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## Abstract

High rates of part-time work have been associated with high female employment rates in the Nordic countries, except for Finland. Part-time work has played a key role in the modification of the male breadwinner gender contract by enabling women to enter paid work while continuing to take on the main domestic responsibilities. Previously tacit and little disputed, this ‘normalisation’ of women’s part-time work has increasingly become a contentious issue in the public debate in Norway, both in terms of its persistently high level and of the cultural values surrounding it. In our case study, we analyse the articulation of these critiques and the underlying conflict dynamics that put the gender contract under pressure and facilitate its modification. Our empirical focus is on events inciting debates and the arguments or ideational frames key political actors have used to support their position. The analysis is based on newspaper articles published during the period 1997–2013.

**Key words:** part-time work, gender contract, political actors, Norway

The Nordic countries, except for Finland, have managed to attain relatively high rates of female labour force participation through high levels of part-time employment among women

(see Yerkes, 2013:11). However, part-time work is not an undisputed means of integrating women into paid work. International research has shown that women working part-time are more likely to be trapped in low paid, low status jobs, as higher paying jobs offering career progression are often constructed as full-time positions (Abbasian and Hellgren, 2012; Grant et al., 2006). Hence, part-time work does not prevent women from remaining economically dependent on a male breadwinner and it increases the risk of low income in old age when pension is earnings-related (e.g. Hinrichs and Jessoula, 2012). By contrast, other scholars maintain that part-time work is a choice for those women who wish to combine care and employment (e.g. Hakim, 1998). Flexible working time arrangements such as part-time work also meet the needs of different groups (e.g. students and people with disabilities) and individuals going through certain phases in their life such as parenthood and ageing (e.g. Fagan, 2001). Moreover, working part-time is often considered the only way for some groups of employees to physically and mentally manage demanding jobs (Egeland and Drange, 2014). From an employer perspective, part-time work is a means of achieving flexibility in staffing (e.g. Atkinson, 1984).

Growth in women's employment in the Nordic countries, and more recently in the Netherlands, Germany and Austria, has been associated with growth in part-time work among women (Eurofound, 2011). During the past two decades, part-time work among women in Iceland, Norway and Sweden has declined while it has remained rather stable in Denmark and has increased in Finland, albeit from a much lower level than in the other Nordic countries. Nordic women work long part-time hours with the average ranging from 18 hours in Denmark to 25 in Sweden in 2015<sup>1</sup> (Eurostat Labour Force Survey 2016). Women's part-time work has been less marginalised in the Nordic welfare states than in many other countries and it has been considered to be a part of ordinary working life (Ellingsæter, 1992; Nätti, 1995).

Among the Nordic countries, Norway had the highest share of women engaged in part-time work in 2015, although only two percentage points higher than the next country, Sweden. In 2015, 38 per cent of employed women worked part-time in Norway, while this share was only 15 per cent for men (Eurostat Labour Force Survey 2016). Although it has declined from even higher shares, the continued high rate of part-time work among women is puzzling in a welfare state with a prolonged labour shortage, up-skilling of the workforce, family policy supporting full-time work and widespread support for gender egalitarian values. To

comprehend this puzzle, we must understand the historical development of part-time work in Norway.

During the 1970s, women's part-time work expanded substantially and became an integral part of a new modified gender contract. It met, to a certain extent, employers' need for labour and women's desire for gender equality and greater economic independence. At the same time, part-time work ensured gender segregation based on explicit and implicit cultural norms about motherhood, or women combining part-time work and unpaid care for young children, and the primacy of men engaged in full-time work (see Hirdman, 1990; Mósesdóttir, 1995; Ellingsæter, 1992; Jensen, 2000; Pfau-Effinger, 1998). Most importantly, part-time work went through a process of 'normalisation' early on, involving, on the one hand, equalisation of social rights and pay relative to that of full-time workers and, on the other hand, similar worker behaviour of those in part-time and full-time employment in terms of employment stability and unionisation (Ellingsæter, 1989). These factors led to part-time work being valued culturally as the outcome of women's free choice, and accordingly intertwined with an acknowledged right to choose part-time work.

Since the 1990s, criticism of the 'normalisation' paradigm has been voiced increasingly, related to both the prevalence of part-time work and cultural values surrounding women's part-time work. Women's *involuntary* part-time work has been considered to be the main problem, although the rate of this kind of work was among the lowest in the Nordic countries during the period 1995-2012 (Lanninger and Sundström, 2014: 18-20). This problem is concentrated among less educated women and women employed in the health and service sectors (Kitterød et al., 2013; Lanninger and Sundström, 2014; Nergaard, 2010a, 2010b). Another critique is related to the development of so-called *part-time cultures* in typical female-dominated public sector jobs requiring high level of education (e.g. nurses). More recently, women's *voluntary* part-time work and women's right to choose to work part time have also become subject to debate.

The aim of this article is to study the articulation of these critiques and the underlying conflict dynamics across different groups of actors. The research questions guiding our study are as follows. What are the events inciting media debates among key actors, and what arguments, or frames, do they use to support their position in printed media during the period 1997–2013? Studying ideational struggles over part-time work that took place between 1997–2013

provides insight into what actors are pushing for change in the gender contract, for what reasons, and what policy ideas they are pursuing.

### **Gender contract in flux**

Part-time work is a highly gendered labour market phenomenon, not only in terms of prevalence, but also as a cultural category (Ellingsæter, 2013; Smithson, 2005). In many ways, part-time work has been crucial in defining women as a separate category of workers.

