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Gender and Labour Market Flexibility: the Case of Working Hours

Abstract

The central issue of this paper is the relationship between gender and collective bargaining over working hours. First of all, studies and theories on gender and industrial relations will be briefly summarized. Second, the advantages of reducing working hours or promoting part-time work have been studied from the female workers' perspective, from the male workers' perspective, from the unions' perspective and from the employers' perspective. The conclusion will contain a review of the outcomes of the bargaining processes during this period. The gender-related contradictions between these two issues appear to be very clear. Over a period of fifteen years, bargaining demands and outcomes have been examined both for the Netherlands and for the conflicting interests of male and female workers concerning a reduction of the working week.

Gender issues in industrial relations

In the 1980s and 1990s, gender issues have been brought out into the open in various areas within the field of industrial relations. An overview will be given here of the major issues. This overview is based on articles found in major journals and books.

One of the most frequently studied issues in industrial relations is the gender wage gap. There is a growing body of research on male-female wage differentials. However, a substantial part of the wage gap has yet to be explained, from one-third to one-half of the cases. Recent analyses focus on the impact of occupational segregation, i.e. the 'femaleness' of the occupation, and this accounted for an increase in the number of cases explained (Groshen, 1991). Other analyses have studied the impact of affirmative action on women's wages, and some attention has been paid to the impact of unionization on the gender wage gap.

Much attention has also been paid to the functioning of the labour market. The topics discussed include gender discrimination in training and in entry into manager-

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ial levels. Further attention has been paid to women's part-time jobs (McRae, 1995). Studies on flexibilization show the existence of customary gender differences: male workers are better off than female workers.

This brings us to the studies that examine women's participation in unions. A number of authors have compared women's participation in unions in several different countries (Cook, et al., 1984). Others have studied gender differences between shop stewards in terms of, for example, time spent on union activism or the ranking of union issues in terms of priority (Lawrence, 1994). Not surprisingly, it was found that the higher the level in the union hierarchy, the less women were represented (Briskin & McDermott, 1993, Goedhard & Van Hoof, 1995). Studies that analyze union membership find that, whereas women used to be less inclined to join unions than men, women today are more inclined to join than are men, at least in several developed countries (Forrest, 1994). Some explanations for this are based on the characteristics of women, i.e. their household duties and therefore their lack of time, as well as in their socialization, which is assumed to be less adequate than men's socialization for the representative bodies. The European Union has taken measures to empower women within unions. These were evaluated recently by Cockburn (1996).

A major issue that has received little attention so far relates to gender differences concerning the demands and outcomes in collective bargaining agreements. A few studies examining fringe benefits have concluded that there are gender differences in the way in which employees profit from fringe benefits. In this paper, the bargaining process will be examined, particularly the issue of working hours, which has become a major feature of labour market flexibility. In the 1980s and 1990s in the Netherlands, two issues have dominated bargaining processes as far as working hours are concerned, i.e. the reduction of working hours and the promotion of part-time jobs. These issues conflict in two ways. First, a reduction of working hours was accompanied by the demand that it should be without loss of pay, whereas the promotion of part-time work was a reduction of working hours with loss of pay. Second, a reduction of working hours should be implemented collectively, whereas a reduction of working hours by promoting part-time work would be realized on an individual basis. A reduction of the working week would reduce the standard working week for everyone, whereas promoting part-time work would reduce the length of the average working week, but not necessarily for everyone.

In this paper, it will be argued that promoting part-time work generally favours female workers, whereas a reduction of the working week mainly favours male workers. Thus, both groups had different interests in bargaining demands and outcomes. These interests even became conflicting interests at certain points in these bargaining processes.

