

Work life balance in the context of regulatory change: a comparison of France and the UK

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Résumé

A la fin des années 1990, l'Union Européenne a souhaité se positionner comme *leader* dans la promotion de normes relatives au temps de travail et aux droits des salariés travaillant à temps partiel. Elle a aussi encouragé la flexibilité de l'emploi et le développement de la conciliation et de l'équilibre travail-famille. Cependant, localement, chaque pays en fonction de son histoire et de ses traditions sociales, a vu émerger des modèles de régulation et de gestion du temps de travail sensiblement différents. Dans cet article, nous étudions dans une perspective comparative et analytique les cas de la France et du Royaume-Uni quant à leurs modèles actuels de régulation du temps de travail et leurs effets sur l'équilibre travail-famille. A partir de résultats tirés de l'Enquête Européenne sur les Conditions de Travail (EWCS) entre 1995 et 2005, nous mettons en évidence un certain nombre de points à savoir une tendance continue à la baisse des durées travaillées, le renforcement de normes dans les temps travaillés, un développement de la flexibilité du temps de travail, un renforcement de l'imprévisibilité des horaires de travail ainsi qu'un sensible déclin de la satisfaction des employés quant à l'équilibre travail famille en France, contrairement à la situation du Royaume Uni. Notre analyse montre le rôle et la stratégie développés à la fois par les employeurs et les salariés dans ces positionnements et vécus individuels et collectifs par rapport au temps de travail.

Mots Clés : Temps – Travail – Régulation – Equilibre vie travail

Introduction

The European Union has been a leading actor in promoting a number of Directives about working time, parental leave and part-time worker's rights. It also considered the promotion of flexible employment and the reconciliation of work and family life in the European employment strategy (Cousins and Tang, 2004). Nevertheless, the situation in European countries can differ on these aspects due to their history, social traditions and norms. In the late 1990s and early 2000s both France and UK enacted changes to working time laws that were profound in their own national contexts. In the case of France the 35 hour week was the culmination of several decades of working time reduction led by political and trade union forces aimed at redistributing work to address persistent levels of unemployment. While the redistributive effects have been questioned the implementation has had considerable impact on the organisation of working time at the organisational and personal level.

While in the UK the introduction of the 48 hour week can be seen as weak when compared to other countries in Europe, the right to request flexible working has in principle, and in practice, redressed some of the balance of power over working time. This is not to say that the right to request legislation is not flawed or weaker than its European counterparts but in a UK context it marked a major shift in working time politics. On the other hand, the introduction of the working time directive has many of the hallmarks of the UK's 'voluntarist' approach to regulation with the opt-out providing employers and employees with ample opportunity to work long hours.

Although both the starting points and levels of working time adjustment are quite different in the two countries the role of debates around work life balance are common to both. The increasing participation of women on the labour market combined with policy concerns around reconciliation mean that the impact of working time on employees working lives remains a live issue. Against this context, this paper considers the impact of regulatory change in these different institutional environments on employees' objective and subjective experiences of work life balance. Our research, using the European Working Conditions Surveys (EWCS), examines and compares working time patterns in France and UK in order to highlight key recent changes and their impact on evolution of working time and work life balance in both countries.

In the first part of this article, we present a review of the French and UK national working time patterns. This review leads us to consider later on the main developments around working time, life and family in recent years. Then, in a second part, we introduce the results of the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) focusing on selected variables and dimensions that highlight work life balance outcomes and tensions. A conclusion, will underline the aspects and dimensions to consider when comparing these two countries and their way to deal with new working time realities.

1. Working time regulation and life-work balance in France and the UK: taking stock

Comparing working time between European countries may appear quite difficult because of the difficulty in obtaining equivalent labour statistics. Firstly, there is no internationally agreed definition of part time work, for example and the OECD and EU use different types of

measures. The absence of international basis is reinforced by the heterogeneity in the quantity and quality of national statistics on working time. There are also differences in the measurement of working time highlighted by the variation between usual hours versus actual hours. It is usually considered that actual hours include overtime and can be used as an economic indicator whereas usual hours don't include this kind of short-term variability. Using Bishop's hours worked indicators (2004), we can consider six determinants of working time: (1) regulations and legislation; (2) preferences and cultures; (3) wages; (4) tax rates; (5) business cycle effects; (6) structural changes in the economy.

1.1. Working time pattern in the UK

In the UK, working hours are among the longest in Europe and there is a strong influence of a 'long-hours culture' (Smith et al., 2003). The UK shows a very unusual distribution of hours worked compared to other European countries (Kodz et al., 2003). It appears that the rates between 16-20 to 50 and above hours are not uniform but without a peak as it can be observed in countries like France or even Sweden or Denmark (with peaks at 36-40 hours). This is sometimes described as a polarisation of working hours and has a strong gender component (Smith 2003). This absence of a model working time norm is partly explained by the high level of part-time work but also the institutional and organisational flexibility around working time. To some extent the limitations of trade union power helps explain this outcome as can be observed in France, but also the weak institutional environment. The UK situation shifted somewhat in 1997 with the very first policies acted by the government focusing on working time, part-time work and parental leave. The big turning point was also has been observed in 1998 with the Working Time Regulation following the EU Working time directive. It was the first official working time regulation in the UK with a maximum 48-hour week, daily and weekly rest periods, night work regulations and four weeks paid leave.

