

# Who is working and when?

Fact sheet about part-time employment in the Nordic countries



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# Causes and consequences of part-time employment in the Nordic countries

**In the Nordic countries, part-time work is much more common among women than men. This affects both the gender equality in the labour market and the economic opportunities available to women and men. This fact sheet reviews the causes and consequences of part-time work in the Nordic region.**

The Nordic countries have higher female employment rates than the EU average, yet part-time work is much more common among women than men, which affects women's economic independence. The gender difference in number of hours worked per week is an expression of the different conditions women and men face in the labour market and society at large. The unequal distribution of part-time employment is therefore a key aspect in the work to achieve gender equality in the labour market.

At the request of Nordic Council of Ministers, Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK) has reviewed and analysed the issue of part-time employment in the Nordic countries. This factsheet summarises the findings presented in three research reports in the area.

## Who Works Part Time?

About 30 per cent of the women in Norway, Iceland and Sweden work part time. In Denmark, the figure is 35.3 per cent, and in Finland only 20.5 per cent of the women work part time. Finland's low rate is partly due to part time jobs being more marginalised and more concentrated to low-skill occupations in that country. Yet there

*"Experts also say that women's part-time employment is closely linked to men's high rates of full-time employment. Focusing only on women's part-time work will not help solve the underlying problem. Instead, there should be a focus on the distribution of part-time employment and family responsibilities."*

are also some historical explanations. Women's participation in the labour market rose earlier in Finland, which has influenced the employment rate. Part-time employment is significantly less common among men in the Nordic countries, although the rate is rising. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, about 15 per cent of the men

work part time, and in Finland and Iceland the rates are 9.9 per cent and 11.8 per cent, respectively.

In all Nordic countries, women with low levels of education are more likely to work part time than women with more education. This pattern is not as pronounced among men. Women in the age group 25–54 years are more likely to work part time than women of other ages, while men who work part time tend to be either younger or older.

## Causes of Part-time Employment

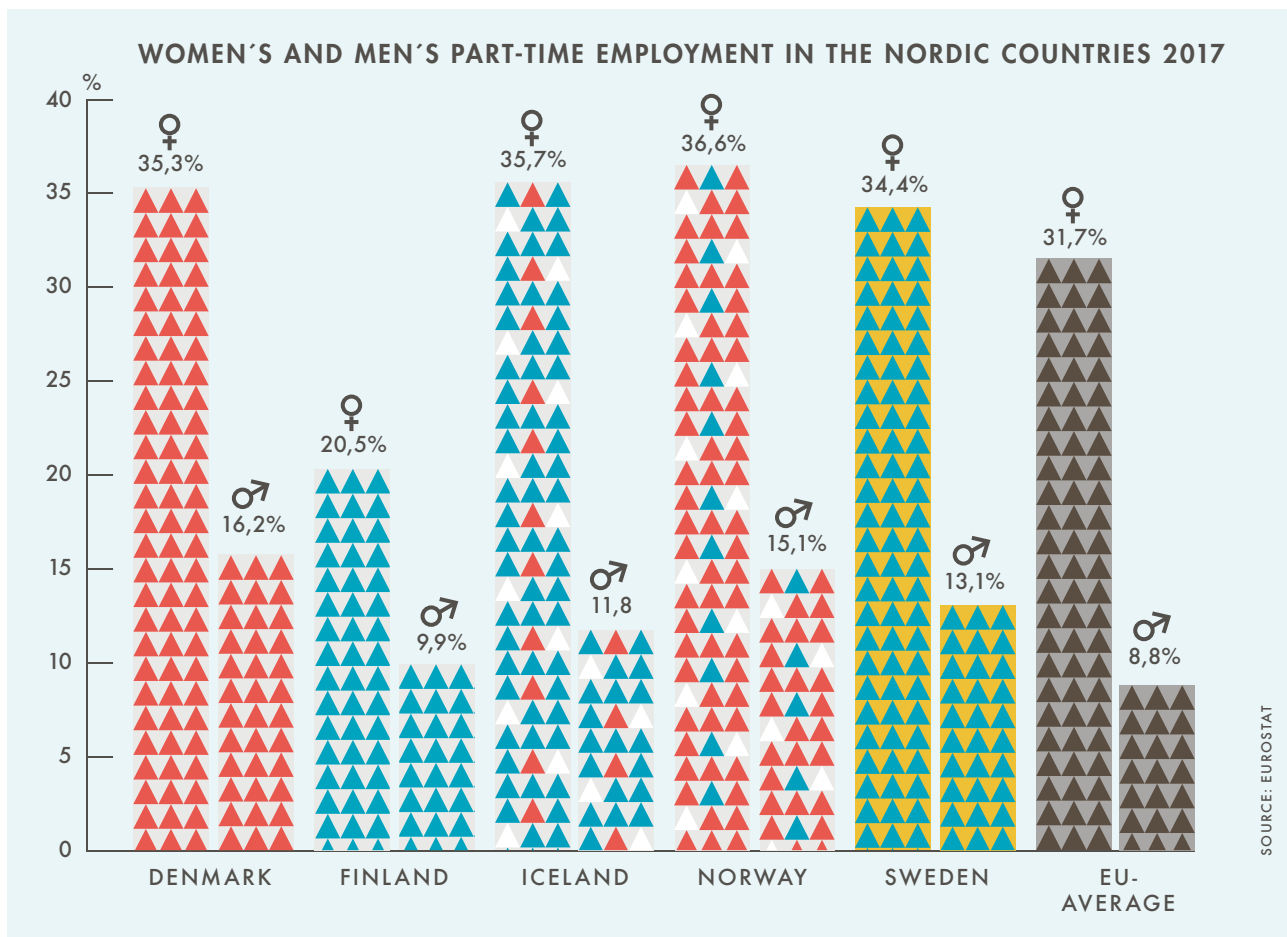
Part-time employment is more common among women for several reasons, including greater family responsibilities, health issues and the organisation of workplaces. Women's part-time employment is strongly linked to the fact that women tend to carry a heavier load than men when it comes to family and care responsibilities. There are norms and values prescribing that women should experience a conflict between being employed and taking care of their homes and families, which makes them apt to engage less in paid work.