Labour market theories often conceptualise part-time work and part-time workers as marginal, belonging to the secondary labour market (see Nätti, 1995). Role theory has also been used to understand women's part-time work; women reduce their paid work when they have children to take on the role of caretaker (see e.g. Katz and Kahn, 1978). Other gender-based theories have seen part-time work as the 'new equilibrium' in the struggle between the sexes; men exploit women's unpaid domestic work and part-time work is the only possibility for women with a double work burden (Hartmann, 1981). However, structure-based theories have been criticized for their conception of an 'over-socialized' actor – making women's own choices disappear (Hakim, 1991).

According to Hakim's preference theory women have, for the first time in history, a free choice, and women's individual choices therefore reflect their preferences (Hakim, 2000). Women's preferences differ from men's, and thus their work patterns also will differ. Women's primary identification with family obligations results in less subjective commitment to and involvement in paid work. Hence, the work sphere is unimportant for many women, and they therefore invest little of themselves in work. However, the claim that women have free choice is disputed. While critics acknowledge that women make choices, the question is on what basis (Crompton, 2006). Labour market opportunities and policy support of mothers' employment vary greatly between countries. Women do not make choices in a social vacuum; norms and identities also influence the decision making process.

Gender is also key to societal perceptions of part-time work. The concept of a 'gender contract' is useful as a general framework for illuminating ideational struggles over part-time work over time. Scholars have applied the concept in different ways and with various meanings. It is sometimes used broadly, to capture periods of different gender role

expectations like, for example, moving from a ‘traditional’ to a ‘modern’ gender contract. Some define it as the ‘tacit rules governed by obligations and rights that define the relations between women and men, between genders and generations, and [...] between the areas of production and reproduction’ (Rantalaiho, 1993: 2, quoted in Gottfried, 2000:239). An ‘embedded gender contract’ sets the terms of gender relations in the family and the integration of men and women into the labour market and other social spheres (Pfau-Effinger, 1993). The concept has also been assigned to different historical compromises made to settle recurring gender conflicts created by the interaction of capitalism, democracy (empowerment) and the gender system (gender segregation and hierarchy based on a male norm) (Hirdman, 1990). As we apply it here, the concept of a gender contract indicates a certain type of compromise made about the gendered division of labour at work, and, by implication, at home (see Gottfried, 2000). The ‘normalisation of part-time work’ has been a key compromise underpinning the modification of the male breadwinner model in Norway.

Some scholars claim that we need a ‘new gender contract’ (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 2002). During the Industrial Revolution, the male breadwinner model represented a social equilibrium that was considered to be a desirable social model for most people. Since then, upheaval of the old social order has created ‘social inequilibria’ where alternative social models are competing (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Esping-Andersen contends that we are moving towards a new social equilibrium based on gender equality, and that the Nordic countries have moved the furthest in this direction. However, the transformation process is characterised by instability and competing norms for the best social model. Other scholars have argued that changes made to the gender contract may be stepwise and uneven rather than transformative (see e.g. Mósesdóttir, 2001; Chapter 6; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). However, incremental changes made to settle growing conflicts over the prevailing gender contract can, over time, accumulate and initiate transformative change or a new gender contract.

The novelty of our analysis lies in its focus on ideational struggles among political actors over the prevailing Norwegian gender contract rather than the outcomes of such struggles. Ideas shape how we understand political problems, give definition to our goals and strategies and provide us with interpretive frameworks (Beland and Cox, 2011; Beland and Ridde, 2014). Policy ideas used to support or reject particular problem definitions or proposed solutions related to part-time work provide insights into the ideational struggles over how to

organise society and women's role in it. The normalisation of women's part-time work can be considered a certain compromise between 'gender essentialist' and 'gender equalitarian' ideas. Gender essentialism is the assumption that women and men are essentially different and have, therefore, different skills, abilities and desires. Gender egalitarianism refers to the degree to which a society or an organisation minimizes gender inequality (e.g. Charles and Grusky, 2004). Recognizing how the relative balance between essentialist and egalitarian assumptions is shifting in such ongoing processes of transformation is key to understanding changes in national gender contracts.

### **The national context: Labour market and family policies**

To understand shifts in ideational struggles, it is important to look at changes in the national context of part-time work. Norwegian women have a high employment rate of around 73 per cent, which has been more or less stable since 2000 (Eurostat Labour Force Survey 2016). However, average working hours in Norway are among the lowest in the OECD area (Statistics Norway, 2016). The work effort of women working part time is estimated to be 22 per cent lower than if they had worked full-time. High employment rates imply that most of the country's labour reserves have already been mobilized. However, the demand for labour in the health and care sector is expected to increase considerably after 2020 (Holm et al., 2014).

Since the early 1990s, the 'work line' has been the key rationale of welfare policies. It refers to the duty and right of all adults who are able to work to engage in paid work. However, the application of the work line to women, and especially to mothers, has been less consistent. Although mothers' employment has been supported by family policies, their individual choice with regard to how much to participate in paid work has also been valued. The Norwegian earner-carer model has been noted for its dualist features, combining dual earner support with traditional male breadwinner elements (for example Ellingsæter, 2006; Leira, 1992).

Generous paid parental leave supports women's continued employment, and its total length was extended from 42/52 weeks (100/80 per cent replacement rate) in 1993 to 49/59 weeks in 2013. All extensions were made by adding weeks to the so-called daddy quota, specifically increasing from the 4 weeks instituted in 1993 to 14 weeks in 2013. The quota supports the

redistribution of care from mothers to fathers, and may strengthen employment among mothers. However, in 2014, while keeping the total leave length, the minority right wing government reduced the daddy quota to 10 weeks.