One explanation for the long hour culture in the UK is the reliance on overtime. As the Cranfield Survey of European companies (1995) indicates, the rate of overtime use in companies is 24% higher in the UK than the next highest European country in the survey (CHECK). An over-time culture is a specificity in the UK and reflects the large share of manual occupations and the consequence of low levels of pay, a situation which encourages many workers to rely on overtime to reach an acceptable level of wages (Kodz et al., 2003). We can also observe that long hours are common in higher level jobs, with a reliance on unpaid overtime. Over a quarter of the UK workforce works an average of seven hours of paid overtime a week and the most affected group is male manual workers (IDS, 2002). However, unpaid overtime takes a significant part in the total of overtime hours and is most often worked by managers and professionals. A corresponding specificity of the UK work system, the week-end working (Rubery et al., 1998). The week-end working rate is higher than all other European countries. Both workers and management can take advantages of this situation: employees may find benefits in working at this traditional non-work time and employers may take the opportunity to increase operating time. Finally work intensification seems to be a new characteristic in the UK around the idea to have to work faster, the feeling of being under pressure; a trend that is evident across countries (Burchell et al., 2007). This concerns traditionally blue collars but more and more high status workers (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Webster, 2004)

1.2. Working time pattern in France

In France, working time considerations and debates have been a major theme for centuries (Fridenson and Reynaud, 2004). The major trend has been a continuous reduction of working time with an important point reached in 1939: the 40 hour-work week. In 1981, the newly elected government renewed the commitment to reducing working time and its improved distribution. In 1982, then principle of the 39 hour worked week and 5 weeks paid leave. If the objective was a reduction of working time to 35 hours in 1985, after 1982, all progress towards a new reduction in working time failed. In 1996, a law, without changing the official reference to 39 hours, offered the option to companies to reduce working time duration with financial help from the government, in order to keep jobs or to avoid cutting jobs. However, the major turn took place at the end of the century, in 1998 and 2000 with the 35 hours working week new reference implemented by the *Aubry* laws. The main goal was still to use working time reduction to create new jobs illustrated by the law's initials *ARTT* (*Aménagement Réduction du Temps de Travail*). However, the creation of jobs is still subject of debate: from the 800 000 announced jobs, around 350 000 new jobs have been created (DARES, 2001).

One of major consequences of the changes has been the development of flexibility in working organisation. Working time reduction in French companies created the necessity to re-organize work in order to face the reduction of working time but also to help companies to face competitive challenges. This new flexibility took place in the creation of an annual reference of working time duration (1600 hours/year) with the possibility of “low” and “high” weeks in term of worked time (the concept of annualised hours). The idea to create days off to take within the civil year to reduce annual duration of working time to 1600 hours or to the average of 35 hours a week over the year had strong success in companies. DARES (2002-2003) underlines that 57% of employees affected by ARTT agreements had variable week and 12% got to know their schedule a week before working.

Intensification and a concentration of “thickening” of work can be presented as the second major impact of the reforms. DARES (2001) points out that if 25 % of the employees have better working conditions, at least the same number indicated worse working conditions. Moreover, the generated free time is not always used at it should be, it would be mostly time for breaks and relaxation rather than doing new activities in familial or social life. Another point to be mentioned is the breakdown of the collective spirit at work resulting from the increased variety of work schedules and a new tendency to individualism at work (Sanséau, 2005).

The final aspect we can present as a consequence of the *Aubry* law is a global movement of wage moderation and reduction of over time. Wages moderation and financial changes helped permit a reduction of working time without increasing costs (Heyer and Timbeau, 2001; Passeron, 2002). Moreover, annualised hours system globally reduced overtime, specifically for blue collar workers.

1.3. Working time, life and family: between balance and conflict?

The notion of reconciling work and family life is an increasingly important academic and political debate in Europe (Cousins and Tang, 2004). With an increasing number of women in the labour market and their fight for educational attainment, careers and financial independence, the theme of reconciling work and family is becoming central to many aspects of organisational life. Some aspects seem achievable with application of well-developed

policies, others appear to be a “key pressure point” for policies, although they are extremely uneven among the European states. (Applebaum et al., 2002; Duncan and Williams, 2002; Tyrkkö, 2002). We must also consider the impact of the labour market, and the characteristic of gender gap in pay and occupational segregation in shaping these challenges.

1.3.1. The UK situation

The UK situation can be presented with the results of a European funded project “Households, Work and Flexibility” (HWF) (2001). As we noted earlier, the pattern in the UK can be considered as short hours for women and long hours for men and this situation is exaggerated for parents. In the UK since the 1980s, part-time employment has been a major source of employment development for women, especially for mothers in a context of low child care provision and limited parental leave measures (Cousins and Tang, 2004). In the 1990s and in the early 2000s, the female part time working rate remained stable at around 44%.

Firstly, it appears unsurprisingly that parents compared to non-parents agree in the UK that work is not compatible with household tasks or family responsibilities. The percentage is even stronger for fathers than mothers: 55% versus 36% for household tasks; 46% versus 29% for family responsibilities. In fact, this dimension is to be expected since fathers work longer than mothers. When fathers work more than 50 hours a week, 70% of them consider that work makes it difficult to fulfil responsibilities, compared to 13% when they work between 30-39 hours a week. For mothers, the rate concerning household tasks is 42% when they work 30 hours and less and 52% when they work 30-39 hours. Concerning the fact that responsibilities towards family could prevent from doing they work adequately, both mothers and fathers agree that the longer they work, the more complicated it is.

