

Part-time work: Atypical? Precarious? Normal?

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Abstract There is no consensus among scholars about whether part-time work is an alerting signal of an on-going fragmentation of the labour market and of the rise in atypical working arrangements or whether it should be defined as a normal working condition as it is already fully embedded in social and labour legislation. According to the common definition of a normal, standard working condition, part-time work should be treated as atypical work. But does that also automatically make it precarious? This article starts with an overview of developments in flexibilisation and a status-quo analysis of the part-time working arrangements in Austria as a sign of labour market flexibilisation. It continues with a contention of whether part-time work as an atypical working arrangement is automatically linked to precarious working and living conditions. Using Austria as a starting point, this article closes by approaching a crucial question for all European labour markets: What form do future part-time work arrangements need to take in order to be considered “normal” from an employee’s point of view? This article concludes with the assertion that discussions on the future of part-time work should not be driven by questions of definition. Rather, it would be more productive for further research to focus on offering scope for freedom of choice and social security for part-time employees.

Keywords Part-time work · Labour market flexibility · Austria · Policy pointers

Introduction

We are facing an on-going trend on the labour markets in Europe: There is a significant move towards part-time work

arrangements. Nearly every fourth worker in Europe is working part-time (34 h or less, [1, p. 35]). Part-time working patterns vary across the continent. In the Netherlands, for example, almost half of the workforce is employed part-time, in the eight countries Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and the UK almost a quarter of employees work in such arrangements, while in Bulgaria this figure is only around 2 %. A glance at the latest European Working Conditions Survey reveals that part-time working is generally synonymous with females: In the 27 EU countries, more than 30 % of women work part-time [1].

At the same time, an erosion of the normal employment conditions with respect to standard labour¹ conditions and contracts can also be observed. The change of jobs, professions and working time patterns is a clear indicator for the development of increasing flexibility on Europe’s labour markets. “Working times are becoming more colourful and diverse, sometimes longer but also shorter, and certainly more flexible” [3].

There is no consensus among scholars about whether part-time work is an alerting signal of an on-going fragmentation of the labour market and of the rise in atypical working arrangements or whether it should be defined as a normal working condition as it is already fully embedded in social and labour legislation. According to the common definition of a normal, standard working condition, part-time work should be treated as atypical work. But does that also automatically make it precarious?

This article starts with an overview of developments in flexibilisation and a status-quo analysis of the part-time working arrangements in Austria as a sign of labour market flexibilisation. It continues with a contention of whether part-time work as an atypical working arrangement is

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¹ In this context the term “standard employment relationship” (SER) is also common, see for example [2].

automatically linked to precarious working and living conditions. Using Austria as a starting point, this article closes by approaching a crucial question for all European labour markets: What form do future part-time work arrangements need to take in order to be considered “normal” from an employee’s point of view?

This article concludes with the assertion that discussions on the future of part-time work should not be driven by questions of definition. Rather, it would be more productive for further research to focus on offering scope for freedom of choice and social security for part-time employees.

Labour market flexibility

The increase in part-time arrangements is a sign of growing flexibility on the labour markets. One question in this context is whether flexibility in fact characterises a new development at all. Kratzer [4] asserts that flexibility in itself is nothing new, although its current forms certainly are. Following this interpretation, “conventional” normal employment in a Post-Fordist sense is already a type of flexible employment.² Work, labour as well as the working environment are all dramatically changing. According to Kratzer, this is not a transformation from a stable system to a flexible one, but more “(...) a transition of flexibilisation, virtually a flexibilisation of the flexibilisation” [4, p. 3].

The Austrian labour market is characterised by a heterogenic structure of entrepreneurship [5, p. 34, p. 40] and by very liberal and flexible employment protection legislation. This had been counteracted by the high impact of the so-called “social partnership” (Sozialpartnerschaft) and its interest groups (e.g. Chamber of Labour and Austrian Trade Union) who had a strong influence on hiring policies at company level. The system specific to Austria was characterised by social partners who had the power, resources and influence to control and manage domestic economic and social policies.³

In the 1980s and 1990s, Austria faced a period of significant transformation in economic and labour-related affairs. The rising international dependency and on-going neoliberal political influence challenged the social and welfare state and also changed the structure of the Austrian labour market as well as the influence of the social partnership.

