

The french 35-hour week: does it make it easier for parents to combine paid work with family responsibilities?

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The 35-hour law (in reality it is a 1,600 hours a year law), established in 1999, redefined working time regulations. Against a background of high unemployment (around 12 per cent), its main objective was to create employment. However, at a rhetorical level, the French adoption of a 35-hour working week was also part of the search for a better work-life balance. Improvements in the social dialogue were also assumed to produce on-going benefits (Brunhes et al., 2001).

More Flexible Working Hours in Return for a Reduction in Working Time

For a better understanding of the impact of this law on the strategies elaborated by working parents to combine their job and their family life, it is important to put emphasis on the economic context and on the trade-offs and compromises that have been made between the state and the employers¹. Firstly it is important to keep in mind that most of the employers were very reluctant about this law and strongly opposed the view of the government when the law was passed by 1999 (they argued this would make it more costly for any company seeking to rationalise its operations to face up to globalised competition). However, they have been obliged to come to terms with the implementation of the law. According to the principle of compensation, they have benefited from a decrease in social contributions based on low wages and in many collective agreements wages have been frozen for a certain period of time. For a significant proportion of part-timers and low-paid workers (SMIC), the outcome was a decrease in real wages, which in turn impacts on the choice of the child care arrangement. Moreover, the legislation on working hours has been made more flexible and diversity was the rule in introducing new forms of work organisation (Dayan, 2002).

Against the background of imbalanced power-relationships between employers and employees (except in the public sector where trade-unions are more able to negotiate with the administrators), employees have sometimes been obliged to accept flexible working schedule and practices that they have traditionally objected to: therefore their perception of the RTT depend largely on the methods of work organisation that they are familiar with, but also on the type and extent of their social and work integration.

Moreover, the 35 working hours are calculated on a average on a yearly-basis, which means that employees can sometimes work 42 hours a week or more for a few months and much less during other periods of time. Within the same company, a large range of solutions can also be developed. This has contributed to reinforce the general movement towards individualisation and fragmentation of working schedules. As far as management is concerned, for instance, the

¹ By June 2001, 62 per cent of employees working in companies having more than 20 employees were working on average 35 hours per week. The next part of the law was due in 2002: the 35-hour rule is to apply to small firms too.

units of reference are working days, which means that they can get a day off every two weeks for example (or have a longer period of vacation). But, at the same time, they can go on putting in a huge number of working hours each day which does not help to devote more time to family obligations. Parents working at the management level often complain that their work load has dramatically increased, work has become more intense, they have to do the same amount of work in a shorter time span than before and they feel more stressed than before.

A few results drawn of our research among families with young children: a wide range of effects

According to a recent study (Doisneau, 2000) on the effects of RTT on life both at and outside work, work organisation features appear to be the determining factors in how satisfied workers are, more than their own personal circumstances or those of their companies. This is partly borne out by the results of our research² conducted among working parents (fathers or mothers) *with at least one child aged under six*, working in a firm which has adopted the RTT³ within the framework of the first Aubry act.

When asked "*Do you feel that the law on the 35-hour week has made it easier for you to combine your family life with your working life?*", almost six out of ten parents working in a firm or establishment which had already adopted the law answered positively. A statistical analysis of the data showed the most discriminant variables in the replies to this question. As Tables 1, 2 and 3 show, conditions of employment, and in particular those relating to patterns of working schedules, are what contributes the most to influence people's perception of the impact on their family lives.

- Working atypical hours (early in the morning, late in the evening or at night⁴) regularly or occasionally considerably reduces the probability that workers will judge RTT to have had a positive effect on their family life: among those who work during 'normal' hours, 64 per cent consider that the RTT has improved their daily life compared to only 50 per cent for the others. This actually confirms the major impact which atypical working hours have on ways of managing childcare, which becomes more complicated in view of the opening hours of childcare facilities;

- One of our hypotheses was the following: as far as the impact of the 35 hour law on the reconciliation of unpaid work and paid work is concerned, there is a split between those employees who had already been benefiting, before the implementation of the law, from "family-friendly" policies at the workplace and those who are working in less or not family-friendly environments where, for instance, working schedules don't fit well childcare arrangements. This hypothesis was partly validated by the results of our research. Working parents were asked to assess the measures implemented in their company in favour of employees having family responsibilities and to give a mark to their employer. The question was as follows: "*In your opinion, does your employer or your immediate superior or do those*

² This research has been funded by CNAF and DARES (Ministry of Solidarity and Social Affairs) and conducted under the scientific supervision of J. Fagnani (MATISSE, University of Paris 1) and M. T. Letablier (Centre d'Etudes de l'Emploi).