According to Cousins and Tang (2004, p. 544), the UK could be considered as “an example of ‘non-institutionalized’ and de-regulated response to working time and its reconciliation with family life”. If men work long hours, women often work part-time. It seems that British men often do not express a preference to reduce their worked hours, with the exception of those with extensive hours. The wish of females to work part-time could be an answer to the expectation of long hours working for full-time workers, the long working hours of their partners and of course a historical lack of institutional support to combine work and family. The counterpart is for mother’s shorter hours of work to reduce difficulties to balance work and family but also less paid jobs and less financial independence.

1.3.2. In France, new tendencies after the 35 hours reform

If one of the main goals of the *Aubry’s* 35 hours reform was to reduce employment by reducing global working time in France, one of the expected effects was a better balance between work, life and an improvement of working conditions throughout re-organisation of work. The first evaluations of the effects have been available with one of the first survey *Enquête RTT et Modes de vie* (DARES, 2001). The main goal of this survey were to get a better understanding of the changes occurred in every day life of the employees who turned to the 35 hours new reference. If the reduced working time did not deeply change the daily organisation of employees, it appears a modification in rhythms and in the use of time. The explanation is on the fact that employees received mostly free time (days or half days) attributed to reduce their weekly worked hours. Only less than a quarter of employees got a daily and regular reduction in working time.

Thus the main use of this free time has been around relaxing, spending time with the children, practising activities like gardening, DIY jobs. For parents of children above 12, 63% of mothers indicate spending more time with them versus 52% for the fathers. Indeed, the newly

acquired free time, didn't change the classical division of tasks in the family cell. Domestic tasks appear to stay mostly women's domain.

We can also note that 59% of the employees indicate a positive effect of the reduced worked hours on their every day life, 13% indicate a deterioration, 28% that nothing changed. It seems important to consider the professional categories to have a better understanding of the appreciation of the employees about reduced working time. This is confirmed when examining gender and the professional categories. Results show (*Enquête RTT et Modes de vie DARES 2001*) that the level of satisfaction of non-qualified males (57%) is around the average (59%), working woman or non-qualified female employees expressing less satisfaction than average (40%). The difference is explainable with the fact of having children and responsibility for reconciliation. The most satisfied category would be the mothers with a child under 12 (71%). The explanation could be that with the difficulty to combine full-time job and family and domestic tasks, they felt, more than other categories, less pressure or the sentiment of missing time, so they felt more than others the necessity to enjoy more free time (Askenazy et al., 2004; Cette et al., 2004).

Pélisse (2002) highlights, on the base of a research on 50 companies, that the perception of the "35 hours" by employees is deeply related to the quality of the newly acquired free time by the days off attributed and therefore by their control of worked and non-worked periods. Some employees seem to have greater capacity of control. On the other hand, others have difficulties in managing this because related constraints and flexibility variations are too strong. These dimensions are correlated with the results of others studies. Sanséau (2002, 2005) underlines that satisfaction of employees experiencing flexible time management and reduced working time is deeply linked with past experiences of working hours, individual positioning of time as a social dimension, anticipation and control of worked hours and the importance of prior consultation of employees concerning the change of their schedule.

1.4. Research objectives

The changing regulatory and institutional environment for working time in France and the UK might be expected to have various and multiple impacts on the patterns of working hours in each country. Furthermore the increasing pressures for companies to adjust production and services to meet the demands of clients creates further pressures on the management of working time and thus the experience of individual employees. Although we have quite different starting points and histories of working time and working time management in each country we might expect that these changes might lead to a reduction in the global working time levels while on the other hand greater demands for flexibility from employers might lead to increase in variation of working time or scheduling of hours. Similarly greater demands for reconciliation of work and family life might lead to both shorter hours and a greater variety of hours but, but in contrast to the interests of employers, some stability in the scheduling and possibly limitations on unsocial hours working. In this paper we profit from the availability of comparable data for the period 1990 to 2005, for both France and the UK, to explore the impact of regulatory change in these different institutional environments on employees' objective and subjective experiences of working time.

Methods and data

The European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) is carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (European Foundation) every five years. The first EWCS survey was carried out in 1990/91 and the most recent in

2005. The sample of the EWCS is representative of persons in employment (based on the Eurostat definition of both employees and self-employed). The sampling procedure in each country uses a multi-stage, stratified and clustered design with a random walk procedure for the selection of respondents (see Parent-Thirion et al., 2007). Face-to-face interviews are conducted with respondents in their own household. The most recent wave of the EWCS (2005) collected working conditions data from a total of 31 countries; 27 EU member states, plus two candidate countries and two European Free Trade Association countries.

The questionnaire is developed by the European Foundation in close cooperation with an expert group. The questions in the survey have been evolving since the 1990/91 EWCS and while some have remained identical to facilitate longitudinal analysis others have been added or changed to keep up with the evolution of working practices and technological developments. For our purposes there are a range of questions on working time including usual hours, the scheduling of hours, the frequency of working unsocial hours and levels of satisfaction with work-life balance.