Beginning in the 1980s, Austria faced [9] a period of rising flexibility which went hand-in-hand with a reduction in social

security, and the Austrian welfare system came under increasing pressure. The ÖVP/FPÖ⁴ coalition at the beginning of the millennium served to enhance this development. In this context, it is important to note that the perpetual conservative orientation⁵ of the Austrian welfare state with its strong connection between income and access to social services still remains, because

“path-dependencies and the complex dialectic of institutions and politics still constitute — despite certain convergences with the liberal model — a system of employment specific to Austria” [5, p. 44].

Recent reforms, which “(...) resulted in a strengthening of traditional features — the respective systems now tend to be even more employment and earning-related than before” [9, p. 29], show evidence of this situation.

It should be noted that only the conservative orientation of the Austrian Welfare State revealed its strength: Over the course of the financial crisis, the use of short-time working arrangements was remarkably successful. The (conservative) labour market regulation with internal flexibility measures recorded better performance than external flexibility measures, such as hire and fire [11, 12].

Nevertheless, the publications of Statistik Austria⁶ reveal an increase in marginally-employed workers, a greater amount of temporary and subcontracted labour and the self-employed, a rise in jobs with frequently changing start and end times, and a growth in part-time working contracts. Increasing working time flexibility reflects this tendency as well as the numerical flexibility⁷ in Austria: Data from the Austrian Social Insurance⁸ shows that a quarter of employees change their occupation within a year⁹ [15, 16]. It is the male-dominated standard (“normal”) working day which is gripped by the process of erosion [17].

This tendency towards more flexibility is also revealed by the fact that only 46 % of all workers in Austria have the same working hours every day (2000: 51 %). Only about 52 % have stable start and end times at work (2000: 59 %) [18]. Workers within rotating job models and within shift-working contracts

⁴ ÖVP: Christian-Conservative Party; FPÖ: Freedom Party.

⁵ The reform of the childcare benefit scheme carried out in January 2010 underscores this finding. The income-based variant shows significant differences from the fixed alternative of childcare benefits [10].

⁶ Statistik Austria is an independent and non-profit federal institution under public law. It is responsible for performing scientific services in the area of federal statistics (www.statistik.at).

⁷ Numerical flexibility describes the quantitative dimension, primarily “time”. Functional flexibility represents the qualitative aspects (quality of work). A further distinction can be made between external (hire and fire policies) and internal (for example, working time reductions) flexibility. For more information see: [13, 14].

⁸ The Main Association of Austrian Social Security Organisations (www.sozialversicherung.at).

⁹ The high job turnover rates are most probably related to the seasonal variations on the Austria labour market.

² This can be especially explained by overtime hours which serve as an easy-to-handle flexi-tool for employers.

³ For more information about the “Social partnership” as a system of industrial relations specific to Austria see: [6–8].

increased from 15 % to 19 % between 1998 and 2008 [19]. According to the European Commission, “it will come to a double-tracked development in which new forms of flexible and autonomous ‘knowledge work’ will coexist with repetitive and intense production systems” [20, p. 7].

The trend is obvious: Working conditions in the future will become more flexible. The task is to emphasise the positive aspects of this development for both the employers and the employees. Broadly speaking, “employers welcome work on demand” while employees favour “free time on demand” [21].

A return to common and old patterns of employment cannot be the answer to these developments: Clinging to old employment structures is akin to rejecting the reality, as is forcing the “total” flexibilisation of the labour markets. Promoting the “good” dimensions (emphasising work-life balance) of more flexible working patterns is the future challenge for labour relations. This, however, is no simple task: The European Commission is committed to the enforcement of more flexible working time arrangements by employers and companies [20]. The employee-orientated flexibilisation does not follow the rhythm of economic cycles. Other issues are also important: individual working time and work load composition, more space for personal and family-related obligations as well as for vocational training.

“(…) workers wish to have more working time flexibility, most notably those who have family obligations and those who are interested in better compatibility between family and career” [20, p. 7].

From a normative employee-centric point of view, workers should not be forced into flexible working arrangements. Flexibilisation must serve as an alternative which guarantees social security equal to normal, full employment.