Another reason is that a part-time culture has emerged in female-dominated sectors such as child and elderly care in the Nordic countries. This culture leads to an expectation, and acceptance, of part-time employment among women.

Many female part-time workers also describe difficulties finding a full-time job. Foreign-born women and women with low levels of education are particularly likely to work part time involuntarily. In some female-dominated sectors, there are employers who offer few or no opportunities for full-time work, and thus, job applicants who would prefer to work full time feel forced to accept part-time contracts.

The discussions about involuntary part-time work have attracted a lot of attention in the Nordic countries. In Norway and Sweden, attempts have been made to create more full-time positions in for example the care sector, in which there is a need for more staff. However, most of these initiatives have been subject to the employer's discretion and preferences. In many cases, they have also been obstructed by labour laws and collective agreements.

The rate of involuntary part-time workers varies greatly across the Nordic countries. Finland and Iceland top the list, while Denmark and Norway have the lowest rates. When the unemployment rate goes up, so does the



share of people who work part time involuntarily. This became particularly visible in the wakes of the financial crises in the 1990s and in 2008.

Health problems and disabilities are other reasons women work part time instead of full time. Health problems can in some cases arise from attempts to combine full-time employment with family life, or they can be caused by the way work is often organised in the female-dominated health and care sectors. Research shows that women's experiences of insufficiency in both the labour market and the family domain are important causes of part-time employment and reduced health.

Male part-time workers are less likely to state family life as a reason for their choice, with the exception of men in Finland. Instead, men tend to report that they work part time for health reasons or because they are in school.

Employers may offer part-time rather than full-time contracts for several reasons. For example, access to part-time staff often makes it easier to adapt to short-term fluctuation in staffing needs. The desire of employers to reduce salary costs and thus increase profits is also an important factor.

### **How Are Women's Financial Situations and Pensions Affected?**

Part-time employment affects women's financial situations both immediately and in the long term. One

immediate consequence is less money to spend, and in the longer term the women may end up with flatter salary trajectories and lower pensions. A study shows that almost all women and men in the Nordic region are satisfied with their jobs, whether they work part or full time. However, in several of the countries, the dissatisfaction rates are higher among part-time workers. A relatively large share of these individuals report having had problems paying their bills in the last three years. Among women in Denmark and Sweden, part-time workers are more likely to be unhappy with their income. The share of people who say their financial situation is difficult is particularly large among women who work part time in Finland.

An extended period of part-time employment may affect a person's future pension, but the effect differs between the Nordic countries. A comparison shows that the difference in future pension between part-time and full-time work is small in Denmark and Norway. In these countries, having worked full time for most of one's career has a greater effect on the pension than having worked part-time for a period. In addition, the pension systems in Denmark and Norway compensate people for time they have spent at home raising children. In Denmark, parts of the pension system also compensate people for lower incomes. In Finland, Iceland and Sweden, a woman's pension is 4–6 per cent lower if she

has worked part time for 10 years. In these countries, there is a stronger correlation between pensions and the life-time number of hours worked in life.