Three models explaining gender bias

Bargaining models usually distinguish between two parties, the employers' organization and the trade union. The bargaining process consists of the initial demands and offers that both parties put on the negotiating agenda, then the negotiating itself

which involves a trade-off between demands and offers, and, finally, the outcomes of the bargaining process. Some researchers have argued that examples of gender bias can be found in all steps of the negotiating process (Cook, et al., 1984). This is the case, for example, when unionists are not aware of the issues that female workers want on the negotiating agenda, when the negotiators take the issues brought to the forefront by male unionists more seriously than those brought up by female unionists, and when demands advantageous to female workers are conceded more easily than those demands favouring male workers.

What examples of gender bias can be found in bargaining processes, i.e. in demands and outcomes? We define gender bias here as both the demands and outcomes from which the male workforce benefits to a greater degree than the female workforce. We distinguish between demands and outcomes perceived as gender neutral, and demands and outcomes that explicitly favour female workers, such as child care arrangements and leave facilities. Although they are usually perceived as gender neutral, nearly all bargaining demands and outcomes favour groups of workers over others, for example, younger workers over older workers, highly qualified workers over less qualified workers, or vice versa. As long as the male and the female workforce differ in so many respects, such as age, qualification levels, duration of employment, working hours, family background, etc., these demands and outcomes are not gender neutral, but are likely to favour either male or female workers. Usually, demands and outcomes that explicitly favour female workers are considered supplementary to gender-neutral demands and outcomes, and not exclusionary.

Three models of analysis are revealed in the studies explaining gender bias in bargaining outcomes. These are the median voter model, the representation model and the workforce model. These models do not include an analysis of trade unions' internal negotiations which precede the actual bargaining between the union and the employers' organization. Although these models are usually used to spell out wage policies, they also can be applied to negotiations on working hours. The three models will be discussed below.

The median voter model attempts to spell out how the process of union wage policy works and which wage demands will be put on the negotiating agenda. The median voter occupies the median or middle position in the electorate of the paid union officials, i.e. the largest group of union members. It is argued that officials are likely to put the demands that reflect the interests of this group on the bargaining agenda. Thus, the largest member group dominates the demands and, ultimately, the outcomes too (Kaufman, 1989). Sap (1993) has studied this hypothesis with regard to the gender wage gap. The median voter could hamper unions in the organization of new member groups.

The representation model focuses on the percentage of female negotiators on both the employers' side and the employees' side. A relatively high percentage of female negotiators would lead to female-friendly outcomes. Heery & Kelly (1988) found that female negotiators were indeed more likely to put issues on the bargaining agenda that would explicitly favour female workers. However, male negotiators were eager to have issues on the agenda that would benefit other groups, for example, low-paid employees. These outcomes implicitly favour female workers because women

are over-represented in this group. Thus, this model explains only the extent to which bargaining outcomes explicitly favour female employees in looking at the percentage of female negotiators.

The workforce model predicts that as the percentage of women in the workforce to which the bargaining agreement applies increases, the number of bargaining outcomes favouring the female workforce also rises. The findings by Chaykowski and Currie (1992) show that workers in predominantly female bargaining units have more generous leave provisions, but are less likely to have pension coverage than workers in similar bargaining units which are predominantly male. Thus, outcomes can be predicted from the gender of the workforce involved.

Research method and data

This paper aims to explain the 1980-1995 bargaining outcomes concerning the reduction of working hours and the promotion of part-time work. To do so, we will use the three models discussed above. For the workforce model, the interests of the male and female workforce in setting working hours must be analyzed. For the median voter model, the interests of the largest unionist groups must be studied. For the representation model, trade-offs in the negotiating process must be revealed.

The data used in this paper is as follows. For bargaining outcomes, we rely on annual collective agreements. The interests of the male and female workforce are reconstructed based on the working hours reported in labour force statistics and the preferences for working hours as reported in various research reports. The interests of the largest union groups are reconstructed based on official union documents. The reconstruction of the bargaining process is based on press releases by the negotiating parties that have been published in the newspapers. The sources are not quoted here, because this paper aims to briefly present this study. Quotations can be found in a forthcoming publication by the author (Tijdens, 1997).