Part-time in Austria

Using the most common classification, all working arrangements with fewer than 35 h¹⁰ of work are considered part-time. In Austria, part-timers are fully included in the social system and fully integrated under labour law regulations¹¹: They are socially insured in the case of accidents, disease, and unemployment and also enjoy pension benefits. They are also integrated in the severance pay system. According to data from Statistik Austria, 44 % of women work part-time while only 9 % of men do so [23]. The overall part-time rate in Austria is around 25 %. The part-time working ratio of more than 80 % among woman is significant [24].

¹⁰ Until 2003, Statistik Austria classified part-time work as 35 h or less. Since 2004, self-evaluations are used. Eurofound uses the classification of 34 h or less.

¹¹ The last important amendments to the Austrian Labour Law in this context were implemented in 2007 (also see Hinterseer 2011) [22].

Explanations for the rise in atypical working arrangements like part-time work — between 2005 and 2010, the part-time rate increased by 3 % annually [25] — range from people’s new demands for working and living conditions to greater economic pressure and challenges. The reasons for part-time work in Austria differ between the genders: Almost four out of ten women mention family and care issues as reasons for working part-time, while only 4 % of men state the same. For them, vocational training is the most common reason for part-time work. Data from Statistik Austria shows that the lower the occupational qualification, the higher the part-time rate [24].

The hourly wage is lower than in a full-time job, and compared to other countries, many part-time jobs in Austria would fall under the classification of better paid full-time employment [5]. Other problems that arise with regard to part-time work include a lack of career advancement opportunities and lower job security [26, 27]. Part-time workers are often seen as peripheral workers and are given unfavourable working times [28].

Counting unpaid housework, parenting and fostering as work, part-time employed women work even more hours a week than fully-employed men. Women in Austria reach a weekly workload of up to 60 h [18, 29]. This could be an explanation for the results of the “Arbeitsklima Index”¹² in Austria which shows that most workers do not intend to move into a full-time job [18, p. 92] [30]. However, surveys in Germany emphasise that women in particular want to have the right to move into a full-time job or work more monthly hours [27, 31]. The fact that part-time employment is seen as a preferred arrangement under special circumstances and not as a permanent status is highlighted by the fact that 34 % of part-time workers view their job as a “workaround” and almost a third of part-time workers explicitly want to work more [32].

The development in the future expansion of part-time work will mainly depend on the following factors: Investment in childcare facilities and progress towards more flexible forms of employment (flexitime, working time accounts) will lead to a decrease in employed women working part-time but will increase the overall rate of employed women at the same time. Further development is also dependent on the acceptance of part-time work in society in general: If workers in higher positions work part-time more often, this will have an influence on the overall rate. The longer life expectancy as well as the improved health conditions of the elderly, who will work more during their retirement, will also have an impact on the part-time workforce. Taking into account a simple extrapolated trend of the part-time developments and the Austria-

¹² The “Arbeitsklima Index” is regularly conducted by the Chamber of Labour in Austria (Arbeiterkammer) to measure the subjective well-being of workers. For further information see: <http://www.arbeiterkammer.com/gesundheit/arbeitsklima.htm>.

specific parameters, a part-time rate of about a third is realistic in Austria for 2020 [33]. In this context it should be noted that in the first half of 2010, a rise in part-time working arrangements was statistically related to a decrease in full-time employment while the unemployment rate declined slightly [34–36]. It is also statistically proven that the rise in employment in Austria since 1995 exclusively stems from the growth in part-time work [24].

Atypical? Precarious? Normal?

