



Talking point



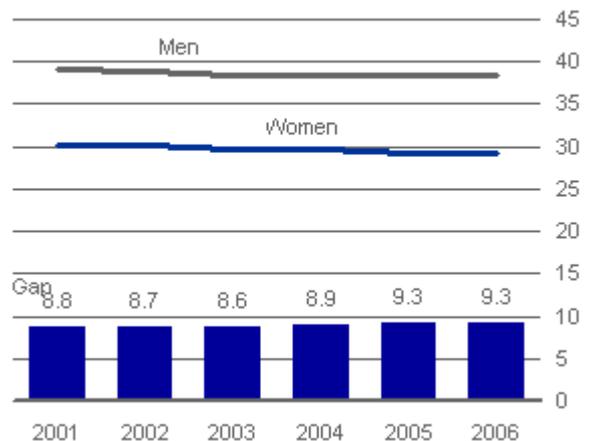
More mothers at work, mostly part-time: What is the problem, exactly?

December 10, 2008

Although the female employment rate is increasing, the gender gap in hours worked widened between 2001 and 2006 (Mikrozensus Sonderauswertung IAQ). Should we, as progressive people, rejoice at the former or start crying about the latter? A closer look at the data shows that the two developments are, in fact, related.

Fewer work hours for all

Weekly hours of paid work



Source: Mikrozensus Sonderauswertung IAQ 2008

1. The female employment rate (61.5% in 2006) has been steadily increasing in Germany in the last decades, as in most industrialised countries. This is mostly due to the sharp increase in the number of mothers at work. These mothers tend to work part-time, sometimes only a few hours per week, which lowers the reading for the average number of hours worked by women. **The switch from non-working mothers to part-time mothers is a step forward in gender equity, even if there is still much to do.**

2. **The maternal employment rate is still relatively low in Germany in an international context**, especially when children are less than 3 years of age. This is the result of a culture emphasising mothers' exclusive role in early childhood and of the related shortage of child-care facilities. Germany is currently experiencing clear changes on both counts, leading to an increase in working mothers. Available data are not recent enough to show a potential "Elterngeld effect" boosting the employment rate and number of hours worked, for mothers with young children (the new parental paid leave scheme was implemented in January 2007).

Still few working mothers in Germany

Maternal employment rates, women aged 15 to 64, 2005 by age of youngest child

	0-16	<3	3 to 5	6 to 16
DK	76.4	71.4	77.8	77.5
FI	76.0	52.1	80.7	84.2
FR	59.9	53.7	63.8	61.7
DE	54.9	36.1	54.8	62.7
EU-19	59.5	51.1	58.2	63.2
OECD	61.5	51.9	61.3	66.3

Source: OECD

3. **In Germany as in most countries, the share of part-timers among women in paid employment is increasing.** Sometimes, a woman turns to part-time employment because there is no full-time position available. However, part-time is by and large a choice (also partly related to the current shortage of child-care facilities and all-day schools). **Mothers are especially attracted to a part-time work arrangement.** About 75% of employed mothers work part-time in west Germany and 43% in east Germany, compared to one-third in the OECD area.



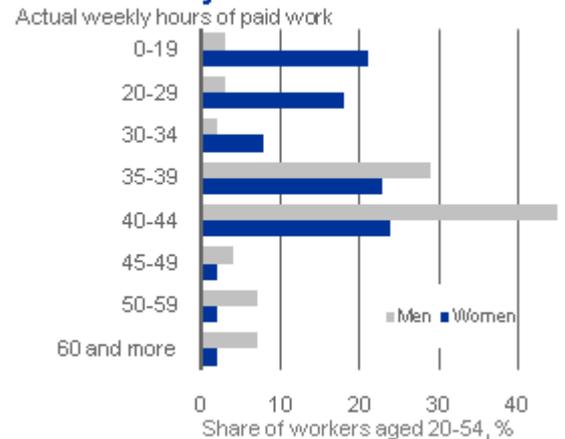
■ **Low-intensity part-time: hard to make it a career path**

German women opting for part-time often work relatively few hours: 20% of female workers aged 20 to 54 work less than 20 hours per week. This is partly due to Germany's minijob regulation providing tax incentives to work for less than EUR 400 per month. It is close to impossible for a worker to have a career with so few hours, and this is probably even not desired.

■ **High-intensity part-time: potentially not a barrier**

As to flexible arrangements involving more work hours (higher-intensity part-time, home office, etc.), they are still too often associated with limited career opportunities, although there is no basis, in terms of qualification or organisation, to justify this. The problem can be tackled through a more supportive company culture.

Women want to work but not too much on the job



Source: OECD für 2005

In principle, **two routes – potentially in combination – are available to decrease the gap between men's and women's working times**, keeping in mind the trade-off between income and work-life balance.

- The most discussed route is to make it more attractive for mothers to opt for higher-intensity part-time employment.
- The other route is for fathers to decrease their load – with the likely consequence that their partner will further increase her hours (and, of course, the positive impact, for children, of increased father-child interactions).

More gender equity in the treatment of social insurance and taxes would remove the incentive for mothers to drastically cut down their hours in paid employment, with obvious consequences for their career and financial prospects. Germany's joint taxation system provides weak financial incentives for mothers to resume work, and for second-earners to work more hours.

Both with taxes and work hours, it makes sense to look at the family at large as a unit. There is now ample evidence that young couples desire a better work-family balance for both partners, implying a more equitable work division at home and in the workplace. **Truly family-oriented workplaces** have a big role to play: offering career paths with flexible work arrangements for both parents, and tackling the gender wage gap.

See also:

[Women on expedition to 2020: The path to more gender equity in Germany](#)

[Are women really worth less?](#)

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