these employees, which gave rise to complex juggling arrangements. Only 11 out of the 75 respondents to the questionnaire used any form of paid care and the interviews indicated that this was restricted largely to managers. One male junior manager used the subsidized crèche at his wife's employers – a local authority – but it absorbed between 60 percent and 70 percent of his wages (Perrons and Hurstfield, 1998).

Where the welfare state is stronger, and public childcare is provided on a greater scale, for example in Sweden and France, the family continued to be important for this group of workers partly because of working patterns. For example, a section leader in France with a 20-month-old baby stated that she would prefer to use the collective facilities but was unable to do so. Although her hours were more predictable than those of ordinary employees, she did not get home until around 8 p.m. However,

in France, other forms of care were available. This employee worked four days every week and received the parental education allowance (APE), money paid to parents (in effect, largely mothers) to rear their own children, for the day not worked. While she was at work she employed a registered childminder (*assistant maternelle*), whose social security costs were paid for by the state (AFEAMA). However, it had been difficult to find someone willing to work the hours she required (Fagnani and Déscolonges, 1998).

The respondents also expressed a preference for family care, often for a mixture of concerns about the cost, quality and reliability of other forms of care. This preference was widespread throughout the studies, although in Sweden extensive use was made of the public childcare facilities, which seemed to be taken as given, and the employees may have been referring to the importance of family care when public care was not available (Bellaagh and Gonäs, 1998).

For single parents, and employees without close family, the deficit in childcare provision not only constrained women's employment opportunities but also left some children in precarious situations. In the former East Germany there was a strong sense that the situation had deteriorated, in this respect, since unification. Public childcare provision had declined and shop opening hours had been extended. For one single-parent shop assistant without nearby family the situation was particularly desperate:

Since the fifth class my children are latch-key children. They are on their own at home. I never had anybody to look after them, no grandmother, no grandfather, nobody. This is an awful situation, especially during school holidays and especially for the youngest, who was alone all day, because I was only allowed to take one week's holiday during the six-week school holiday. She watched TV, which is not very good. (Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998)

A single-parent shop assistant in the UK described her anguish at leaving her daughter (aged ten) alone in the following way:

I am not proud to have to tell you that I have to leave her for four mornings [in the school holidays] to come to work. I was frightened. I'd say don't open the door. She'll sit and play her music tapes and watch TV. She won't go in the kitchen I make her a packed lunch.

What is also worrying is that arrangements for childcare sometimes formed part of the initial hiring decision, as in the case of the German manager below:

If there is an applicant with an infant, I ask the question, 'who looks after the child while you are working here?' on principle. If there is only a public kindergarten, it is already a problem, because we do not have morning-only jobs and it will not create a good atmosphere if we start to make exceptions now. (Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998)

In terms of the division of responsibilities for childcare within two-parent households, over half of the respondents stated that women either played the sole, or took the major role, (the figures ranging from 50 percent in Germany to 63 percent in the UK), with the remainder saying that the responsibilities were evenly divided. The information from the interviews revealed a less balanced picture, and the women interviewees indicated that they had chosen this form of work to facilitate their major responsibility for caring.

In relation to domestic work, other than childcare, a clear pattern, common to all countries, emerged from the interviews, namely that women played the major role and retained overall responsibility for managing the household, including the financial arrangements. In the questionnaires, a slightly more balanced picture emerged. Nearly three-quarters of the Spanish respondents and two-thirds of those in the UK and Sweden stated that women either carried out all, or played the major role, in domestic work. A slightly lower proportion in Germany made a similar claim, while in France the figure was just less than 50 percent with the balance stating that the role was evenly divided. The frustration arising from this unequal sharing of roles was clearly expressed by a Spanish woman in the following extract:

He helps in some tasks. Not in all of them. He thinks that he is a man, and like all of them, he doesn't like it. He says he is allergic to dishwashing. But think about that. We women who have jobs are at an advantage. We choose a partner to share a life and we do not choose to serve him. The advantage [of working] lies in that if he is not an ideal husband, you can always leave him. If you work, you are more independent psychologically. In my case, this has helped me transform my relationship with my husband. (García-Ramon and Ortíz, 1998)

However, the main factor leading to male involvement was the woman's absence from the home, especially during the evening and at the weekends. At these times men would have to look after the children themselves, although in some cases grandparents were also called upon. This movement away from the traditional model took place in order to facilitate the paid work of the partner, and was often disliked by the men concerned, as the following quotation from an assistant in Sweden illustrates:

What he [the husband] finds very irritating I find to be positive, namely working every second weekend. He finds it very hard to be forced to take all the responsibility at home for a whole weekend. As far I am concerned, however, I find it really pleasant. I am able to have two days off in the middle of the week and the children can choose if they want to go to the nursery school on those days or not. (Bellaagh and Gonäs, 1998)

Some women employees stated that the men 'helped' with domestic work but often considered that they were lucky or that their partners were

unusual, as the following comments from Sweden and the UK respectively indicate:

There are not a lot who have such a good husband as I have, I mean when they get home, they have to cook and fix everything. When I get home I just have to sit down at the table and eat. (Bellaagh and Gonäs, 1998)

My husband will do that, like on a Sunday he will do the dinner while I am at work, I will give him a quick ring to tell him when I am going to be home.

One of the most frequent complaints in relation to their overall life situation was that they had insufficient time to spend with their children, especially if they worked at nights and at weekends, and little free time to spend together as a family. Similar feelings of conflict between work and home were less evident among the men who took part in our study. A German manager sensed that he may have missed some valuable times with his children but he had always been 'in love with the firm'. He did not think his children suffered, however, because 'his wife gave everything to the children they would have missed from him' (Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998). A UK male manager, reflecting on the past, recognized a possible dilemma but his thoughts echoed those of the German manager above:

The time that I grew up in the business we were all keen to be seen as go-getting people, people who were always being promoted. You would put hours into the business because you enjoyed it. You suffer big guilt trips, because while you know you are depriving your family of hours, you are really enjoying it, you're loving it.

Flexibility and Equal Opportunities in Work

There is no doubt that the development of flexible working arrangements has facilitated women's entry into paid work and in this way has contributed towards more equal opportunities between women and men. However, while more explicit forms of discrimination have weakened in the workplace, opportunities continue to be segregated by time. In the case study, the vast majority of shop workers experienced little likelihood of progression. There were four main obstacles, which to some extent were mutually reinforcing. First, managerial and supervisory jobs were de facto if not de jure, reserved for employees prepared to work full-time hours. Second, there was only a limited range of job opportunities. Third, many employees had few qualifications, and training while offered, was limited. Finally, differential gender expectations still played a role in practice, despite the existence of equal opportunities policies.

In each of the case studies, managerial jobs were full-time jobs. Full-time working is not a formal precondition for promotion, but in reality

only full-timers were promoted. In Spain, all of the floor supervisors were men on permanent contracts. The few female supervisors had been employed by the company for a long time and had demonstrated their commitment by working additional hours on a regular basis, with little or no financial remuneration. This informal practice clearly discriminated against those with caring responsibilities (García-Ramon and Ortiz, 1998). In Greece, part-time workers were generally excluded from the more skilled positions. For example, in the supermarkets they would not be found in delicatessens, where a pay bonus was paid. In the UK, where working hours were not strongly regulated, managers worked very long hours, regularly over 50 and sometimes over 60 hours per week. This culture of long hours acted as a deterrent to people with family responsibilities, as one employee commented: 'I know how long these managers work. I haven't got that level of commitment when it comes to choosing between home life and work. They work until 10 p.m., sometimes all night. I don't want that, thank you.' Women in the other countries echoed these remarks. Women with demanding caring roles did not wish to burden themselves with extra responsibilities. One Greek employee felt that there were opportunities for promotion, but she was not presently interested, partly because she 'wanted to devote as much time as possible to my child' and partly because the additional pay was not considered worthwhile (Kyriazis, 1998).

In the UK, there have been some attempts to resist the 'macho long hours culture' and several stores were aware of the 'work smarter not longer' human resources philosophy. In supermarkets, a policy to reduce managerial hours to 45 a week had recently been introduced, in order to try and reduce employee stress. This scheme was to be monitored electronically, although a German manager confessed to bypassing a similar scheme, by leaving work and then returning without swiping her card (Kurz-Scherf and Scheele, 1998).

Despite the widespread use of flexible working in this sector, it is clear that little consideration had been given to applying flexible working patterns to management, except in the sense that managers were expected to be infinitely elastic and always available to the company. However, despite their long working hours, shop opening and operating hours can be even longer, so there are always times when any particular manager is not present. This absence of particular personnel clearly raises the possibility of managerial work being carried out on a part-time basis. The feasibility of managerial positions being organized on a part-time basis was demonstrated in one of the Swedish stores, where management was divided between six people, at least one of whom was continuously present.¹⁵ Interestingly, part-time management was only considered as a serious proposition in the UK store managed by a young mother.¹⁶