Analysing the European labour markets reveals that the rise in atypical work reflects an on-going neoliberal economic trend [37, 38]. Data show a rapid and permanent erosion of normal working contracts. “Normal” in this context means permanent and full employment with stable starting and end times, from Monday to Friday [39, p. 3f]. Consequently, every work situation which differs from this definition is considered atypical. The increase in atypical work threatens the social system and its tax-based foundations, which relate mainly to the “normal” working classification. The adjective “precarious” is often used in connection with atypical working arrangements. Browsing the relevant scientific literature reveals the vagueness of the term. “Occasionally the borders between atypical and precarious become blurred in a synonymous equalisation” [26, p. 502]. Brehmer and Seifert [26] build some categories which help to define variables for precarious work. Working arrangements which are changed in the course of flexibilisation should be operationalised through the following dimensions: income, job security, employability and social security. The authors show that a combination, or rather the accumulation of these different dimensions, leads to precarious situations. But even with this categorisation of the problem area, defining what is precarious or not continues to be a complex issue. When it comes to subjectivity and the self-determination of workers to characterise precarious work, the concept becomes more vague and difficult to operationalise [26, 40]. Atypical work like temporary agency work or non-permanent part-time work could, for example, serve as a starting point for a stable working situation and could therefore not automatically be defined as precarious work. In other contexts, such work could also lead to instability and social troubles.

Nevertheless, for a rising number of people, this leads to precarious working and living situations, and studies show that workers in atypical work situations face a higher risk of precarious working and living conditions [40]. The great increase in part-time jobs underlines these assertions. Compared to 1998, when 16 % of all employees were part-timers, almost a quarter of the work force is currently part-time employed in Austria. Open-end contracts are still in the majority, but the number of non-permanent contracts is

constantly growing [29]. As a consequence, should part-time work be included in a group with the increasing number of marginally-employed workers, the greater amount of temporary and subcontracted labour and the self-employed, who are usually categorised as atypical?

More and more scholars argue that part-time work should no longer be seen as atypical employment (for Austria, see for example [41]).¹³ As already stated, part-time work in Austria is socially and legally equal to full-time work. In line with this interpretation, almost 90 % of the workforce in Austria is currently “normally” employed.

Work is made precarious by special forms of flexibilisation. The labour market expert Marcel Finke defines the “rise in non-standard forms of employment” [9] as one of these developments. This includes all jobs without collective agreements. The number of such forms of employment is rising, but most of the workers are still embedded in collective agreements – also part-time work arrangements. Another form is the low-wage sector of the labour market. This sign of flexibilisation and especially of deregulation in the labour market is not only a problem for part-time workers: Almost 15 % of the full-time employed in Austria already work in a precarious low-wage sector. What actually leads to a risky situation for workers is the combination of atypical arrangements, like a non-permanent part-time job. It must be noted that the degree of precariousness differs between job branches: In Austria, for example, jobs in the tourism industry are affected most [42].

To sum up, above all, fictitious self-employment (“Scheinselbständigkeit”), minor working contracts, temporary agency work and non-permanent part-time work are increasingly undermining labour law and social law regulations. These forms of work indicate a high rate of involuntary employment [43]. Brehmer and Seifert [26] investigated the correlation between atypical forms of employment (non-permanent, part-time work included) and the risks of precarious work for Germany. Their results demonstrate that the atypically employed are more at risk of working in a precarious situation than workers in a “normal” form of employment. The authors also claim that

“(i)t cannot be stated at all, that all these forms of employment are precarious per se. According to the analysed characteristics, the majority of atypically employed workers cannot be classified as precariously employed. The research neither implies that all normal working arrangements are free of precarious risks” [26, p. 516].

¹³ The literature on Danish flexicurity tends to assume that workers are in regular open-ended contracts, or, if not, that part-time or temporary contracts can be considered equivalent to regular employment [1, p. 18].

Due to the full integration into the labour and social law regulations, holding part-time work in Austria is not a precarious situation for most employees. Generally, however, most problems arise in the future: In case of redundancy, unemployment benefits, severance pays and pension rates are lower in comparison to long-time full employment. Women in particular suffer in this context. The high part-time rate in combination with high divorce rates and the paternalistic orientation of the Austrian welfare state should be taken into account in this connection [5, 44]. Especially in Germany, against the backdrop of the Hartz IV reforms, non-standard forms of employment are criticised, as is part-time work. In statistical studies, all working contracts with 35 h or less are classified as part-time work. As a result, the variations of working hours are high, and differentiations between what is categorised under the term part-time work are essential.

Policy pointers

Part-time work is a persistent trend on Europe's labour markets and reflects the development of deregulation and flexibilisation. Part-time work is mostly grouped under atypical work and therefore automatically connected with precarious working and living conditions: low wages, a low level of social security and a high rate of involuntary work [43].