A few publications have already examined the changes over the waves and considered trends in the data by comparing the 2005 survey with earlier surveys (for example Parent-Thirion et al., 2007; European Foundation, 2007). At the European level comparisons over time are not necessarily straightforward since changes over time are confounded with the expanding membership of the EU and the increasing scope of successive surveys (Burchell et al 2007). However, here we use these data to explore the patterns of working time in more detail in just two countries that have been present in all waves.

2. Results and analysis

2.1. Working durations

Table 1 confirms the long hours working of full-timers in the UK compared to France that we noted above. On average UK men in full-time work usually work 43.5 hours per week compared to 38.8 in France. Perhaps more surprising is that women in full-time work have longer usual hours than both men and women in France (40.2 hours). By contrast, for part-timers we find the opposite pattern with shorter average hours in the UK, illustrating both the polarised working time patterns observed above and the prevalence of low-quality short hours part-time jobs for many women and students (O'Reilly and Fagan 1998). Reflecting the lack of a model hours group or 'working time norm' we find the variation in working hours, illustrated by the standard deviation in table 1, much higher in the UK than in France.

The trends in the EWCS data confirm our expectation of a downward trend in working time for male full-timers in both countries and women in France but not those in the UK where there was just a slight rise between 1995 and 2005. The rise for women in the UK appears to be connected to the increased hours among clerical and service workers and operators and elementary occupations (table 1). These are in line with patterns observed in other countries (European Foundation 2007). The variation in full-time hours has also declined but remains higher in the UK.

As we have noted above the role of occupation is vital in understanding changes in working time patterns. Table 1 regroups the ISCO-92 occupational categories into four comparable groups that have been shown to be rather stable over time and across countries (See Rubery et al 1999). Here we see that the downward trend in working time is evident across almost all groups for women and men – the exceptions being women in clerical and service work and operators and elementary occupations. However, we can still see the important role

occupations play in shaping current differences within countries with long average full-time hours observed for managers and professionals in both countries and for men in skilled manual and craft work. For part-timers we see a fall in hours too, in almost all cases, and also an increasing standard deviation in both countries. So while we see overall global working time falling the plurality of working patterns appears to be rising with a greater variety among part-timers.

Table 1 Mean hours usually worked per week by occupation, full and part-time status and gender 1995-2005

| | 1995 | | | | 2000 | | | | 2005 | | | |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | FR | | UK | | FR | | UK | | FR | | UK | |
| | mean | SD | mean | SD | Mean | SD | mean | SD | mean | SD | mean | SD |
| Managerial, Professional & Technical | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| male full-time | 44,1 | 9,8 | 46,7 | 11,7 | 44,9 | 11,4 | 46,6 | 13,0 | 40,1 | 7,1 | 44,6 | 10,6 |
| male part-time | 25,0 | 5,9 | 23,1 | 7,5 | 23,0 | 6,0 | 23,1 | 8,4 | 20,8 | 7,4 | 16,3 | 6,9 |
| female full-time | 41,7 | 8,6 | 40,8 | 9,2 | 44,7 | 12,7 | 42,0 | 8,1 | 38,0 | 6,8 | 39,8 | 6,1 |
| female part-time | 22,1 | 5,5 | 20,9 | 6,3 | 22,1 | 6,4 | 20,8 | 7,0 | 21,9 | 7,4 | 19,9 | 8,1 |
| Total | 38,3 | 12,1 | 38,9 | 14,4 | 40,8 | 14,1 | 39,9 | 14,4 | 36,1 | 9,7 | 36,1 | 13,6 |
| clerks & service workers | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| male full-time | 43,6 | 8,7 | 43,6 | 8,0 | 39,5 | 6,1 | 42,9 | 9,3 | 37,4 | 4,0 | 41,2 | 8,8 |
| male part-time | 23,4 | 7,4 | 20,5 | 6,5 | 19,2 | 6,2 | 23,1 | 7,3 | 17,2 | 9,3 | 16,9 | 7,6 |
| female full-time | 40,9 | 6,4 | 38,6 | 4,4 | 38,3 | 4,3 | 38,6 | 4,4 | 36,2 | 2,8 | 40,6 | 10,8 |
| female part-time | 23,0 | 5,1 | 20,1 | 5,4 | 22,4 | 6,3 | 18,9 | 6,8 | 22,5 | 7,6 | 18,6 | 7,1 |
| Total | 37,6 | 10,4 | 32,6 | 11,8 | 33,9 | 9,4 | 30,9 | 12,7 | 34,0 | 7,2 | 28,3 | 14,1 |
| Skilled Manual & Craft work | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| male full-time | 45,3 | 11,0 | 44,7 | 9,7 | 43,0 | 10,1 | 44,5 | 9,3 | 40,3 | 8,3 | 43,6 | 8,7 |
| male part-time | 19,8 | 7,9 | 19,9 | 6,9 | 22,5 | 8,0 | 18,5 | 11,3 | 13,0 | 7,4 | 16,1 | 10,7 |
| female full-time | 48,4 | 13,7 | 40,3 | 6,0 | 42,4 | 8,6 | 39,7 | 2,0 | 38,0 | 7,5 | 38,5 | 1,3 |
| female part-time | 20,0 | 0,7 | 16,8 | 5,9 | 20,4 | 5,6 | 17,7 | 6,5 | 22,0 | 6,5 | 24,0 | 6,6 |
| Total | 44,5 | 13,1 | 41,1 | 12,5 | 41,3 | 11,2 | 42,3 | 11,5 | 38,1 | 10,3 | 39,9 | 12,1 |
| Operators & Elementary Occupations | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| male full-time | 41,0 | 6,7 | 45,7 | 10,6 | 39,9 | 5,4 | 43,4 | 10,3 | 37,0 | 4,0 | 42,7 | 7,0 |
| male part-time | 23,9 | 4,4 | 19,0 | 6,1 | 20,3 | 7,3 | 20,3 | 8,5 | 20,4 | 10,4 | 17,1 | 9,6 |
| female full-time | 38,7 | 3,6 | 39,4 | 4,7 | 37,9 | 3,8 | 39,5 | 5,3 | 38,7 | 7,2 | 41,6 | 10,6 |
| female part-time | 23,4 | 5,2 | 18,3 | 5,5 | 18,3 | 6,8 | 16,5 | 6,8 | 21,0 | 7,0 | 14,5 | 7,1 |
| Total | 38,1 | 8,1 | 34,5 | 15,1 | 35,7 | 9,5 | 36,6 | 14,6 | 33,6 | 9,5 | 33,4 | 15,1 |
| TOTAL | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| male full-time | 43,8 | 9,7 | 45,6 | 10,6 | 42,5 | 9,6 | 44,5 | 10,8 | 38,8 | 6,4 | 43,5 | 9,3 |
| male part-time | 23,4 | 6,7 | 20,4 | 6,9 | 21,6 | 6,9 | 21,6 | 9,0 | 18,7 | 9,2 | 16,6 | 8,5 |
| female full-time | 41,9 | 8,6 | 39,8 | 6,9 | 40,8 | 9,0 | 40,0 | 6,3 | 37,5 | 6,0 | 40,2 | 8,1 |
| female part-time | 22,6 | 5,3 | 19,5 | 5,9 | 21,6 | 6,6 | 18,9 | 7,0 | 21,7 | 7,3 | 18,5 | 7,7 |
| Total | 39,5 | 11,6 | 36,7 | 14,2 | 38,0 | 12,0 | 36,4 | 14,1 | 35,1 | 9,3 | 33,8 | 14,4 |

