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# What research says about part-time work

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A debate is raging in Norway. Is it good for mothers and their children if mothers work part-time? The new president of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), Gerd Kristiansen, doesn't think part-time work is good for society. But what does the research say?

Two subjects can really stir women up: breastfeeding and part-time jobs.

The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) President Gerd Kristiansen recently planted her foot squarely in one of these hornets' nests when she said that Norwegian women hide behind their role as mothers when they choose to work part time. A 41 percent minority of all employed women in Norway have part-time jobs.

Politicians, trade union leaders and part-time working women are riled. They are shocked, liken the remark to bullying, call it condescending and retort that the LO president has failed to grasp the reality of daily life for many women.

Women who work part time feel they have to defend themselves. But it hasn't always been that way.

## **Women integral to the workforce**

Not many decades ago, women were blasted just for taking paid jobs at all. They had to convince everyone they were loving mothers, even though they spent some of the day away from their kids.

The moral tide has turned. Paid jobs are what count. Women's financial independence is a personal necessity for securing a substantial retirement pension or for making do if a divorce is in the cards. It's also a social necessity in a country with only three percent unemployment. Women are an integral part of the work force. Norway counts on the resources and skills of its women.

There are two types of part-time jobs. The first has been forced on employees – these are jobs that are not available as full-time positions. Many in this category are in the health sector. One quarter of all part-timers in the health sector, including one-sixth of all part-time nurses, would prefer to work more, according to a study from 2011. It seems nearly everyone agrees that such involuntary part-time job schemes should be done away with.

But most women who work part time have voluntarily elected to work less than Norway's full work week of 37.5 hours. It's their free decision to work shorter hours that is at the root of the current controversy, especially when the motivation is to spend more time with one's children.

So what is good and what isn't? And who isn't it good for?

Norway's research news website, forskning.no, has written about a number of studies of part-time work in

the country. What does research say about women's choices? What about children – are they better off if their mothers don't put in full days of work outside the home?

### **Part-time solutions don't solve the home/job conflict**

A lot of women in the health sector work part time.

Yet part-time work doesn't alleviate the time-squeeze and conflicting duties between work and family, according to Bente Abrahamsen, a senior researcher at the Oslo and Akershus University College.

Her research has focused on nurses. Part-time nurses reported that it is just as tiring to combine jobs with family as it is for nurses who work full time.

In this case, the conflicts between family and work resulted from the shift work their jobs require, and the times of day they have to work, not whether their positions were full-time or part-time.

### **Women's careers undermined by part-time work**

Several studies have shown that women undermine their careers when they take time away from salaried work, whether by taking the maximum amount of maternity leave or choosing to work part-time after having children.

In theory, part-time workers have the same rights as full-time colleagues. But a study by the researcher Helga Aune at the University of Oslo uncovered numerous examples of unequal treatment. These included income levels, work hours and job seniority.

Employers are not necessarily discriminating against women who have been on fully legitimate leaves, according to sociologist Geir Høgsnes. His study showed that what keeps women from being promoted, and thus earning higher salaries, is a lack of work experience and links to the job.

More full-time working women are satisfied with their work hours compared to part-time working women. A total of 90 percent of mothers with two or more children who work full time claim to be satisfied, according to a study from 2009.

### **Part-time work means lower pensions**

Extensive periods of part-time work constitute a main reason why nine out of ten recipients of a minimum pension in Norway are women. This means that a woman's free choice of part-time options limits her options when she reaches retirement age.

Part-time work and leaves also wind up putting economic pressure on women to work longer before retiring. This is because they are less likely to have earned enough pension points to make use of the option to retire at age 62 without a big cut in benefits. Working more years in their 60s leaves them less time to spend with their grandchildren.

"In hindsight, many who live on a minimum pension would have made other decisions and avoided the part-time trap if they had fully understood its consequences," says Helga Aune.

A study from Statistics Norway and the University of Stavanger shows that long maternity leaves, opting for cash benefits to take care of youngsters at home rather than using kindergartens as well as part-time work are factors that make for leaner years in old age. Researchers conclude that the welfare schemes that give

families more flexibility can come back at women like boomerangs.

However, a researcher at the Oslo and Akershus University College thinks working part time can be a health benefit once you approach retirement age.

### **Mum's full-time job gives dad more space**

Women take nearly 90 percent of their paid maternity leaves, whereas most fathers only take the quota allocated to them by Norwegian authorities.

Still, men participate more in family life than they used to. Men have changed the most in recent years with regard to fatherhood and taking care of their children.

A study shows these changes are mainly due to characteristics of the women they live with. If the woman works full time, men do more housework and become more involved in the care of their kids.

Couples who both work full time are more likely to share child care equally than families where the women are more at home with the kids, according to a study from the Norwegian social research institute NOVA.

Another study shows that 70 percent of couples who both work full time practice gender equality when it comes to housework.

### **Best for the kids?**

An important argument women use for working part time is getting more time to be with their children.

But according to Statistics Norway, women who currently work full time spend more hours with their children than housewives used to do.

Agder Research conducted a survey of 1,300 ten-year-olds in 12 municipalities which showed that children with mothers in full-time jobs are better off than their peers whose mothers work part time. Researcher Ann Christin Nilsen points out that the family economy benefits when mum works full time. More money often equates with additional choices and opportunities.

A SINTEF study of the effects of Norway's cash benefit system showed that children whose parents held paid jobs did better than children with mums at home.

Researchers discovered a clear link between the opportunities women have in the job market and the future opportunities their children face. Women who hold jobs outside home are better role models for their children once they grow up.

However, another study showed that school children with mothers at home perform slightly better academically than children with two full-time employed parents.

"The results of the study indicate that what we offer the children when both mother and father work full time is not enough to compensate for mum," says Mari Rege, a professor of economics at the University of Stavanger.

An international study shows that children with working mothers have poorer eating habits than kids whose mums are homemakers.

But it looks as if the opposite is true in the Nordic countries. A Danish study shows that children are less likely to become obese if their mothers work full time rather than part time.

In Oslo, the Ullevål University Hospital's centre for obese children recommends that parents send their kids to kindergartens. They are more likely to get physical exercise there than at home with mum. "Kindergartens contribute to a healthier lifestyle," says the head of the centre, Magnhild Pollestad.

### **The free choices**

Those who promote the right to individual choices in this issue say families need to find their own solutions to the modern pressures of careers versus family life.

The problem with the choice taken by Norwegian families is that they all tend to head in the same direction: reductions in working hours for women.

Researchers agree that the state must not go too far in encroaching on families' rights to make their own choices. There are plenty of other factors that can be regulated, such as the availability and affordability of kindergartens, salaries for jobs that are traditionally dominated by women and the lengths of paternity leaves.

But within the walls of their homes, couples call the shots. Their freedom of choice tends to follow well-trodden paths. The mother works part time and the father works full time. She is cared for and he's the breadwinner.

### **Traditions can change**

This tradition is rooted in our culture and our conceptions of what a mother and father should be. Social scientists say this is what dominates our choices in this context.

The culture of Norwegian couples collides with the dominant political goals and the state's initiatives to get women working full time. But Norwegian couples tend to go along with whatever governmental initiatives are passed down to them.

Official equal status policies and stronger welfare schemes lead the way and affect the choices men and women make.

Research on Norwegian families in past decades has shown that improvements in incentives change traditions and the conceptions of what constitutes a good family life.

[Read the article in Norwegian at forskning.no](#) [8].

 [A large 41 percent minority of all employed women in Norway have part-time jobs. \(Photo Colourbox\)](#)

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Glenn Ostling

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