Some of the reasons given for rejecting part-time managers were

spurious. For example, one UK manager argued that part-timers would 'go home at the end of their shift and therefore be unable to cope with unpredictable events such as fires'. More generally, part-time employees were excluded from intermediate promotions even though they received job-specific training. Furthermore, stereotypical attitudes remained about the suitability of women for managerial positions. For example, a Greek male who had risen within the store to become a supervisor commented that: 'Women do not seek promotion. They see it as a temporary job. Their main goal is to get married and have a family. This is perhaps why men get promoted more quickly' (Kyriazis, 1998). Similarly, in the UK, a young female junior manager in the International store said that she would like to work at head office, but 'I would like to have a family as well, so I don't see myself as a potential board member', and when asked why, she laughed and said, 'Well, a lady on the board, with family responsibilities?' This reference to gender and also to young people was echoed in some other interviews along with the implication that young people, and young men in particular, were seen as more eligible for promotion. As an assistant in the UK commented:

Some of these young boys come into the store, and they have only been here for a few weeks, and they seem to be going into customer services [considered a step forward]. And I have been here for ages, and I am still just sitting at the till, and yet I can transport goods and drive a lorry. I don't know what it is. These young boys come and we stay where we are. Maybe they feel they can rely on them more. I don't know. (assistant, UK)

Thus, part-time employees were in reality confined to the lowest supervisory positions and the top positions were, in general, male, despite the fact that the sector as a whole was highly feminized. In the larger stores there were some opportunities for younger women who worked full-time, and women were also found in stereotypical female areas such as personnel. While there were some gender-stereotypical attitudes about the suitability of women in management, the main form of discrimination was linked to time, which, in turn, was linked to the differential caring responsibilities between women and men.

CONCLUSION

The development of flexible patterns of working has enabled people with caring responsibilities, especially mothers, to take up paid employment. Jobs in retail offer a variety of working patterns, including evening, night and weekend work. Flexible patterns of working were particularly evident in the UK and Sweden, where contracts were sometimes determined on an individual basis. These varied patterns enabled parents, especially mothers (the majority of whom had the major responsibility for

childcare), to carry out paid work while a partner or grandparent took over *their* caring responsibilities. Elsewhere, in France, Germany, Spain and Greece, the forms of flexibility were more rigid and less likely to be tailored to individual preferences.

In all cases, however, as a consequence of women's absence from the home, men have been drawn into domestic work and childcare, but women retained major responsibility for this work in the majority of cases. In the absence of appropriate and affordable care, jobs with non-standard working hours were attractive, as they allowed paid work and family responsibilities to be combined. However, in practice, part-time work constrained promotional opportunities and therefore income. These forms of work consequently allow women to enter paid work, but, in the retail sector at least, rarely provided an independent income (see Orloff, 1996). Although the income earned was found to be empowering, the women remained financially dependent on a male breadwinner or the state. Flexible working in the retail sector has therefore opened up some employment opportunities, but in a way that leaves the gender division of labour within the home, largely, but not completely, unchanged. Thus the contribution of flexible working to the mainstreaming objectives is a limited one. Women's role in paid work has expanded, women are combining paid work with caring responsibilities, but our findings indicate that so far, while there have been changes in the organization of work and time, there have been 'no long lasting changes in parental roles or family structures' (European Commission, 1996b: 5). Thus, to the extent that flexible employment expands employment opportunities for those with caring responsibilities, it could be said to be compatible with equal opportunities initiatives. However, to the extent that this form of working, as a consequence of the pay and hours, builds upon and reinforces the prevailing domestic division of labour and financial dependency on a partner or the state, then it is in conflict with the equal opportunities policies of the EU.

If employment in the future is to be more flexible, then certain preconditions are necessary, in order to ensure that it is compatible with equal opportunities, even in the more limited sense of equal opportunities in paid work. First, working patterns need to be predictable, but with some flexibility to cope with the unexpected demands associated with caring responsibilities. Second, flexible workers should not be excluded from promotional opportunities simply because they work part-time. Third, all states need to develop childcare strategies that pay attention to the needs of flexible workers. Even in those countries with comparatively good childcare services, the opening hours were often too restrictive for the needs of flexible workers.

Attention also needs to be given to the pay levels in feminized sectors of the economy. The retail sector is both feminized and dominated by low

pay (Rubery et al., 1994). As long as women's pay remains lower than men's, then it will be very difficult to bring about a change in the gender division of time between women and men. The economically 'rational' couple will tend to prioritize the paid work of the higher earner (but see Dunne [1998] for an account of the way lesbian couples make different choices in this respect), and single mothers will remain permanently disadvantaged. This unequal division of domestic labour remains a key obstacle to the realization of equal opportunities for women and men in paid work. Although employment regulations and childcare provision varied between the countries, the effects of these differences in practice were not so noticeable as might be expected from the gendered welfare regimes literature (see Sainsbury, 1996). Low paid employees, with caring responsibilities, face common problems, which suggests that while state policies modify the forms of incorporation into paid work, inequalities by gender and social class remain important.