Source: European Working conditions Surveys 1995, 2000, 2005

We can see the impact of these shifts in the distribution of working time in the patterns displayed in table 2. Here we can see the increasing levels of short hours part-time work (less than 20 hours) among women and men in France and men in the UK. While the rates for women in the UK remain much higher, they have fallen slightly over the period. Although the evidence of a working time norm is weaker in the UK we can see an increased concentration of women (27% to 33%) and men (47% to 53%) working 35-40 hours a week. In France this concentration has traditionally been much higher but there is also evidence of a reinforcement in this group for men (58% to 71%) and women (55% to 58%).

Table 2 Distribution of Usual Hours by gender 1990-2005

| | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 |
|---------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Male | | | | |
| France | | | | |
| 1-19 hrs | 0,3% | 1,9% | 2,4% | 3,1% |
| 20-34hrs | 6,7% | 8,2% | 9,3% | 5,1% |
| 35-40hrs | 58,0% | 54,4% | 58,4% | 71,3% |
| 41-47hrs | 8,7% | 15,2% | 11,6% | 6,7% |
| 48+hrs | 26,2% | 20,3% | 18,4% | 13,8% |
| Total | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% |
| UK | | | | |
| 1-19 hrs | 1,5% | 4,4% | 2,7% | 7,4% |
| 20-34hrs | 4,7% | 7,3% | 7,5% | 6,6% |
| 35-40hrs | 47,1% | 44,9% | 52,4% | 52,5% |
| 41-47hrs | 15,6% | 13,8% | 11,7% | 8,2% |
| 48+hrs | 31,0% | 29,5% | 25,7% | 25,3% |
| Total | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% |
| Female | | | | |
| France | | | | |
| 1-19 hrs | 3,2% | 5,7% | 8,1% | 7,8% |
| 20-34hrs | 26,1% | 24,2% | 27,4% | 21,9% |
| 35-40hrs | 54,5% | 51,6% | 49,4% | 57,7% |
| 41-47hrs | 6,1% | 7,7% | 4,7% | 3,3% |
| 48+hrs | 10,0% | 10,8% | 10,4% | 9,2% |
| Total | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% |
| UK | | | | |
| 1-19 hrs | 26,2% | 22,5% | 24,4% | 26,6% |
| 20-34hrs | 31,3% | 31,7% | 29,5% | 30,0% |
| 35-40hrs | 27,1% | 36,3% | 35,2% | 32,9% |
| 41-47hrs | 6,0% | 5,0% | 4,6% | 4,5% |
| 48+hrs | 9,3% | 4,4% | 6,3% | 6,1% |
| Total | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% | 100,0% |