In labour market contexts, where these forms of employment differ significantly from the common social and legal setting, these assumptions are true. Adaptions to labour law regulations, such as in Austria, treat part-time work almost as equal to full-time work and thus challenge this connection.

Political decisions are needed to embed the increasing part-time arrangements into a modern labour market setting, in which flexibility is not only employer-driven but also flanked by reduced future risks. It is particularly difficult for political decision-makers to influence the quantitative development of atypical part-time work. On a qualitative level (social rights, labour law, wage issues), however, there is more potential for political influence in terms of "context governance" [37].

The following list constitutes an initial attempt to propose political measures which are essential to disconnect part-time work from precarious working and living conditions. These policy pointers could serve as a starting point for further discussion and promote further in-depth research. As mentioned in this article, it is difficult to define what makes work precarious. The following policy pointers are based on the categorisation of Brehmer and Seifert [26].

More employee-orientated flexibility

The common approach to work is changing. The boundaries between working time and private time are being blurred.

Work as one element of a complex life framework is more often seen as a major impact on the quality of life.

"The practice of (...) flexibilisation strategies often does not overlap with the wishes and needs of workers, because the opportunities for participation are small and there is little room for planning the daily routine" [45].

Flexible working (time) arrangements are therefore increasingly gaining in favour. This trend will continue in the near future. This especially concerns those who face the task of combining family obligations with work duties. The increasing flexibility offers new potential for people to combine work and private spheres more sufficiently. Yet, as the German Trade Union (DGB) shows, the connection between these two spheres is not always promising [46]. The vague border between work, leisure, family and privacy is a major stress factor for employees. OECD studies point out the relationship between a successful work-life balance and family-friendly working time arrangements [47, 48]. Positive flexible arrangements are flexitime, working time accounts, trusted flexitime, opportunities for home-working, sabbaticals and different forms of leave.

The right to change from full-time to part-time and vice versa

This innovation from the Dutch labour market system should be at the core of modern labour markets with rising part-time work arrangements in Europe. It guarantees a better basis – especially for women – to combine childcare with professional plans.

Full inclusion in the social system and integration under labour law regulations

As mentioned in this article, in 2007, Austria made a big step towards the full integration of part-time work under social and labour law regulations. This should become European standard to avoid part-time marginalisation. The Netherlands has gone one step further and given these rights to marginally employed workers, too. Furthermore, the flexibilisation of working conditions and working time should always be connected with collective agreements and employee councils to reduce the risk of one-sided flexibility developments.

Breaking down traditional role models

Women — and this is a European phenomenon — dominate the part-time workforce. Therefore, it is crucial to break down traditional role models. In conservative welfare states such as Austria, women are usually associated with family and household issues while men are connected with job and career agendas. Highly-skilled workers and managers in part-time work are not socially-accepted enough and traditional family

roles still tend to be attached to women. The still high gender pay gap reflects this issue. The Dutch case shows the potential to change this mind-set with its remarkably high part-time rate among men (23 %; Austria: 9 %).

Mandatory parental leave for men between two and six months as well as extra wage increases for women¹⁴ could help to challenge not only these role models but also the gender pay gap.

Expansion of childcare institutions

Women not only frequently prefer part-time work because of the aforementioned high amount of unpaid work but also because childcare institutions are insufficient, too expensive or both in most of Europe.

On the one hand, more public funding is required for day nurseries, for affordable and local kindergartens and for all-day schools. The exemplary child care system in Sweden is tax funded and has a maximum cost limit for parents to make child care affordable [50]. On the other hand, social partners and political decision makers have to encourage employers to support their employees who have children. In Germany, we see, for example, an expansion¹⁵ of on-site childcare facilities, which not only helps parents to combine work and family issues more easily but also brings advantages for employers and companies.¹⁶

Reduction in overtime, working time and non-permanent working contracts

Extra hours are an important flexibilisation tool for employers. A reduction in the high amount of overtime hours in Austria (about 350 million) [19] would have positive effects on the labour market. This working time reduction would offer a new distribution for work. New jobs could be generated and part-time workers could increase their working hours more easily. Through a higher rate of taxation, overtime hours should be made more unattractive for employers and always be counterbalanced by compensation time or payments.