In 1998, the centre-right government introduced a cash-for-childcare benefit. Initially, parents of children 1-2 years of age who did not have a place in publicly subsidised childcare received the benefit. In 2012, the arrangement was abolished for the two-year-olds by a centre-left government. Other arrangements also encourage reduced working hours and unpaid care work. Parents have a conditional right to work reduced hours, and get generous pension credits for unpaid care work. In addition, a lone parent transitional benefit and tax credits for one-income families still exist, although eligibility requirements have been tightened.

The most important change in family policies supporting mothers' full-time work took place in the period surveyed. Compared to the other Nordic countries, childcare services in Norway were underdeveloped until the 2000s. When the cash-for-childcare benefit was introduced in 1998, the gap between supply of and demand for childcare places was huge, especially for children under three years old. However, a universal system in terms of number of places, lowering of parents' fees and the right to a place, finally came into place in the second part of the 2000s. This was the result of an all-party compromise in 2003. A formidable increase in childcare usage followed: a substantial increase from already quite high levels for three- to five-year-olds, from 78 to 97 per cent from 2000 to 2010 (Ellingsæter et al., 2016). An even more spectacular change was observed among the youngest children; coverage rates for one- and two-year-olds rose from low levels of 27 and 46 per cent, respectively, to high levels of 72 and 90 per cent. A number of part-time places were replaced with full-time places, which also had been short in supply. In 2015, 94 per cent of children 1-5 years old enrolled in childcare services had a full time place, i.e. a contract of 41 hours or more per week, (Statistics Norway 2016).

While the rise in employment rates among mothers with children under the age of three had levelled off the years after the cash-for-childcare reform, rates started to increase again towards the end of the 2000s. Ideas about the benefits of childcare changed during this period of expansion; a view of childcare as an investment in human capital and in children's early development has gained more prominence across political parties. Mothers' own perceptions

of childcare services as the best form of care were markedly strengthened during the 2000s; ambivalence towards institutional childcare for the youngest children more or less disappeared (Ellingsæter et al., 2016).

## **Our study**

Our case study encompasses media discussions of key political actors as concerns part-time work in Norway. Our group of political actors includes representatives of political parties, members of parliament and government ministers. Political parties included, from left to right, are the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party and the Progress Party. Moreover, the study includes social partners, including main employee organisations, including LO (the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions), YS (the Confederation of Vocational Unions), Unio (the Confederation of Unions for Professionals), Akademikerne (the Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations) as well as employer organisations such as KS (the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities), NHO (the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises) and Spekter (the Employers' Association Spekter). The Gender Equality Ombudsperson is also included.

Two decades or the period 1993–2013 constitute the timeframe of our case study. By using the media database 'Retriever'<sup>2</sup>, we are able to access articles on part-time work published during the period 1993–2013 in printed newspapers covering the national and regional levels in Norway. Our search for articles consisted of three stages. In the first stage of our search, we examined the number of articles mentioning part-time work (deltid) in each year during the period 1993–2013, that resulted in 9,809 articles on part-time work. In the second stage, we selected only those years that had a significant increase from the year before in the number of articles on part-time work to make the number of articles more manageable. Our selection criteria gives us eight years of intensified debate and a total number of 4,984 articles. These eight years are 1997, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2011 and 2013.<sup>3</sup> The third stage involved reading through the selected articles and identifying critical events and articles presenting the views of the key political actors on part-time work. From our sample of 4,984<sup>4</sup> articles, we found 315 articles written by or including interviews with our group of actors that presented their views on part-time work in terms of problems, causes or solutions. These



articles are spread over the eight selected years and we used them to identify the most frequently mentioned ideational frames used by our group of actors.

A common approach in media studies is to identify frames or arguments that actors use to support their position in a debate. We follow Entman (1993) who defines frames on the basis of how issues or events are discussed in terms of: (1) definition of the problem; (2) identification of the cause(s); (3) presentation of the solution(s); and (4) moral evaluation. Accordingly, we identified in our content analysis of the 315 newspaper articles the most frequent frames (words and phrases) used by the key actors when discussing problems and causes of, as well as solutions to, part-time work. Keywords from academic research on part-time work guided our identification of the most frequently mentioned frames (problems, causes and solutions). Normative foundations underlying the criticism or the support of different actors for part-time work were also part of the analysis.

### **Critical events: Media discussions of part-time work**

We will now identify events that are associated with intensification of public debate about part-time work. Our focus will be on the interaction between our key political actors and critical events shaping the debate on part-time work. These events are economic, structural, political and social/cultural conditions that induce political actors to engage in media discussions (e.g. Egeland and Drange, 2014; Grip, 2014; Kepplinger and Daschmann, 1997). The selected eight years were marked by events such as parliamentary and local elections (1997, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2013), and the appointment of three commissions that published reports on pension reforms and the use of part-time and shift work (2003, 2004 and 2007). Other events were targeted measures undertaken by the government and the social partners to increase full-time employment in the public sector (2010 and 2013), and criticism of women's voluntary part-time work (2013). The growing labour shortage in the Norwegian labour market from 1997 was also an underlying factor motivating discussions about the extensive use of part-time work and the need for change. In the following, we will discuss these critical events in more detail.

