

Part time employees: volunteers or pressed women?

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Recent debate on women's employment has focussed on whether women's lesser participation in employment, compared with men, is due to choice or constraint (Hakim, 1991; 1995; Ginn et al., 1996). Not surprisingly, official statistics on employment have played a part, but statistics on reasons for not seeking full time work have concealed as much as they revealed, because of the way questions have been asked in the Labour Force Survey and the reporting of results.

The argument centres on the extent to which women part timers are 'volunteers', their short hours reflecting a lack of commitment to employment due to preference and internalised gender norms, as Hakim claims, or 'pressed women', who need waged work but have to combine it with unavoidable caring responsibilities, as Ginn et al. argue.

The latter view is consistent with the higher rates of full time work in countries where child care is more affordable and accessible (Joshi, 1992), with the close association between the rate of full time employment and age of the youngest child (Thomas et al., 1994) and with a body of other research on employment and family caring responsibilities (Brannen et al., 1994).

Questions to part timers in the LFS could have provided information on this issue but the quarterly reports in Labour Market Trends, instead of illuminating women's reasons for working part time, have given a misleading impression. The relevant table on part timers lists those who could not find a full time job (14 per cent in 1995), those who were ill or disabled (2 per cent) and students (12 per cent) but groups the remaining 72 per cent under the heading 'Did not want a full time job'. Nearly 80 per cent of women part timers were so 'labelled', compared with 37 per cent of men. This presentation distorts reality by implying that women with domestic/caring responsibilities somehow had more choice than those who were sick or studying, whereas this would not be the case for many of them due to lack of childcare/adultcare facilities. No indication is given that many people categorised under the heading 'Did not want...' might have taken a full time job if caring commitments (and lack of affordable childcare/eldercare facilities) had not prevented them from doing so. Instead, the impression is given that they would not take a full

time job even if a fairy godmother materialised to release them from their domestic tasks.

A more logical (and gender-neutral) way to present the statistics would be to divide part timers into those who say they cannot work full time (for any reason) and those who say they could but prefer not to. Apart from the sociological interest, it is important for policy purposes to distinguish between part timers who prefer part time work and those who would work full time if their circumstances permitted it.

The recent introduction of a supplementary question (in the Autumn quarter only, reported each April) on the reasons for not wanting to work full time is an improvement, in that part timers are asked why they 'Did not want a full time job' (see ONS, 1996, Table 6). Possible reasons include 'domestic commitments' and 'spend more time with family'; nearly 60 per cent of women part timers who 'Did not want...' gave one of these as their reason. However, the presentation of results is still flawed, in that those citing domestic/family reasons continue to be labelled 'Did not want a full time job', in contrast to those who were sick or students.

To return to the issue in dispute, the new information indicates that at least half of women working part time are pressed women who cannot work longer hours. Those who were sick, students, had domestic commitments or could not find a full time job comprised 49 per cent of women part timers. If those giving 'Spend more time with family' were included, the proportion unable to work full time would be 80 per cent. It would be unreasonable to include all of this group as pressed women but it is likely that some of them, at least, were obliged to be at home to help with homework and other family needs. Now that the information on reasons for not seeking full time work will be available annually, it will be interesting to see how the relative proportions of volunteers and pressed women change over time.

Part-time employees and self employed by reason for taking a job (Great Britain, 1995, not seasonally adjusted)

Reasons for taking part-time work(%)	All	Men	Women
Did not want full-time job	72	37	79
of whom:			
Financially secure but want work	6	10	5
Earn enough working part-time	4	6	4
Spend more time with family	23	2	27
Domestic commitments	25	2	30
Another reason	12	17	11
Could not find a full-time job	14	27	11
Student or at school	12	32	8
Ill or disabled	2	3	1

Source: Table 6, Labour Market Trends, April 1996, ONS

The ONS have agreed to look again at how the information on part timers is reported, following representations from the Fawcett Society. Understanding the reasons for part time work will also be improved by the Autumn 1996 LFS, when 'lack of childcare facilities' will be included as a possible reason for working part time.

References

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