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### Article information:

To cite this document:

Lenka Formánková Alena Křížková , (2015), "Flexibility trap – the effects of flexible working on the position of female professionals and managers within a corporate environment", *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 30 Iss 3 pp. 225 - 238

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/GM-03-2014-0027>

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# Flexibility trap – the effects of flexible working on the position of female professionals and managers within a corporate environment

The effects  
of flexible  
working

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Received 18 March 2014  
Revised 7 October 2014  
Accepted 6 January 2015

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to analyse the experience of female part-time professionals with employee and managerial positions with the utilisation of flexible work arrangements in a corporate environment in the country with a full-time dominated work culture. The data represent a rare case study of the work environment in a Czech branch of one multinational company. This paper focusses on the position of female employees working part-time in professional and managerial positions. The reason for such an arrangement is their attempt to combine career and care for pre-school children. This paper evaluates the effects of flexible work policies in an environment where part-time work for female professionals is rarely available and, therefore, precious. In particular, this paper discusses conditions under which these arrangements are available and its impact on gender equality.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper represents a rare case-study of an organisational environment. The seven analysed interviews derive from a larger study on the corporate environment which included 35 interviews and a series of participatory observations. In the analysis, the following questions are discussed: What is the position of employees working within flexible working arrangements in a specific corporate culture? Which aspects of flexible working arrangements affect the professional recognition and evaluation of the employees? To what extent and how do flexible working arrangements affect employee satisfaction with their working and private lives?

**Findings** – The data reveal the diverse and often subtle forms of discrimination and exploitation of working mothers, who use the flexible working arrangement as a work-family reconciliation strategy. Female employees working with alternative working arrangements do not have equal bargaining power in comparison to other employees, regardless of whether they are professionals, and sometimes in managerial positions. At the formal level, the part-time professionals are restricted in pay and in access to the company benefits. In the informal relations within the workplace, their work lacks of sufficient recognition of colleagues and superiors. Overall, part-time work for female professionals and managers leads to an entrapment between the needs of their family and the expectations of their employer.

**Practical implications** – The research reveals the practical limitation in introducing policies the work-life reconciliation policies. The results show the need to focus on promoting better conditions for

This article was written as part of the research project “Changes in partnership and family forms and arrangements from the life course perspective” (grant no. P404/10/0021), funded by the Czech Science Foundation and with the support of long-term strategic development of research organisation RVO: 68378025. Both authors work at the Institute of Sociology AS CR, v.v.i. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for the valuable comments.



employees working part-time. Also, it shows that managerial and highly demanding professional positions can be executed on a part-time basis if the work environment is open towards accepting this arrangement. Moreover, the findings outline the possibilities of developing workplace practices in the Czech Republic in a woman-friendly direction.

**Social implications** – Specific legislative arrangements should be enacted, providing better protection for employees in non-standard employment. At the same time, the incentives for employers to enable part-time working arrangements should be provided.

**Originality/value** – The amount of research on female professionals working part-time or from home is rather limited in context of the post-communist countries. The paper discusses the “double” tokenism of the women working in the leadership positions and at the same time in flexible working arrangements in the full-time working culture.

**Keywords** Tokenism, Czech Republic, Gender stereotypes, Flexible working, Gender discrimination, Part-time workers

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The gender dynamics of part-time employment has been discussed by a wide range of scholars (Lewis, 2006; den Dulk and Peper, 2007), although most of the research on flexible working arrangements was on marginalised female workers in the secondary labour market (Kalleberg, 2000, 2009; Vosko *et al.*, 2009). The amount of research on female professionals working part-time or from home is limited (Lawrence and Corwin, 2003; Dick and Nadin, 2006; Dick and Hyde, 2006), especially in the context of post-communist countries with traditions of full-time employment and, therefore, very few part-time employees.

In comparison with older European Union countries, the post-socialist Czech Republic has a low percentage of men and women working part-time (only 5.8 per cent of all employed are working part-time, and 75 per cent of them are women; Eurostat, 2014). Most people in the Czech Republic are employed with fixed and full-time work hours (Höhne *et al.*, 2010; Vohlídalová and Formánková, 2012). The Czech Labour Code has provided flexible working arrangements since 2006; however, these policies are not applied in most Czech workplaces. Some organisations have introduced flexible working hours, but part-time work and working from home are still rare; Czech employers offer part-time work mostly to marginalised workers in the secondary labour market (Hora, 2009; Vohlídalová and Formánková, 2012). The problem with flexible employment rests in inadequate lawful protection and is unfavourable in comparison to full-time employment. Even though flexibility and the equal treatment of part-time work are incorporated in European Union directives, the low availability of these schemes in the Czech Republic results in the feminisation and marginalisation of these employees (Vohlídalová and Formánková, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the experience of female part-time professionals on employee and managerial position with the utilisation of flexible work arrangements in a corporate environment in the country with a full-time dominated work culture. The data represent a rare case study of the work environment in a Czech branch of one multinational company. This paper focusses on the position of female employees working part-time in professional and managerial positions. The reason for such an arrangement is their attempt to combine career and care for pre-school children. This paper evaluates the effects of flexible work policies in an environment where part-time

work for female professionals is rarely available and, therefore, precious. In particular, this paper discusses conditions under which these arrangements are available and its impact on gender equality. The findings reveal the practical limitation in introducing the work-life reconciliation policies in the company culture. Also, it discusses the “double” tokenism of the women working in the leadership positions and, at the same time, in flexible working arrangements in the full-time dominated work culture.