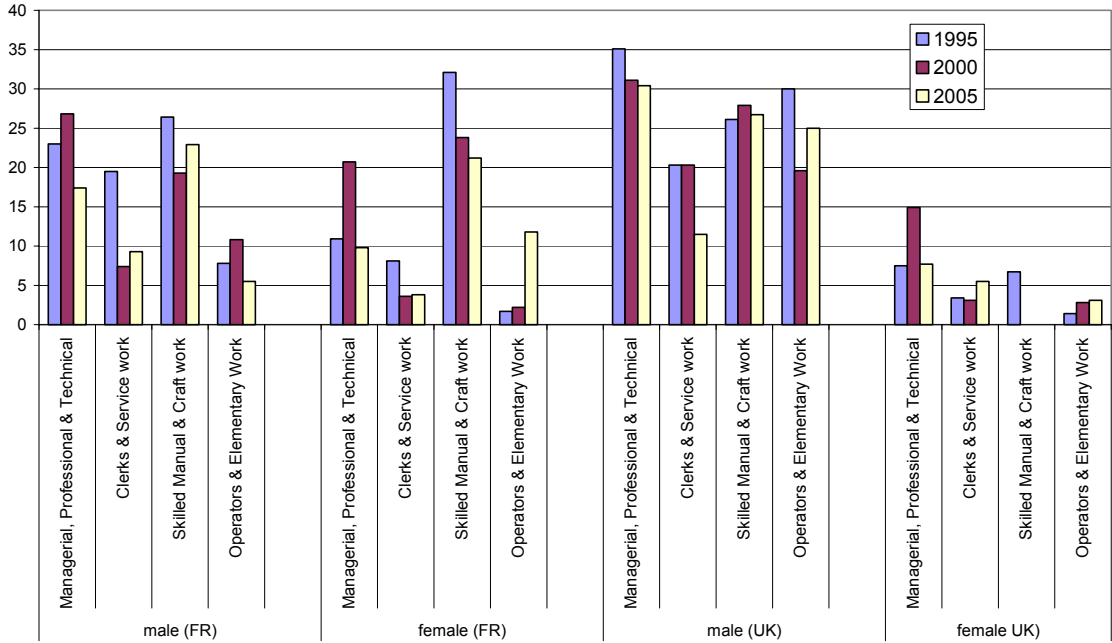
Source: European Working conditions Surveys 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005

One particular concern of policy makers around working time has been the risks of long hours working both for the health of individuals involved but also for the distributional effects of working hours across the population as a whole (see above). Table 2 also shows the fall in long hours working; the proportion of employees working more than the 48 hour limit of the European Working Time Directive. Even though the UK has chosen to implement this Directive with the loophole of a personal opt out, we can see that the proportion of women and men usually working these very long hours has declined in both countries between 1990 and 2005. The decline for men in France is particularly striking (26% to 14%). There is also evidence that these falls are greater among public sector workers (data not shown). After almost ten years since the major changes in the French working time regulation France has the lowest proportion of people working in excess of 40 hours a week in the EU (Afsa et al., 2003).

Figure 1 demonstrates the falling proportion of employees working more than the 48 hour across occupations and the falls at the aggregate levels are observed across these occupational groupings. However, although at low levels, there is evidence of a slight increase in these long hours working among elementary occupations for women in both countries. Looking at

the intervening data point of 2000 it is interesting to note a rise in long hours working among managers and some male dominated occupations. In spite of these falls the impact of the long working hours culture among UK men is striking with 30% of managers and 25% of skilled manual workers still usually working more than 48 hours per week in 2005. Nevertheless the occupational effect is also consistent across both countries with managers and skilled manual and craft workers having high rates of long hours working.

Figure 1: The Extent of Long-hours working (>48hrs) by gender and occupation, 1995-2005



2.2. Stakes around flexibility scheduling

A further risk of greater employer flexibility is greater variability in the individual scheduling of hours so while aggregate falls in working time may be a positive development for work life balance and reconciliation, greater variability in favour of the employer may pose a risk and create challenges for employees with commitments outside work. Here table 3 illustrates the proportion of employees working the same hours every day or every week for 2000 and 2005. These data show that the proportion of employees working the same hours every day has remained rather static in both France and the UK. Similarly the variability of the number of days worked has also remained largely unchanged. What is perhaps also interesting is the relatively small country differences that exit here. The relative stability of the proportion of employees working regular hours or regular days is perhaps also unexpected. However, variability of working time could exist within normal work days and within agreed hours limits (thus employers save on overtime costs for example) and the last panel of table 4 illustrates the falling proportion of employees in both countries, for women and men, who have fixed start and finish times. This type of flexibility could benefit employers and employees depending who is able to decide. Flexibility to adjust start and finish times may allow employees to carry out specific tasks related to childcare or household demands but, on the other hand, flexibility over start and finish times at the employers behest may constrain an individuals ability to reconcile work and family life.

Table 3 The Variability of working hours among employees, 1995-2005

| | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|
| <u>Same hours each day</u> | | | |
| France | | | |
| Men | n/a | 56.2 | 57.5 |
| Women | n/a | 57.6 | 59.3 |
| UK | | | |
| Men | n/a | 56.3 | 53.7 |
| Women | n/a | 66.5 | 64.8 |
| <u>Same days each Week</u> | | | |
| France | | | |
| Men | n/a | 76.9 | 73.4 |
| Women | n/a | 76.7 | 76.7 |
| UK | | | |
| Men | n/a | 71.7 | 70.5 |
| Women | n/a | 78.7 | 79.4 |
| <u>Fixed Start/Finish Times</u> | | | |
| France | | | |
| Men | 65.5 | 63.8 | 59.2 |
| Women | 77.0 | 70.3 | 67.8 |
| UK | | | |
| Men | 56.9 | 57.9 | 52.4 |
| Women | 74.2 | 71.2 | 66.7 |