### *Elections*

During the period under scrutiny, elections evoked discussions about persistent recruitment problems in the public sector and the reasons for women's part-time work. The most active actors in these discussions were employee organisations representing workers in the health and social care sector.<sup>5</sup> The employee organisations used elections to press first the centre-right (Christian Democratic Party, Liberal Party and Centre Party, replaced by the Conservative Party in 2001–2005) and then the centre-left government (Labour Party, Socialist Left Party and Centre Party) to tackle the problem of involuntary and later voluntary part-time work. Actors belonging to the parties on the centre-left<sup>6</sup> and the Gender Equality Ombudsperson gave their support to claims made by the employee's organisations that part-time work was (in)voluntary or the outcome of low pay, lack of child care and gendered organisation of work. Political parties on the centre-right of the political spectrum<sup>7</sup> were less active in the debates until the centre-left government announced in 2010 that it would grant part-timers the right to full-time work. The centre right warned that the legal right could press those who had chosen part-time work into full-time positions. However, they supported more flexible working time arrangements to solve the problem of involuntary part-time work.

### *Commissions*

The three government commissions influencing debates on part-time work were the Commission on Pension Reform (2001-2004), the Commission on Part-Time Work (2003-2004) and the Commission on Shift Work (2007-2008). The latter two commissions were important arenas enabling the key political actors to arrive at a common understanding of why extensive part-time work among women was a problem. The Commission on Pension Reforms was established in 2001, and its suggestions, published in 2004 (NOU, 2004a), were gradually phased in from 2010 onwards. Hence, the political actors discussed pension in relation to part-time work throughout the period under study. The reform of the pension system involved the gradual replacement of pensions calculated on the basis of the 20 best income years with pensions proportional to lifetime income and compensation to parents for caring for their own children at home before they started school.

In the media debate, concerns were raised about the negative impact of a more income-related pension on women's pensions due to their extensive part-time work. Social partners, politicians and gender equality actors joined forces in demanding that the new pension system provide greater compensation for care work in the home. Hence, women's part-time

work was defended partly because it was considered involuntary. The Minister of Gender Equality (Labour Party) acknowledged, for example, in a chronicle that many women wished to work part-time while others were forced into part-time work as the result of lack of childcare and shift work limiting the number of full-time jobs (Brustad, 1997). In this debate, political actors joined forces in defending the status quo with regard to the prevailing gender contract as they focused on the problems of part-time work in relation to women's pensions and the institutional factors forcing women to take on part-time work.

The government commissions on the use of part-time work and on shift work were central in media debates from 2003 onwards as they provided research-based evidence related to the causes, consequences and solutions to the problem of involuntary part-time work (NOU, 2004b; NOU, 2008). The Commission on Part-Time Work was established as part of the centre-right government's effort to tackle involuntary part-time work, especially in the health and social care sector (Strand, 2003). However, the Gender Equality Ombudsperson criticised the mandate because it did not include a gender perspective (Hiim, 2003). The commission did not manage to reach an agreement on measures to reduce the use of part-time work (NOU, 2004b). The majority members rejected the recommendation to give part-time workers the right to full-time work that was put forward by the representatives of employee confederations in the committee.<sup>8</sup> They argued that this right would further exclude disadvantaged groups from the labour market. Instead, measures such as greater availability of affordable child care places to reduce involuntary part-time work would be a better solution to tackle involuntary part-time work (Granvik, 2004).

The Commission on Shift Work (2007–2008) found that the organisation of shift work in the health and social care sector generated involuntary part-time work. The work schedule only included work during every third weekend, and part-time workers were needed to fill the 'holes' in the weekend shifts. According to the Commission, measures that did not tackle the 'weekend problem' could contribute to a reduction in involuntary part-time work only to a limited extent (NOU, 2008). The Commission's conclusion provided support for claims made by employers' organisations and political parties on the centre-right of the political spectrum that deregulation of working time was needed as a means to reduce involuntary part-time work.

In the debate on the use of part-time work and shift work, political actors agreed that involuntary part-time work was the outcome of structural constraints such as the organisation of work limiting women's options. However, their views on why it was necessary to tackle the problem of involuntary part-time were coloured by their various ideological stances. According to political actors on the centre-right, part-time work created a labour shortage in the female-dominated health and social care sector, which reduced economic efficiency. Political actors on the centre-left of the political spectrum were more inclined to regard part-time work as a hindrance to gender equality. This debate did not challenge women's part-time work in general, as key actors only agreed on the need for working time flexibility.

### *Targeted measures*

From 2010 onwards, persistent labour shortages in the health and social care sector provoked the centre-left government to undertake several measures to tackle involuntary part-time work. These measures were: allocation of money in the state budget in 2010 to projects designed to fight involuntary part-time work in the public sector, an instruction from the Minister of Health to hospitals in 2011 to reduce part-time work by 20 per cent, an amendment to the Working Environment Act in 2006 giving employees in part-time jobs first priority when a full-time job became available, and an amendment to the Working Environment Act in 2013/2014 granting part-timers the right to have their position expanded to match the actual hours worked during the last 12 months.<sup>9</sup>

The media discussions of part-time work proliferated when the centre-left government announced in 2010 that, to tackle labour shortage and involuntary part-time work, it would grant part-timers the legal right to work full time. Political actors debated the extent to which women's involuntary part-time work should be solved with a legal right to full-time work or a more flexible labour market. Moreover, social partners reacted to the Commission on Shift Work's conclusion by taking concrete steps to make full-time employment the norm in the public sector. In 2011, the main public sector employee organisations signed an agreement with their counterparts on the employers' side, allowing weekend work more often than every third weekend.<sup>10</sup> The employee organisations agreed to a more flexible working time arrangement as a means to reduce involuntary part-time work among their members working shifts in the public sector. Prior to the agreement, pilot projects (2004)<sup>11</sup>, experimenting with shift work covering more than every third weekend had resulted in a reduction in involuntary part-time work (e.g. Moland and Bråthen, 2011). The agreement regarding more weekend

work created divisions among the employee organisations. The Norwegian Nurses' Organisation (NSF) criticised the agreement for not being in line with the demands of their members who wanted to have the right to work only every third weekend (Gitmark and Gravklev, 2011). In discussions in the media, NSF had repeatedly suggested other solutions to reduce involuntary part-time work in health care such as increasing staffing, raising wages and improving working conditions.