Finally, flexible working should not be seen as a general panacea for the social problems confronting the EU. It is possible to identify positive examples of employment flexibility, which reconcile employer's needs for efficiency with employees' needs for secure incomes, at the level of individual firms. In this particular sector, however, the overall incomes received were rarely sufficient to constitute an independent income. Thus, these forms of work tended to build upon, rather than challenge, the traditional division of labour between women and men, and, therefore, make only a limited contribution towards equal opportunities. More cross-national and sectoral case studies of the actual experiences of flexible workers are required before compatibility between flexible employment, firm-level efficiency and equal opportunities can be assumed.

NOTES

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1. Numerical flexibility takes different forms. Two contrasting forms are annualized hours and zero hour contracts. With annualized hours, the employee is contracted to work a given number of hours each year but the number worked can be varied on a daily or weekly basis. With zero hours

- the employee is on the employer's register but has no guaranteed hours at all.
2. In a global economy, wages could, in principle, decline to the least well-paid worker anywhere in the world (Freeman and Soete, 1994). This decline would reduce demand and undermine incentives to invest in new technology and labour skills leading to a low technology, uncompetitive economy in contrast to the competitiveness objective (see Bruegel and Perrons, 1995).
 3. The other two objectives are concerned with lagging regions, those with less than 75 percent of the EU average GDP per capita and declining industrial regions.
 4. Prime age workers are those between the ages of 25 and 49. In this age group activity rates are less likely to be affected by different policies in relation to education or retirement and thus gender differences between countries can be highlighted. The female activity rate fell in Sweden and Denmark between 1900 and 1995, fell marginally in Italy, Portugal and the UK and remained stable in Finland (European Commission, 1997a). These changes took place in the context of the economic recession of the early 1990s and may, in part, reflect the way women are (un)recorded in the unemployment statistics.
 5. Family workers are defined as those who work within their own families and who do not necessarily receive a separate wage.
 6. Temporary jobs account for about 14 percent of all jobs in the EU in 1995. They are fairly evenly divided between women and men, but there are substantial variations between countries. Temporary work tends to be more prevalent in countries where employment is highly regulated. For example, in 1995, 33 percent of men and 38 percent of women were in temporary jobs in Spain, compared to 6 percent (or less) of men and 10 percent (or less) of women in Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Austria and the UK. Part-time temporary jobs are the most precarious jobs and about 39 percent of women temporary workers in the EU were part-time (European Commission, 1997a; see also Meulders et al., 1997).
 7. On average 70 percent of all women's jobs are in the service sector. The level ranges from 50 percent in Greece to 90 percent in Luxembourg. Women (33.3 percent in Greece and over 50 percent in Denmark) carry out half of the service jobs in the EU.
 8. Informal work refers to paid work that is not officially registered.
 9. Anne Lise Ellingsaeter (1998) suggests that the later and less comprehensive industrialization of Norway has influenced the lower female participation rate there in comparison to Sweden.
 10. The European Commission DGV Equal Opportunities Unit financed this study, but it does not necessarily reflect their views. The author coordinated the project as a whole and carried out the research in the UK, with Jennifer Hurstfield. The project would not have been possible without the support and cooperation from co-researchers from the other countries – see the acknowledgements at the beginning of this section.
 11. The questionnaire and interview schedules are included in the interim reports for the EU and may be obtained from the author.
 12. Rolling contracts are where the employees work different hours on a rotating basis. In Spain, for example, employees in one store worked early one week (e.g. from 8 a.m.) and late the next (e.g. starting work at 2 p.m.).

Similarly, in Sweden, the number of late nights worked may vary on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

13. A growing number of stores now stay open 24 hours a day in the UK. One supermarket chain is planning to open two stores on Christmas Day in 1999.
14. These hours are currently under review and may be changed to 6, 12 and 18.
15. Although these specific managers worked full-time, they nevertheless shared managerial responsibilities, which suggests that part-time employees could carry out these tasks.
16. This case provides an illustration of how the research process can be progressive. The UK manager said that the question of managerial work being organized on a part-time basis had not previously been considered. She went on to say that this question prompted a heated debate between a group of senior managers, who, in the end, concluded that it was feasible.

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