Source: European Working conditions Surveys 1995, 2000, 2005

Here the important question appears to be who decides and the EWCS survey asked respondents about control over the changes in their working time (table 4). Unfortunately these questions were only available in the 2005 version of the survey. The results again show a rather high level of similarity between the two countries with slightly higher levels of employer control in France. However, some important gender difference exist: men seem to have greater levels of complete autonomy to entirely determine their working time while women are more likely to be able to determine working time within certain limits. Figure 2 confirms this greater degree of employer control in France than in the UK. The data show the proportion of employees whose hours are subject to change and the degree of notice they receive for any changes. Here we can see that French employees are more at risk of changeable hours (the remainder of the distribution being those employees whose hours do not change). French employees also seem at greater risk of change at short notice (one day in advance for women and men and on the day for men only). Unfortunately these data are also only available for 2005.

2.3. New perceptions about work-life balance

We can assess the impact of these changes in working time on individual perceptions of work-life balance. This indicator obviously has an important gender dimension since women's greater participation in housework and caring activities in the household means that the rise of female employment has created challenges for individual women, households and organisations. As a result of the dual burden that many working women face, they often seek jobs and working hours that fit with their family arrangements. Similarly, parents may select care arrangements that fit with their working patterns. These interactions may go some way to explaining the very high levels of satisfaction with the fit of work with non-work life observed in the survey (Parent-Thirion et al 2007; Burchell et al 2007). The survey asked how well respondents' work fits with their non-work life, with responses ranging on a four-point

scale from “very well” to “not at all well”. Table 5 shows the proportion of women and men across occupations who stated that their paid work fits very well with their non-work life. The first thing to note about these figures is the very high proportion of workers who answered positively; 34% and 47% of men and 39% and 60% of women in France and the UK respectively. These high levels of satisfaction have remained relatively constant since the 2000 survey in most countries (Parent-Thirion et al 2007) although France is one of the few where the level of satisfaction has actually declined; by two percentages points for women and by three for men. On the other hand, levels of satisfaction have risen in the UK; by a small amount for women but by ten percentage points for men.

Figure 2 Changeability of working Hours in France and the UK, 2005

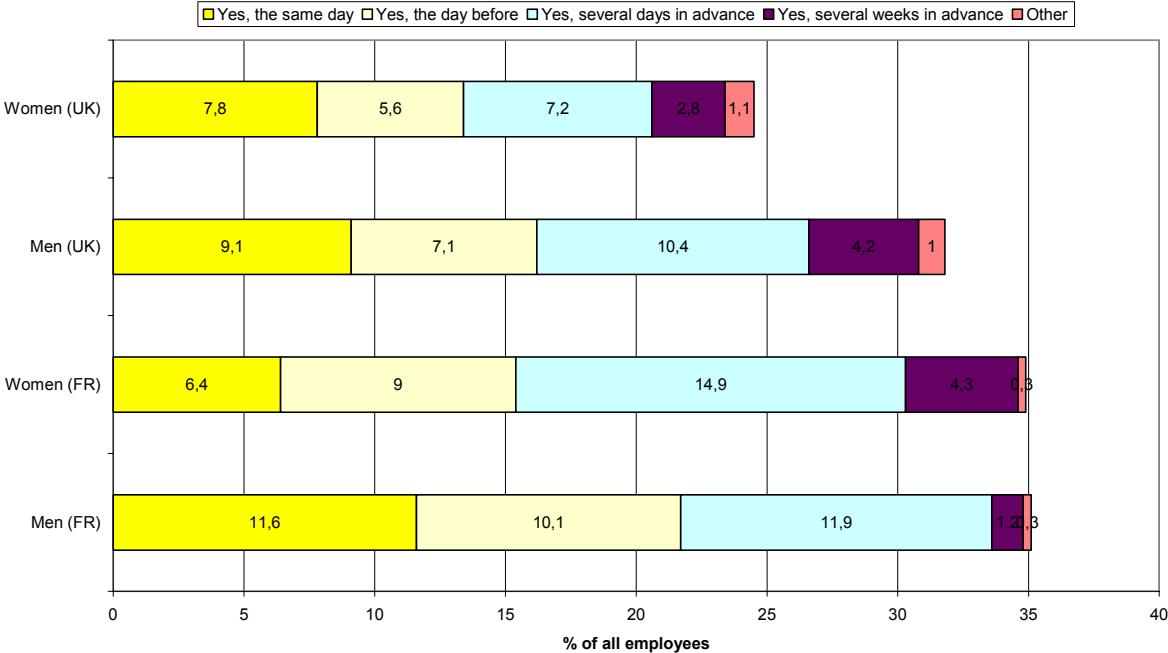


Table 4 The Degree of Working Time Autonomy of Employees (2005)

| | Men (FR) | Women (FR) | Men (UK) | Women (UK) |
|---|----------|------------|----------|------------|
| They are set by the company with no possibility for changes | 57.7 | 55.7 | 52.9 | 53.5 |
| You can choose between several fixed working schedules | 10.2 | 10.4 | 10.1 | 12.5 |
| You can adapt your working hours within certain limits | 13.2 | 21.4 | 16.8 | 23.6 |
| Your working hours are entirely determined by yourself | 18.8 | 12.5 | 20.1 | 10.3 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: European Working conditions Survey 2005