The leaders of the main employee organisation (LO) claimed in various interviews in 2011 that the agreement was a sign of solidarity with those women in constant search for more hours of work. The centre-left government declared their support for the agreement in the media (Bjurstrøm, 2011; Gitmark and Gravklev, 2011). In 2013, employee and employer organisations covering the health and the social care sector joined forces, signing the declaration 'The Big Full-Time Choice' (Det store heltidsvalget).<sup>12</sup> The partners committed themselves to working for the reduction of part-time work and developing a 'full-time culture' in the public sector. This emphasis on full-time work conflicted with the prevailing gender contract involving a historical compromise between the principles of efficiency and gender equality manifested in women's part-time work and men's role as breadwinner.

#### *Voluntary part-time work*

Soon after the declaration had been signed, the Minister of Gender Equality and the leader of the main employee organisation (LO) initiated a new controversy. This time it was not about women engaged in involuntary part-time work, but about women who voluntarily choose to work part time. The controversial intervention was based on a gender equality agenda. The Minister appealed to women to think about the negative economic consequences: lower wages, lower pensions and poorer career prospects. According to the Minister, caring for children at home was not as valuable as working full time when it came to welfare rights tied to work, power and status. The Minister also proposed the introduction of the 6-hour day or other working time reductions to prevent women paying the price for having a family life (Melgård, 2013). This valuation of women's paid work was heavily criticised by politicians from the centre-right as lacking respect for women's choices and for devaluing care work. The goal of gender equality was condemned: a representative of the Conservative Party claimed that the attempt to make Norway the most gender equal country in the world came at the cost of children and of women's opportunity to choose how to live their lives. According

to the Christian Democratic Party, parents' freedom of choice to stay either at home or to work part-time or work full-time should be ensured (Hareide, 2013).

The leader of LO responded to this criticism by asking whether those defending part-time work were of the opinion that the work line policy only applied to men. The leader contended that social welfare in Norwegian society was based on employment, and the main factor contributing to economic inequality was unemployment. Hence, full-time employment was in everyone's interest. This view was also advocated by employer organisations.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the leader of LO claimed that the freedom to choose hours of work was not shared equally by all groups. Women with lower educational levels and in female-dominated sectors worked part time to a much greater extent than women with higher-level education and men. For the members of LO, freedom included high enough wages to provide for oneself, parental leave, child care and after-school care and good workplaces (Kristiansen, 2013).

A representative of the Conservative Party confirmed her party's support for the work line, but at the same time stressed the need to respect men's and women's voluntary choices and that inflexible working time regulations were the main factors leading to involuntary part-time work (Helleland, 2013). The controversy surrounding women's voluntary part-time work erupted again when the leader of LO stated in an interview that women used motherhood as an excuse to stay at home and to not share childcare with their partners. She claimed that media discussions focused more on men's lack of engagement in unpaid childcare work than on women's reluctance to share childcare responsibilities with their partners. The debate on women's voluntary part-time work gained new momentum as the normalisation of women's part-time work was challenged by key political actors who blamed women for not choosing to work full-time.

### **Ideational framing of part-time work: Problems, causes, solutions**

We will now identify the most frequently mentioned ideational frames used by relevant political actors in media debates when discussing problems and causes of, as well as solutions to, part-time work. The following ten words or phrases were those most often used in articles on part-time work in the years under investigation (1997–2013): full-time work, (in)voluntary part-time work, wages, employers, choice, child care, shift work, pension, gender equality and public sector (municipal sector). Our frequency measurement captured primarily words

in ideational frames used by employee organisations, parties on the left of the political spectrum and by the Gender Equality Ombudsperson. As demonstrated earlier, these actors were the most active in the media discussions about part-time work. They regarded part-time work as a problem as it was too often involuntary and had negative economic effects on women's wages and pensions, thereby undermining the goal of gender equality. The right of part-timers to be employed in full-time work was emphasised as a solution to involuntary part-time employment.

Opposing positions were found along the left–right political spectrum, especially during the early part of the period (see Table 1). Representatives of the employee organisations and the left-wing parties demanded normalisation of full-time work by granting part-timers the right to full-time work as a means of tackling the problem of (in)voluntary part-time employment and enhancing gender equality while representatives of the employer organisations, and later the right-wing parties, supported prolonged normalisation of part-time work as a means to ensure flexibility and individual choice. The need for normalisation of full-time work was justified with claims that too many women were engaged in involuntary part-time work because employers in female-dominated sectors organised work into part-time positions instead of full-time positions. Lack of childcare and too much work pressure/a too heavy workload in the social care sector were other factors forcing women into involuntary part-time work. By contrast, employer organisations and right-wing political parties maintained that continued normalisation of part-time work was necessary because women work part-time voluntarily and employers need part-time workers to achieve flexibility. We will now discuss in more detail the problem-oriented themes and the solution-oriented proposals put forward by the social partners, politicians and gender equality actors in Norway in view of critical events stimulating the media discussions during 1997–2013.