One remark must be made. The focus is limited to working hours per week. Annual working hours will not be discussed, although there has been a great deal of change between 1980 and 1995 in this respect. However, labour force statistics present weekly working hours, union demands also focus on the working week, and newspapers have quoted the negotiating parties only when outcomes concerned weekly working hours, and not annual working hours. The reason for this is that negotiations on annual working hours are more complex because they concern social security and pension rights.

The outcomes of yearly collective bargaining agreements

Before examining the research results, we will briefly outline Dutch industrial relations. Since the beginning of the 1980s, a number of socio-economic developments have put both corporatism and union power to the test. Membership in unions affiliated with the FNV (Social Democrat/Catholic, with 60% of all Dutch unionists in

1993) went down in particular, but all unions lost members, including those affiliated with the Christian CNV confederation and the smaller middle-management MHP confederation (Visser, 1991, 217-8). Collective bargaining rounds between employers' organizations and trade unions are held each year, but coverage is declining. In 1990, 71% of all private employees were covered by collective agreements, compared to 82% ten years earlier. The decentralization of company bargaining undoubtedly sets the trend, although only 15% of all Dutch private employees were covered by single-employer agreements in 1993 (Visser, 1995). The majority of the approximately 900 agreements cover an entire sector.

In examining the setting of working hours before the turn of the century, the number of working hours was gradually limited by legal regulations. The 1919 Labour Law set the definitive framework within which time scheduling was allowed. The standard working week hardly changed until the 1960s, when the free Saturday and the shortening of the working week for shift work was realized. It was in the early 1980s that the FNV confederation put forth the demand for a 10% reduction in the 40-hour working week without loss of pay. In the mid-1990s, about half of the large collective agreements currently include a 37 or 38-hour working week. Thus, a 5% reduction was achieved in fifteen years. In addition, bargaining took place for an increase in the number of paid holidays, before the working week was officially reduced.

It was not until the late 1980s that the promotion of part-time work was put on the FNV's bargaining agenda. The demand for part-time work was supported by various governmental actors who argued that the advancement of part-time work could reduce unemployment (Sloep, 1996). These negotiations were relatively successful, except in sectors where working hours are not regular (for example, the catering sector) and in sectors where the large majority of workers are women, as the firms in these sectors face organizational limits imposed by a majority of part-time workers. In the mid-1990s, the majority of large collective agreements had an item concerning an employee's right to reduce his or her working hours. Moreover, numerous agreements included issues concerning equal rights for part-timers and full-timers (Sloep, 1996).

In the 1980s, in the Netherlands as well as in many other OECD countries, part-time employment rapidly increased (OECD, 1994). Part-time work is women's work. In the EU, four out of five part-timers are women, and the majority of these women perform part-time work because of their domestic responsibilities. It has been argued that part-time employment is of little personal value to women, because of job insecurity, awkward working hours, and restrictions on the transition to full-time work (Meulders, et al., 1991). Part-time work may reinforce women's generally disadvantaged position at work. On the other hand, part-time work does increase women's opportunities for lifetime employment. Nowadays, only one out of five female part-timers is involuntarily involved in part-time work, mainly caused by the inability to find a full-time job (OECD, 1990). Moreover, a survey in eight countries of the European Union shows that part-time jobs are introduced due to the needs of management (41%), employees' wishes (36%), or both reasons being equally important (22%) (Delsen, 1995). Thus, part-time jobs are jobs that are wanted. In the Netherlands,

part-time jobs are no longer marginalized jobs, as they were in the 1960s and early 1970s. Our surveys continuously show that female part-time workers have higher hourly wages than full-time female workers!