Table 5: The Proportion of employees who feel their work and non-work lives “fit very well” 2000 and 2005

| | 2000 | 2005 |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|
| Male (FR) | | |
| Managerial, Professional & Technical | 32,0 | 40,6 |
| Clerks & Service work | 35,3 | 30,7 |
| Skilled Manual & Craft work | 40,5 | 35,9 |
| Operators & Elementary Work | 40,4 | 25,3 |
| Total | 36,8 | 33,9 |
| Female (FR) | | |
| Managerial, Professional & Technical | 42,1 | 35,3 |
| Clerks & Service work | 40,7 | 47,8 |
| Skilled Manual & Craft work | 40,5 | 27,3 |
| Operators & Elementary Work | 46,2 | 38,8 |
| Total | 41,9 | 39,4 |
| Male (UK) | | |
| Managerial, Professional & Technical | 34,7 | 44,0 |
| Clerks & Service work | 44,5 | 45,5 |
| Skilled Manual & Craft work | 35,7 | 53,0 |
| Operators & Elementary Work | 38,0 | 47,2 |
| Total | 37,4 | 46,5 |
| Female UK) | | |
| Managerial, Professional & Technical | 49,7 | 55,6 |
| Clerks & Service work | 57,2 | 63,6 |
| Skilled Manual & Craft work | 64,7 | 81,8 |
| Operators & Elementary Work | 77,5 | 66,2 |
| Total | 57,4 | 60,4 |

Source: European Working conditions Surveys 2000, 2005

It is important to note that work-life balance is not only an issue for mothers and fathers with young children; a balance between work and non-work life can be important for all workers who want adequate time to rest and to undertake other activities. This is perhaps illustrated by falling satisfaction among men in France and the lower gender gap in satisfaction rates observed where, as we have seen, there are higher rates of full-time working among women and a less evident ‘modified bread winner model’ than is observed in the UK.

Across occupations we see that levels of satisfaction remain higher in the UK but there are strong differences between the countries as to which occupation has the higher rates of satisfaction. In France male professionals and managers report higher levels of satisfaction while in the UK this groups reports the lowest levels and it is tends to be skilled manual and craft occupations for both women and men with higher levels. On the other, hand in France it is operators and elementary work for men and skilled and craft work for women with lower levels of satisfaction. The divergent trends in the level of satisfaction observed at the aggregate level are replicated within occupations except that we see increasing satisfaction among male managers and professionals and female clerical and service workers in France and falling levels of satisfaction of operators and elementary work for women in the UK.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to study the evolution of working time patterns in the context of change taking the example of two different countries with dissimilar backgrounds and regulation systems. The central goal was to consider the impact of regulatory change in these different institutional environments on employees' objective and subjective experiences of work life balance. Using the EWCS, we examine and compare working time patterns in France and UK, in order to underline the key recent changes and their impact on working time and work life balance in both countries.

In the examination of these two European contexts we present a number of useful and specific findings. Firstly, we can confirm the downward trend in hours for employees in both countries. The EWCS data show a clear general decrease of working time even if we note differences between France and UK (the study confirms the longer working hours of full-timers in the UK) and by gender (slight rise for some female full-timers in the UK), occupation (long hours for managers and skilled craft workers) and full and part-time status (shorter average part-time hours in the UK). If this tendency is the result of a strong working time regulation in France, it is now also something we observe in the UK, following the patterns observed in other countries (European Foundation 2007).

We also observe the reinforcement of the working times norm in France and something of a tentative re-emergence in UK. The 35-40 hours a week norm, traditionally a standard for French workers is becoming reinforced even in a context the annualisation of working time since 1996, we could expect another tendency. In the UK where time norms are weaker, we can see an increased concentration of women and men usually working 35-40 hours a week. However against this trend we also see an enhanced flexibility in the scheduling of hours in both countries. We note that French employees are more at risk of changeable hours and also seem to be subject to change at short notice. This result could be qualified as quite surprising when one of the arguments usually used by French employees is not to follow the UK example of limited security in working time organisation. The reality appears much more complicated and may in fact reflect heterogeneity among employees within countries rather than simple cross-country differences.

The final point in our main findings is a declining level of satisfaction with work life balance in France which is in contrast to a recorded increase in the UK. The falling level of satisfaction among men in France and the lower gender gap in satisfaction rates observed perhaps illustrates a kind of new social and individual situation where work life balance concerns affect men as well as women, mothers and fathers: one where all workers want adequate time to rest and to undertake other activities. Given these results it is important not to ignore the role of supply side decisions on the labour market and working time patterns. While regulatory change may help shape the working time experiences of employees in the two countries the autonomy of supply needs to be recognised. Here the tension between employer and employer friendly flexibility is highlighted in the context of the reduction of working time or the imposition of working time limits on the one hand and enhanced flexibility over scheduling for the employer on the other. Here variations in employer strategy clearly have a role, although shaped by regulations and norms in the society in which they embedded, they have scope to act and develop the management of working time (see Anxo et al., 2007). In this sense, this work should be seen as part of a broader approach that takes into account both the impact of regulatory change on individual behaviour but also the role of other actors and their individual preferences.

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