Part-time employment functions, like overtime (where Austria is leading the way in Europe), as a flexi-tool for employers. A general reduction in working time, like in Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, would be sufficient and could help to create new jobs [53, 54].

As mentioned above, combinations of atypical working arrangements increase the risk of precarious working and

¹⁴ The Austrian Trade Union proposed such extra wage increases for women in Austria in 2011 [49].

¹⁵ From 2007 to 2011, company-based childcare increased by almost 50 % [51], p. 60.

¹⁶ A representative survey amongst companies in Germany reveals economic advantages for companies with a family-friendly personnel policy and human resources management [52].

living conditions. Part-time and/or non-permanent contracted workers should have a preferential right for applying for newly advertised vacancies within the same company.

Reducing the risks of future precarious conditions

As stated earlier, for most workers in countries where part-time work is socially and legally equal to full-time employment, working part-time does not automatically lead to a precarious situation. But in the case of unemployment or retirement, part-time work reveals its risks, especially in Austria with its strong connection between income and access to social services. For this reason, long-term part-time workers should benefit from higher severance payments as well as taxes for pension funds and unemployment benefits. To guarantee this, part-time workers should receive a plus on their pay-checks up to 10 %.¹⁷ Once more the (state and strength of the) social dialogue is crucial: social partners could negotiate the actual amount of the extra payment as part of the wage rounds, depending on branches and their specific part-time distribution and remuneration. Such a step would help minimise social risks — for both voluntary and involuntary part-time workers — and reduce the flexi-advantage for employers to only hire part-time workers. Paying higher unemployment benefits for part-time workers, especially single parents, would reduce a plethora of social risks in this context, as would minimum wages. This issue should not only be discussed at a national level but, above all, on a European one.

Particularly when it comes to combined atypical working arrangements, such a bonus for special risk should be introduced. It could be paid as a lump sum on entry into the “risky” job or paid as a monthly wage add-on [40].

Conclusion

It is clear to see that part-time work is a current phenomenon of the European labour markets. It is a sign of the on-going trend towards the flexibilisation and differentiation of work. Categorized under atypical working arrangements, part-time work is often connected with precarious working and living conditions for employees. As shown in this article, under certain circumstances, this assumption can be true. The outlined trend toward more flexibility will continue, as will the struggle between employee- and employer-orientated flexibilisation.

In spite of these developments on the labour markets, conventional “normal” work remains the most common form of employment in Austria and Europe as a whole [54, 57].

Work will not dry up, but will only be distributed differently: This conflict of distribution will be one of the specific

¹⁷ The additional wage rate is based on the bonus for precarious work (temporary and subcontracted labour) on the French labour market [55, 56].

disagreements between labour and capital. And part-time work will be one of the major aspects of this discussion.

As Austria serves as the starting point for discussion, whether part-time work is defined as atypical work or not is not the crucial question. The social circumstances for individuals are much more important: Do I have the choice to work full-time or part-time, and if I choose the latter, am I socially protected? If the policies mentioned above are implemented, part-time work could be categorised under normal employment without any uncertainty.

In conclusion, “normal” should not refer to any relations to traditional working patterns. Instead, “normal” should be used for all working arrangements which guarantee a high amount of social security and individual freedom for employees. Flexible working time models need to adopt a more employee-friendly orientation, with more time-autonomy and self-determination being crucial to this. To achieve this goal, flexibility must be managed and controlled politically. As Rodgers (2007) points out:

“It is precisely this combination of institutions and policies which constitutes a social model. (...) While a wide variety of approaches may work in different situations, one important lesson from successful experiences in both Europe and elsewhere is the essential nature of broad participation and social dialogue in the process” [58, p. 8].

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines the following five crucial dimensions for a proper working time: (i) healthy working time, (ii) family friendly working time, (iii) gender equality by working time, (iv) productive working time, and the very important dimension (v) choice and influence regarding working time [59]. For most of Europe’s part-time workers, these goals are still far from being achievable.

Using the changes in the standard working conditions as a major benchmark for debate on labour market developments, researchers often “(...) speak almost exclusively of erosion and crisis rather than of change” [60, p. 41]. Therefore, the implementation of the proposed policies is the first step towards a shift to an employee-friendly modern and flexible labour market.

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