### **Part-time Employment in the Autonomous Areas**

Women in the Faroe Islands and Åland have higher part-time employment rates than women elsewhere in the Nordic region – 49 per cent and 45.9 per cent, respectively. These are high rates even when compared with countries in the rest of Europe. In fact, only Switzerland and the Netherlands have higher rates. A small study in which Faroese were interviewed about their reasons for working part time shows that although most of the women had chosen to work part time, the decisions had been made within the framework of social structures and cultural expectations, as well as individual circumstances. For example, motherhood and the expectations that come with it were important to the interviewed women, and their participation in the labour market was constrained by family responsibilities.

In Greenland, there is no significant difference in part-time employment rates between women and men. The Greenlandic part-time employment rates vary more between urban and rural areas than between women and men, as those who live in the countryside are more likely to work part time than people in urban areas.

### **Important to Broaden the Perspective**

To increase the opportunities for women to work full time, there is a need for structural solutions, such as an expansion of child and elderly care services. Experts also say that women's part-time employment is closely linked to men's high rates of full-time employment. Focusing only on women's

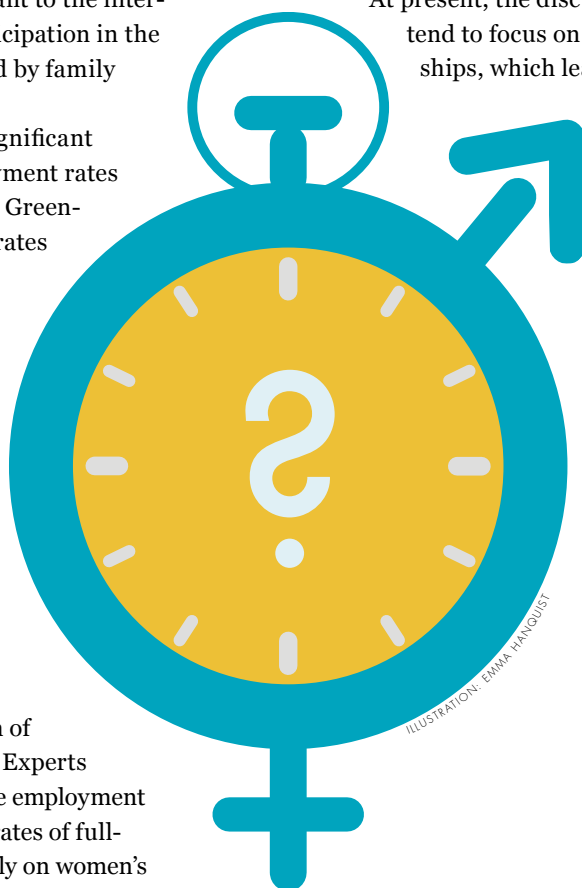
part-time work will not help solve the underlying problem. Instead, there should be a focus on the distribution of part-time employment and family responsibilities.

Women's part-time work is often discussed from a gender equality perspective where the negative effects are emphasised. One consequence of the discussion is that full-time work is made the only desirable form of employment, which reduces the space for discussions for example about a general reduction of work hours. The number of hours worked by men tends to become the norm against which women's participation in the labour market should be compared. As a result, some questions related to gender equality have become difficult to ask. For example, is it necessarily the case that women should work more, or should maybe men work less?

Finally, there is a need for more studies on part-time employment with a focus on not only gender but also on other possible determinants, such as class and ethnicity.

At present, the discussions on part-time employment tend to focus on women in heterosexual relationships, which leaves less room for discussions

on part-time employment in other groups of women. This is a perspective that deserves thorough attention.



#### **SOURCE:**

Within the framework of the project *Part-Time Work in the Nordic Region*, Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK) has made a thorough review of part-time employment in the Nordic countries. The aim of the project was to provide policymakers and the social partners with research-based information that can be used to make the labour market more gender equal. From 2013 to 2016, NIKK produced three research

reports focusing on the reasons behind the unequal distribution of part-time employment and how it affects the economic resources of women and men. The third report focused on the autonomous areas Greenland, Åland and the Faroe Islands. This factsheet is based on the three reports, which are available at [nikk.no](http://nikk.no).



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