³ The families in our sample are recipients of six different CAFs (Local Family Allowance Fund). In each one, there is a representative sample of families with at least one child aged under six, who are recipients of the local CAF. Among this sample (n=3,216), we were able to focus on parents already working 35 hours on average per week.

⁴ *ie.* before 8 AM or after 6 PM.

running your company take account of the fact that you have one or more dependent children very well or not at all?". The scores were from 1, not at all, to 5, very well (see Table 5). It is illustrating that among those employees who rank the employer at the top (4 and 5), 76 per cent deem that the RTT has made it easier to combine their job and their family life; this is the case of only 43 per cent of those who rank their employer at the bottom. Not surprisingly, those who were already "privileged" as far as policies at the workplace are concerned are much more likely to be satisfied than the others.

As Table 4 illustrates, parents appear to have benefited much more from the reduction in working time when their working schedules have been negotiated with their employer or chosen by themselves. On the contrary, when the organisation of working time has been imposed on them, only half of them say that it is easier than before to balance their job and their family life (compared to respectively 66 per cent and 63 per cent). These parents often work in companies where flexibility, associated with largely unpredictable (or given at short notice), atypical and variable working hours, has been imposed to enhance organisational effectiveness. Therefore for them, the RTT has not offset the drawbacks entailed by the change in working schedules and sometimes, it has even aggravated their childcare organisation.

On the other hand, it is illustrative that occupational status, level of education, or level of earnings do not differentiate the answers.

The results of our research corroborate those of a study on part-timers (Bué, 2002) which provides evidence that reducing the working time is not *per se* a means to better balancing of a job and family life. When working hours are imposed and don't fit the organisation of family life, women with children have to cope with more difficulties than mothers working on a full-time basis but benefiting from "normal" working hours or from working schedules which have been negotiated with their employer. Another research which has investigated the employees' assessment of the new arrangement (Méda, Orain, 2002) demonstrates that women with children under twelve appear to have benefited more from the RTT than the others as long as it had not had too detrimental an effect on working conditions or the organisation of working time. People who already had variable and unpredictable working hours and the less skilled workers had a poorer opinion of the RTT than the others, especially when the RTT had made work conditions more difficult.

To summarize : Some outcomes

- In big companies, six out of ten of employees (having a child aged under 6 years old) are satisfied and consider that the RTT has made it easier to combine a job and their family life. They report that they have been spending more time with their children since the reduction in working time. However, the enduring asymmetry between the sexes in family involvement has not been affected by the reduction in working time.
- Opinions vary greatly according to the terms of the agreement that were applied to the company within the scope of the legislation.
- A split between those employees who had already been benefiting, before the implementation of the law, from "family-friendly" policies at the workplace and those who were working in less family-friendly environments where working schedules don't fit well childcare arrangements.

- Women with young children appear to have benefited more from the RTT than the others as long as it had not had too detrimental an effect on working conditions or the organisation of working time. People who already had variable and unpredictable working hours and the less skilled workers had a poorer opinion of the RTT than the others, especially when the RTT had made work conditions more difficult.
- Increased work-loads for middle-level and high-level management
- Less sociable working hours for employees working in the service sector, retail sector, catering...
- Fathers are consistently most likely to take care of their youngest child when they have different working hours (which don't overlap) than their wives
- 'Domino effect' on child care providers
- It has reinforced the cleavage between 'integrated' salaried workers and those who have to come to terms with high professional constraints or very demanding jobs.

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Table 1: Combining paid work and unpaid work: has the reduction of working time made it easier than before? Breakdown according to working schedules

	YES	NO	Total
Have atypical working hours	50%	50%	100%
Don't have atypical working hours	64%	36%	100%
TOTAL (n= 658)	58%	42%	100%

p < 0.001 (significant at 0,1%)

Source : Enquête sur la conciliation de la vie familiale et de la vie professionnelle, 2000.