**Table 1. Rival frames for discussions of part-time work in Norwegian media.**

Actors	Policy Idea	Problems	Solutions
Employers' organisation and the political parties on the right	Normalisation of part-time work to ensure parents have a choice and employers means to achieve flexibility.	Inflexible working time arrangement and then women's choice not to work weekends in the public sector the reasons for involuntary part-time work.	Make the working time regulation more flexible. Women need to be part of the full-time culture in the public sector.
Employees' organisations, centre-left political parties and gender equality actors	Normalisation of full-time work to promote equality in terms of gender, class and ethnicity and to meet labour shortage.	Employers who do not offer full-time positions in the female-dominated public sector. Lack of childcare and too heavy work pressure/workload.	The social partners negotiate more flexible shifts. Introduce the legal right to full-time work. Employers and women need to work on developing full-time culture in the public sector.

*Problem definitions*

Representatives of employer organisations had a positive view of part-time work, especially during the early part of the period in question.<sup>14</sup> They considered part-time work to be a reflection of the choice made by women to prioritise their families, as well as the only means of achieving flexibility in the Norwegian labour market. However, these representatives were more concerned with the problem of involuntary part-time work among women after 2003, when the Commissions on Part-Time Work and Shift Work had been established. By the end of the period in question, representatives of one employer organisation (KS) covering the public sector were also concerned with other institutional factors shaping decisions to offer part-time employment in the public sector. Among these were tight budgets, small service units and a part-time culture prevailing in the female-dominated occupations/sectors (Bransdal et al., 2011; Haug 2013). During the same period, representatives of right-wing parties aligned with the employer organisations in arguing that inflexible working time regulations were the problem because they led to involuntary part-time work, especially in the public sector.



The employee organisations and political actors on the left were the most problem-oriented. At the start of the period 1997–2013, these actors claimed that because part-time work was low paid and generated a low pension, it made women economically dependent on men throughout their life course. After the appointment of the Commission on Part-Time Work in 2003, the focus shifted to involuntary part-time work as a problem mainly found in the female-dominated public sector that co-existed with a persistent labour shortage.<sup>15</sup> Part-time work was, therefore, a gender issue and involuntary part-time work a welfare state paradox.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of the period in question, the Gender Equality Ombudsperson, followed by employee organisations, stressed the role of part-time work in creating not only gender inequalities but also class and ethnic divisions among women as women with low skill levels and qualified immigrant women were more likely to be in part-time employment. Hence, part-time work was linked to poverty and lack of opportunities (Kagge and Melgård, 2013a). Moreover, the social partners agreed that part-time work was bad for service quality and created recruitment problems in the health and the social care sector, which was struggling with labour shortages.<sup>17</sup>

In 2010, the leader of an employer organisation (Spekter) blamed voluntary part-time work for creating involuntary part-time work in the health and the social care sector (Bratten, 2010). The argument was that the greater the number of women choosing to work part time, the greater the number of part-time workers needed to fill the ‘holes’ created in the work schedule. Hence, the NSF’s demand that shift work not involve weekend work more often than every third weekend created demand for part-time work. The leader also stated that more flexible working time arrangements could meet both employers’ needs for more weekend workers and the needs of women searching for more hours in the health and social care sector. This claim was in line with the conclusion of the Commission on Shift Work established in 2007 (Bratten, 2011). A leader of the public sector employer organisation (KS) soon followed suit and encouraged nurses to acknowledge the relationship between voluntary and involuntary part-time work (Vågeng, 2011).

In 2013, a minister in the centre-left government and the leader of the main employee organisation (LO) also problematized women’s decision to work part time. These actors wanted women to consider the economic costs of part-time work and to share the care of children equally with their partners instead of working part-time. The employee organisation leader also claimed that Norwegian society was resting on a part-time culture without any

consideration of what it meant for individuals or the workplaces (Kagge and Melgård, 2013a). This was in line with research showing that women's working hours in Norway were influenced by employers' working time arrangements and the part-time culture prevailing in their workplaces (e.g. Abrahamsen, 2009; Amble, 2008; Nicolaisen and Bråthen, 2012). A leader of the NSF also participated in the discussions and claimed that part-time work was a cultural problem that affected both employers and employees. Hence, the argument went, to make full-time work the rule and part-time an option, employers had to provide more full-time positions and women in the health and the social care sector needed to develop a full-time culture (Kagge and Melgård, 2013b). The problem orientation of actors on both the right and left had now moved closer together around the need to tackle part-time culture in female-dominated occupations/workplaces.

### *Solutions*

The solution-oriented proposals were in line with the problem definitions of the two opposing groups of actors. After 2003, representatives of employers' organisations and, later, political parties on the right argued for the need to tackle the high rate of involuntary part-time work by making the working time regulations more flexible. Other solutions proposed by these groups of actors did not gain wide support. One example is the solution suggested by the main employer organisation's (NHO) in 2001 to allow more labour immigration to solve the shortage of qualified workers created by widespread part-time work (Berge, 2001).

The most frequently mentioned solution to the problem of part-time work among representatives of the employee organisation and parties on the centre left was to introduce the right to full-time work for those in part-time work.<sup>18</sup> These actors also encouraged employers in the female-dominated public sector to offer more full-time positions at their workplaces.<sup>19</sup> Other solutions were proposed, especially during the early part of the period in question, including wage increases to enhance women's incentive to work full-time,<sup>20</sup> and, to a lesser extent, reduction in working hours.<sup>21</sup> A leader of one of the employee organisations (YS) suggested shorter working days for parents of small children as a means of solving the problem of time squeezing, which in turn would enable women working part-time to move into full-time work (Bjørngen, 2001). In 2007, the employee association representing professionals with university education (Akademikerne) argued for a different solution to the problem of part-time work by suggesting putting a ceiling on hours of work. Men's overtime forced women to reduce their hours of work to take on childcare and domestic responsibilities

in the home. Hence, part-time work was a coping strategy for women with partners working overtime (Dagbladet, 2007).