The workforce model: male and female workers' interests

To analyze the workforce model, we have to reveal male and female workers' interests in the setting of working hours. We must go back to the post-war period for an answer. The manufacturing and building sectors were booming and the demand for men's labour increased, while there were few jobs for women. Women were supposed to contribute to the rebuilding of society by setting up a family, and many of them did, as the baby boom shows. On the day of their marriage, the vast majority of women quit their full-time jobs; they needed a full-time working week for their household duties. At the end of the 1940s, the breadwinner system was set up in the labour force and in industrial relations, and this also influenced general attitudes on gender roles. Male workers had to earn wages to support their families. In the 1950s, the breadwinner system had become the dominant pattern. The male breadwinner had a full-time 48-hour working week and was married to a full-time housewife. In the 1960s, the extremely rapid growth of the service sector generated an increasing demand for workers in the female-dominated occupations. To overcome this labour shortage, employers recruited housewives with grown-up children for part-time jobs. The shortage of male workers put pressure on the standard 48-hour working week in collective bargaining agreements. The outcomes showed a gradual reduction of the working week to 40 hours. The free Saturday became a common phenomenon. In the 1970s, women's labour-supply behaviour changed. Increasingly, they preferred not to withdraw from the labour market before they gave birth to their first child. Some of these women had also changed their full-time jobs into part-time jobs, in order to have time for household duties. In growing numbers, housewives desired to re-enter the labour force, with the condition that they would work part-time, in order to be able to continue their household duties.

In the 1980s, women with children decided increasingly not to withdraw from the labour market but preferred to continue working under the condition of reduced working hours. There were two reasons for this. First, high unemployment levels in the first half of this decade reduced women's chances of re-entering the workplace and finding a comparable job. Second, an increasing share of the female workforce performed skilled jobs. Thus, the opportunity costs of a homemaker career increased. Moreover, working intermittently would cause loss of skills and thus a depreciation of human capital, which would lower women's wage levels when re-entering the workforce. In growing numbers, female workers asked their employers to reduce their working hours, and this was met with success. Moreover, also in growing numbers, housewives with grown children preferred to re-enter the workforce in a part-time capacity. In the 1980s, the percentage of part-time workers in the female labour force grew tremendously, while the percentage remained low in the male workforce. Male workers were opposed to part-time jobs for two reasons. First, concerning the

protection of wage levels in full-time jobs, male workers feared the wage-lowering effects of the so-called marginal part-time jobs. Second, in general, male breadwinners preferred their wives to remain housewives for emotional reasons: because they did not want to spend time on household labour and because they feared that their position as a breadwinner would become less important. Married male workers had no intention of working part-time in order to share in the household duties. Male workers in general were in favour of reducing the standard working week as a measure to lower high unemployment rates.

In the 1990s, improvement of child care arrangements and leave facilities, the increase of part-time jobs and changing attitudes towards gender roles facilitated women's continuous working patterns. Nowadays, the dominant strategy of Dutch working women who want to have a baby is the part-time strategy: three out of four want to continue their job, but a large majority of them want to do this only if they can reduce their working hours, usually by half (Tijdens, et al., 1994). It can be estimated that the annual percentage of female workers demanding a reduction in working hours varies from 1% to 10%. The dominant time-saving strategy in dual-income families with children concerns domestic help. Women re-entering the workforce prefer to work approximately 20 hours a week. From 1981 to 1993, the percentage of part-timers within the female workforce increased from 37% to 64%. The vast majority of part-time female workers are married women. In this same period, the percentage of part-timers within the male workforce increased from 5% to 9%.

The median voter model: union members' interests

In order to analyze the median voter model, we must examine the largest union member group and its interests in the setting of working hours. For a long time, trade unions in the European Community were in favour of reducing the working week. In 1979, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) called for a 10% reduction in working time without loss of pay, and since then there has been very little backsliding from this position (Delsen, 1995). The Dutch FNV followed this ETUC policy immediately, aiming for a 10% working time reduction without loss of pay within four years.