Table 2: Has the Reduction of Working Time Made It Easier Than Before? Breakdown according to the Mark Given to the Employer

	YES	NO	Total
1 and 2. Not at all and Slightly	43%	57%	100%
3. Moderately	57%	43%	100%
4 and 5. Quite a Bit and Extremely	76%	24%	100%
TOTAL (n= 658)	58%	42%	100%

p < 0.001 (significant at 0,1%)

Source : Enquête sur la conciliation de la vie familiale et de la vie professionnelle, 2000.

Table 3: Has the Reduction of Working Time Made It Easier Than Before ? Breakdown according to the actual number of working hours per week

	YES	NO	TOTAL
34 hours or less	21.7%	21.6%	21.6%
Between 35 et 38 hours	52.5%	39.8%	47.2%
39 hours and more	25.7%	38.7%	31.2%
TOTAL (n=658)	100%	100%	100%

p < 0.001 (significant at 0,1%)

Source : Enquête sur la conciliation de la vie familiale et de la vie professionnelle, 2000.

**Table 4: Has The Reduction of Working Time Made It Easier Than Before ?
 Breakdown according to the question "Have Your Working Hours Been Imposed,
 Chosen By You Or Negotiated?"**

	IMPOSED	CHOSEN BY YOU	NEGOTIATED	OTHER
YES	50.6	62.5	66.2	67.5
NO	49.4	37.5	33.8	32.5
<i>100,0</i>	100.0 <i>49.6</i>	100.0 <i>11.7</i>	100.0 <i>32.8</i>	100.0 <i>5.8</i>

p < 0.005 (significant at 0,5%)

Source : Enquête sur la conciliation de la vie familiale et de la vie professionnelle, 2000.

**Table 5: Has the Reduction of Working Time Made It Easier Than Before ?
 Differences between the public sector and the private sector**

	YES	NO	Total
Public sector	67,7	32,3	100,0
Private sector	55,2	44,8	100,0

I. Parents Who Find It Easier to Balance Work and Family Life

Significant modalities of variables*	Value test	Statisti. Signifi.
Mark Given to the Employer: 5 (« Extremely well »)	4.71	0.000
Reduction of working hours on a weekly basis	3.58	0.000
Standard working hours	3.23	0.001
Works on average 35 et 38 h. per week	3.12	0.001
Working hours negotiated with the employer	2.98	0.001
Mark Given to the Employer: 4 (« Well »)	2.98	0.001
No atypical working hours	2.80	0.003
Support for childcare at the Workplace	1.97	0.024

* *Modalités nominales significatives au seuil de 5%.*

II. Parents Who Don't Find It Easier To Balance Work And Family Life

Mark Given to the Employer: 1 (« No at all »)	3.68	0.000
No reduction of working hours on a weekly basis	3.58	0.000
Working hours imposed by the employer	3.49	0.000
Atypical working hours	3.23	0.001
Mark Given to the Employer: 2 (« Slightly »)	3.03	0.001
Non standard organisation of working schedules	2.80	0.003
Works on average more than 35 h. per week	2.20	0.014

Abstract

The French 35 hour working law and the
work-life balance of parents

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Does the law that mandates a 35-hour week make it easier for parents to combine paid work with family responsibilities? Its main objective was to create employment. However, at a rhetorical level, the French adoption of a 35-hour working week was also part of the search for a better work-life balance. Results of a study carried out among a representative sample of working parents with young children show a wide range of effects: the impact on their daily life is dependent, in particular, on the working time arrangements in their company and on the child care arrangements that are available to them. Work organisation features appear to be the determining factors in how satisfied these parents are, more than their own personal circumstances or the main characteristics of the companies. Particular emphasis will be placed on negative side-effects as far as child care is concerned. I will also point out the ambivalent impact of this law on the division of labour within the family.

In fact, the different ways in which this law has been implemented have revealed strong inequalities in working conditions. On the other hand, the ways in which workers are taking or not taking advantage of the reduction in their working time depend on their attitudes towards their job and on the perceptions of their role in the family.