Over time, actors on both the employer and employee sides of the issue became increasingly concerned with finding ways to improve workforce utilisation as a solution to the prevailing labour shortage in Norway. Two solutions dominated the media discussion at the end of the period in question: these were the right to full-time work and more flexible working time regulation.

### *The right to full-time work*

In 2003, the Gender Equality Ombudsperson joined forces with employee organisations and demanded the introduction of the legal right to full-time work to tackle the problem of involuntary part-time work (Hiim, 2003). The left-wing parties, in the opposition at the time, also supported this legal right as a means to reduce involuntary part-time work and achieve more gender equality. In 2005, these parties came into power, and shortly before losing power in 2013, they passed a bill granting part-timers the right to have their position expanded to encompass actual hours of work. The right-wing parties in the Parliament did not support this amendment.<sup>22</sup> The need for measures increasing flexibility in the labour market was the main concern of representatives from the Progress Party and the Liberal Party. Representatives from the Conservative Party and the Christian Democratic Party also stressed the need for policies ensuring that part-time work was an option not only for parents of small children (Christian Democratic Party) but also for those unable to work full time (Conservative Party).

During the period under scrutiny, the implementation of shorter working days to solve the problem of part-time work was not mentioned by either the Gender Equality Ombudsperson or representatives of the Labour Party, although one employee organisation (YS) and the Socialist Left Party had suggested it on several occasions. The Gender Equality Ombudsperson declared in 2003 that women should work full time but have the option to work part time while their children were small without being punished with a lower pension for having worked shorter hours (Folkvord, 2003).

Over time, the responsibility of employers to create full-time jobs, and then women's duty to work, or the 'work line', became the dominant frames for media discussions. These frames

were pushed through by the main employee organisation, LO, with the support of the political parties on the left as well as the Gender Equality Ombudsperson. When the main employer organisations also followed suit, blaming widespread part-time work among women for creating involuntary part-time work, the political parties on the right and the NFS expressed support for the frame, emphasising the need to give women an opportunity to choose their hours of work. According to the leader of LO, full-time employment was in everyone's interest and this view was supported by employer organizations including KS and Spekter (Kristiansen, 2013). These actors regarded the work line framework to be a solution to the problem of low pay and low pensions for women.

According to the leader of LO, the work line frame also addressed the problem of growing divisions among women created by more widespread part-time work among low- skilled women and qualified non-Western women. However, not everyone could work part time. The leader of the employer organisation Spekter emphasised that women with small children or suffering from health problems had a legitimate reason to choose part-time work (Karlsen and Kristiansen, 2013). Other more costly solutions did not gain widespread support among the main political actors. These included solutions involving narrowing the gender pay gap by raising wages in female-dominated occupations/sectors and cutting men's hours of work by introducing a 6-hour work day or by putting ceiling on working hours.

#### *More flexible working time regulations*

In 2011, the social partners signed an agreement allowing work schedules with more weekend work.<sup>23</sup> The agreement created divisions among employee organisations. The leader of the NFS claimed, for example, that those employers who regarded more weekend work as a prerequisite for the creation of more full-time positions made employees already burned out from asocial hours and insufficient staffing responsible for solving the problem (Nordhuus, 2013). Until 2011, the main disagreement on how to solve the problem of involuntary part-time work had been between the employee organisations and the employer organisations.

The employer organisations argued in favour of more flexible working time regulations, while the employee organisations encouraged employers to provide more full-time work and, to lesser extent, to introduce a 6-hour working day in order to equalise working hours between men and women. In 2013, a declaration was signed committing the social partners to work on developing a full-time culture in the public sector as it would involve a win-win

situation for the users of the services, as well as for the employers and the employees.<sup>24</sup> Cultivating a full-time culture was regarded as a means of achieving high service quality, solving the labour shortage and improving women's wages, career development and pension rights. The declaration can be seen as an effort to settle disagreements or divisions among the employees' organisations that had been created by the agreement to allow more weekend work.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion: Destabilising the gender contract**

Scholars have maintained that widespread part-time work among women in the Nordic countries indicates that gender equality, involving a symmetrical dual earner model advancing women's economic independence, has not been realised in these countries (see Andersen, 2013; Haataja and Nyberg, 2006; Jonsson, 2011). The segregation of women into part-time work has been a solution to the gender conflicts that followed the decline of the male breadwinner norm. At the core of this compromise is the normalisation of women's part-time work that constitutes the modified gender contract.

As our study of media debates demonstrates, there was a heightened ideational dispute among the main political actors over women's part-time work in Norway between 1997 and 2013. Moreover, critical events such as the co-existence of labour shortages and involuntary part-time work, as well as reforms making pension rights more income-based, undermined the gender contract based on the normalisation of part-time work. Hence, the gender contract, which included a certain compromise between the contradicting principles of 'gender essentialism' and 'gender equalitarianism', was destabilised. The flux was characterised by periods of instability and competing gender norms that the main actors sought to settle by creating alliances around certain incremental changes inducing further modification of the gender contract. These incremental changes rest on the outcomes of actors' struggles over economic, democratic and gender ideals (cf. Esping-Andersen, 2009; Hirdman, 1990).

In part, conventional conflict dynamics have driven the ideational struggles over part-time work in Norway. Social partners and the political parties on the left used rationales such as the work line, involving employers' responsibility to create full-time jobs and, later, women's duty to work full-time in order to promote 'gender equalitarianism'. In contrast, political parties on the right emphasised the need to respect women's choice to work part-time and

provide care in the family, thus adhering to 'gender essentialism'. Moreover, these parties supported the claims of employers' organisations that more flexible working time regulation (shift work) was needed in order to fight involuntary part-time work and labour shortages in the public sector.