In the same way as the ETUC, the FNV argued that a reduction in working hours would have an impact on increasing unemployment rates. Promoting part-time work could also have been an answer to high unemployment rates, but at that time, the FNV did not consider this policy for two reasons. First, the average union member is a man who works full-time and who is not willing to work less hours if this would mean loss of pay. Consequently, the unions did not support this policy. Second, part-time work was considered marginalized work, and the FNV and many other ETUC have been opposed to the introduction of part-time work for a long time, arguing that it might bring about inferior working conditions (McRae, 1995). Third, the average union member is a breadwinner, and, in general, breadwinners prefer their wives to remain housewives. Therefore, the unions wanted to reduce the standard working week. On several occasions, they were opposed to policies promoting part-time

work. In 1990, for the ETUC, 'the reduction of working hours without loss of wages remains a fundamental demand in a period of unemployment when work sharing is imperative' (OECD, 1995: 12). One must realize that a reduction of weekly working hours is only attractive to so-called hourly workers, and not to the increasing group of salaried workers, i.e. the groups that are not paid for overtime.

Starting in the late 1970s, the women's movement supported union demands for a reduction of the working week. They were even interested in a collective reduction of the standard working week to 25 hours. According to their philosophy, men and women should share domestic responsibilities equally, in the time remaining after a 25-hour working week. In particular, they were in favour of reducing the number of hours worked each day, arguing that household duties had to be done every day. Other ways of reducing the time needed for household work were not considered, such as hiring someone to help out at home, or letting household duties pile up so that they could be done one day a week. The women's movement did not support the demand for a reduction in working hours for an increasing number of female workers. The main argument was that part-time jobs were associated with marginalized jobs, by which a person could not earn a living. This even conflicted with the general demand for a 25-hour workweek. The union has never brought up the demand for a 25-hour work week during collective bargaining. In the mid-1980s, the women's movement abandoned the demand for a daily reduction of working hours for two reasons. First, discussions concerning commuting problems arose and led to an extra argument against the reduction of the working day. Second, the idea of letting household duties pile up (so they could be done one day a week) was supported, because this was the most common pattern among part-time working women.

From 1985 to 1990, the percentage of female members in the FNV confederation increased from 15% to 20%. At the same time, female unionists became increasingly organized and gained a foothold in union policies. Due to pressure from women's groups, the unions decided to promote part-time work in collective bargaining. In the early 1990s, the FNV set up a campaign to promote part-time work, the main argument being that reducing working hours would create extra jobs. As has happened in other European countries (see Hakim (1995b) for the United Kingdom), the Dutch unions claim that the rights of part-time workers should be up to par with those of full-timers. The main reason for this is to prevent competition in employment conditions, as was the case when equal pay for equal work was demanded at the beginning of this century.

Since the early 1980s, the dominance of the median voter, i.e. the largest union member group, has obviously changed. The median voter used to be the male breadwinner. Increasingly, female union members have succeeded in placing their interests on the bargaining agenda. The median voter has changed slightly in the direction of female unionists.

The representation model: male and female negotiators' interests

The representation model focuses on the percentage of female negotiators. The higher the percentage of female negotiators, the higher the percentage of outcomes

that are explicitly in favour of the female workforce. However, when reconstructing the bargaining processes over the past fifteen years, very few female negotiators were involved, although in the setting of working hours different interests became apparent.

In general, employers were not in favour of part-time jobs either in male-dominated or female-dominated sectors. In the 1960s, to overcome the labour shortage, employers created part-time jobs in female-dominated jobs and sectors, and negotiated a shorter standard working week in male-dominated jobs and sectors. In the early 1980s, employers faced two issues relating to working hours: the unions demanded a reduction of the standard working week and female workers increasingly demanded a reduction of working hours. Quite obviously, they were not in favour of a general reduction of working hours, because this would increase the cost of labour per hour. Furthermore, it has been argued that employers tend to prefer wage increases to a reduction in hours, due to their concerns involving capacity or capital utilization (OECD, 1995). Employers had two answers during the bargaining rounds. The first was a trade-off between reducing the standard working week without loss of pay and promoting part-time jobs for all workers. The second answer came in the late 1980s, when employers preferred extending operating hours in exchange for a reduction of the working week. According to De Lange (1995), employers in many EU countries saw this as a chance to introduce flexible work and extended operating hours.

As far as the promotion of part-time work is concerned, the negotiating results of the early 1980s were the first, forced breakthrough in this respect. For the first time, part-time jobs were created at the request of workers, not by corporate strategy. There are two other assumptions concerning why employers would be willing to meet the requests for reduced working hours, these mostly originating from skilled female workers who wanted to start a family after five to ten years of employment. In many organizations, female workers had developed bargaining power, partly because of the activities of women's groups in the organization, partly because the manpower investments of many employers had grown so high that accepting requests for reduced working hours gave more return on investments than when these skilled female workers quit. Furthermore, the demand for skilled female workers was high, especially because the number of skilled jobs increased while the number of unskilled jobs decreased, and this strengthened women's bargaining position. Findings in the banking sector support both hypotheses (Tijdens, 1997).

When more attention was paid to work productivity (which may have already been a response to the reduction of the working week without loss of pay), employers' interests in part-time work also increased, as one of the ways of bringing manpower levels in line with the supply of work. Since then, part-time jobs were no longer seen as the marginalized jobs they were in the 1960s.

In the late 1980s, employers were increasingly willing to consider female workers' demands for a reduction of their working hours. At the same time, due to pressure on productivity, employers became more willing to negotiate the unions' demand for a reduction of working hours in exchange for flexible scheduling arrangements. Since then, the unions have not perceived the reduction of the standard working week and

the promotion of part-time work as conflicting issues, and employers no longer see them as two issues that must be traded off. This concerns arrangements made collectively and individually. It also went along with demands for equal rights for full-timers and part-timers in order to prevent wage-lowering effects caused by part-timers. However, in the 1996 bargaining round, employees were not really willing to go on strike for a 36-hour working week, probably because it would be easy to realize a shorter working week individually, if this was what they wanted.

To conclude, during the 1980s and 1990s, gender-related demands have been present in the working hour bargaining processes, and this has defined the current situation relating to working hours. Essentially, the controversy between the reduction of the working week and the promotion of part-time work was a gender conflict. The conflict was won by the female workers, one could add, with a little help from employers.

Implications for theory

When it comes to implications for theory, a few comments should be made. The previous sections have shown that promoting part-time work has been a female-related issue in the bargaining process, whereas the reduction of the working hours without loss of pay has been a male-related issue. Moreover, both unions and employers quite clearly identified the bargaining issues as having a gender-related character. Thus, although bargaining processes are considered to be gender-neutral, it is easy to reveal gender-related bargaining demands and outcomes.

The three models studied can be applied to the bargaining processes at stake. The workforce model applies to the sectors in which part-time work was allowed. The most female-dominated sectors were first, to be followed by the male dominated sectors. The median voter model can be applied to the unions who thought that the reduction of the working week should apply to male breadwinners, who were the majority of union members. The representation model refers to women's pressure groups who have influenced the bargaining demands.

Four comments can be made about the use of the models. First, all models apply to the outcomes of one bargaining round, even though these processes could go on for years. Second, the focus is on the outcomes, while in fact focus should be on the cost of the outcome. Thus, the value of the outcomes must be calculated. Third, the bargaining demands of various groups must be seen as being primarily in conflict, not as supplementary, as was the case with the demands for a reduction of working hours versus the promotion of part-time work. Fourth, in the models, the assumption is made that it is more or less clear that female workers, female union members or paid female union officials, are able to define their interests, but they may not be able to find a place for their interests among the general interests. Thus, the three models require further elaboration.

In conclusion, working hours in the various sectors are set by the different demands that male and female workers make on working hours. During the 1980s and 1990s, gender-related conflicts have been present in the negotiating processes concerning working hours.

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