At the end of the period 1997–2013, the key actors had formed alliances around measures allowing shifts with weekend work more often than every third weekend (2011) as a means to tackle involuntary part-time work. Governmental commissions with representatives from the main groups of actors were an important arena for the formation of these alliances that cut across traditional divisions between social partners, employees vs. employers, and political actors, left vs. right. The labour shortage that prevailed during the 2000s, at the same time as the share of women aged 25–64 working part-time almost doubled (Lanninger and Sundström, 2014: Figure 2), was used to justify the exclusive focus of the alliance on facilitating change in women's behaviour (more full-time work). Hence, other solutions, aiming at altering men's behaviour (shorter working hours) and the undervaluation of women's work (higher wages in female dominated jobs), were pushed aside.

The incremental changes facilitating further modification of the gender contract were more income-based pension system with compensation to parents for caring for their children under school age, measures promoting full-time employment in the public sector and a legal right to full-time work. Less controversial changes shaping the gender contract included universal provision of publically subsidised child care from 2003 onwards. Hence, the gender contract moved towards a more symmetrical dual earner model or a greater acceptance of women's full-time work as a norm, and part-time work as a choice for those women with small children or unable to work more hours. This modification of the contract did not prevent controversies from arising, as the 2013 dispute over women's voluntary part-time work demonstrates. At the centre of recent controversies is women's choice to work part-time as it undermines the work line principle and the goal of gender equality.

Ageing, immigration and technical changes will put the prevailing gender contract under further pressure. Ageing of the population will increase the need for women to engage in full-time work and take on more care work while employers will continue to need a flexible working force to meet fluctuations in demand, reduced working hours among older workers and leaves of absence of those sick or on educational breaks, as well as to staff asocial hours.

Technological advances (robots and digital analytics) and immigration may go far in meeting labour shortages and providing flexibility in the Norwegian labour market. If these forces create a lack of job opportunities, then we may see groups on the centre-left demanding shorter working hours to achieve more equal sharing of work among those in employment, on the one hand, and the growing number of unemployed and those in atypical employment, on the other. More equal sharing of work will move men's working time closer to women's and be in line with the work life principles and gender equality. If the high employment rate in Norway continues to contract, other actors may respond by stressing the need to support the choice to care for not only young children but also elderly family members in order to reduce unemployment and some of the pressure of aging on public finances. Women are likely to take on the caretaker role to much larger extent than men due to the gender pay gap and norms based on gender essentialism. It is clear, however, that the modified gender contract based on normalised part-time work is in the process of change and will continue to be a source of ideational struggles. Studies of a gender contract in flux need to combine analysis of media discussions and interviews with the key political actors in the debate if we are to gain a better understanding of why certain policy ideas are left out of the debate or rejected and of how alliances are formed around certain solutions.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the three EU countries with the highest rate of part-time work among women in 2015, the average hours of work ranged from 19 hours in Germany to 21 hours in Austria.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.retriever-info.com/no/>

<sup>3</sup> These were the years with an increase in number of articles of at least 17% from the year before. The eight years did not appear to be influenced by the years Retriever started to include articles from a new source, i.e. different newspapers. Only the year 2001 corresponds to a year when articles from a new newspaper were added to the database. Hence, we do not know whether the intensified discussion in 2001 is due to the entrance of articles from the newspaper *Dagbladet* into the database or to an intensified discussion of part-time work.

<sup>4</sup> Many of the articles included statistical information on part-time work and interviews with people who worked part time.

<sup>5</sup> NSF and NHS/Fagforbundet, LO, YS and Unio.

<sup>6</sup> Arbeiderpartiet (Ap), Sosialistisk Venstreparti (SV).

<sup>7</sup> Høyre, Fremskrittspartiet (FrP), Kristelig Folkeparti (KrF) and Venstre.

<sup>8</sup> LO, YS and UHO (later Unio).

<sup>9</sup> This right was an amendment to the Working Environment Act (§ 14-4a)

<sup>10</sup> LO and its association, Fagforbundet, versus Spekter.

<sup>11</sup> Social partners covering the public sector (KS, LO, YS and UHO) and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health cooperated on these projects experimenting with different working time models in order to reduce involuntary part-time work.

<sup>12</sup> Fagforbundet, NSF and Delta, KS.

<sup>13</sup> KS and Spekter

<sup>14</sup> NHO, Spekter and KS

<sup>15</sup> e.g. LO, NSF, Ap and SV.

<sup>16</sup> e.g. the Gender Equality Ombud, LO, YS, Ap and SV.

<sup>17</sup> e.g. KS, LO, YS, UHO, NSF and SHD.

<sup>18</sup> NSF, NHS, Fagforbundet, Fellesforbundet, the Gender Equality Ombud, Ap, SV, Senterpartiet (Sp) and KrF.

<sup>19</sup> LO, NSF, Unio and Handel og Kontor, NHS, KS, Ap, SV and the Gender Equality Ombud.

<sup>20</sup> The Gender Equality Ombud, Kvinnefronten, LO, NHS, NSF, Delta (YS), Radikale Venstre (RV) and SV, Ap

<sup>21</sup> LO, YS, Utdanningsforbundet, Unio, SV and RV

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Saker/Sak/Voteringsoversikt/?p=56767&dnid=1>

<sup>23</sup> LO and Fagforbundet and Spekter

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.ks.no/tema/Arbeidsgiver/Kompetanse-og-rekruttering/Heltidskultur/Det-store-heltidsvalget/>

<sup>25</sup> Fagforbundet and Spekter