### Flexible working arrangements in the organisational context

In the traditionally male-dominated workplace, the “ideal” worker is “unencumbered”, working continuously and full-time, not allowing any interference from family matters (Acker, 1990; Lewis, 2001). As this model still persists in many workplaces, high-ranked professional positions in particular are often seen as incompatible with family life (Lewis *et al.*, 2007).

Family-friendly policies – e.g. part-time or other flexible working arrangements – offered by the employer are often not enough to ensure that parents are able to successfully combine work and family life (Hochschild, 1997; Lewis *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, work-life reconciliation policies, although targeted at both parents, are not gender neutral (Burnett *et al.*, 2010). When a work-life reconciliation policy is introduced in a company, it is assumed that it will be women who will take it up. An organisational environment is very complex in terms of working conditions, and certain vital aspects need to be considered:

- the provision of alternative employment arrangements;
- conditions under which the opportunities for flexible working hours or place of work are implemented and the way they are negotiated; and
- the status of such jobs, etc.

In whatever ways employers offer flexible working arrangements to reconcile work and family life, the design of the arrangements reinforces gender stereotypes for female workers (Lewis *et al.*, 2007). As Acker (1990, 1992, 2006) argues, all organisations have inequality regimes which are reproduced in formal processes as well as in informal interactions (Acker, 2006). Even though there is an egalitarian goal, certain inequalities persist because of the unequal division of power and control in the company.

An employee working within alternative working arrangements is often in a marginalised position in the organisation (Hochschild, 1997). They can end up in a trap of low remuneration, involuntary underemployment, work insecurity and discrimination (McGinnity and McManus, 2007; Beck, 2000). Simpson (1998) points out that an assessment of one’s work commitment is often based on the number of work hours put in. She refers to a corporate environment in which individual employees are evaluated on the basis of their overtime work as a culture of “competitive presenteeism”. A competitive corporate culture increases demands on the length of time spent at work, creating only limited career opportunities for those who use alternative work arrangements. In any such organisational culture, part-time work and home-based work are logically evaluated as less important, and people perceive such employees as inferior. As a result, part-time employees are often not considered for promotions or professional development and may even be considered inferior in terms of their quality of work (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2003).

When the number of part-time employees in an organisation is limited, they additionally deal with the negative consequences of standing out as tokens. [Kanter Moss \(1977\)](#) in her classic study of the organisational environment defines token status using three main conditions. First, as there are few such employees, tokens are over-observed. This high visibility generates increased pressure on performance, which may be met by overachieving ([Kanter, 1977](#)). Second, token persons are seen in opposition to the rest of the employees. To maintain the notion of a polarity between the two groups, the differences of token persons from the dominant group are exaggerated. Polarisation, thus, leads to the isolation of token members from the larger group, especially in informal contexts. Third, individual characteristics of token people are misperceived because of stereotypes about the token group.

Tokens react to the pressures from the dominant group in two ways. Their first strategy is to accept and assimilate to their stereotyped image, which can subsequently lead to “role entrapment” ([Kanter, 1977](#)). A second strategy is to challenge the stereotype on almost every occasion. Tokens often find it easier to conform to expectations ([Kanter, 1977](#)). Kanter’s theory has been criticised for being blind to gender categories. Among many others, [Yoder \(1991\)](#) argues that, unlike men who often benefit from their visibility as tokens in feminised working environments, women more often face the negative consequences of tokenism, especially in male-dominated occupations considered inappropriate for women.

### **The availability of flexible working arrangements in the Czech Republic**

The majority of the Czech population considers part-time employment as a work-life reconciliation policy for mothers of pre-school children ([Höhne et al., 2010](#)), even though Czech employers do not fully recognise the need for flexible working arrangements for the work-life balance of their employees ([Plasová, 2008](#)). Full-time employment remains the major type of employment in the Czech Republic with fixed working hours and location. The following flexible working arrangements are covered by this legislation:

- flexible working hours;
- working time account;
- part-time work; and
- compressed work week and home-based work (e.g. telework).

Working arrangements discussed later in the text are addressed in more detail.

Under the rubric of flexible working hours (flex-work), the legislative framing allows to choose the beginning and end of one’s shift, but the person is required to be at the workplace for the contracted daily, weekly or monthly work hours. The working regime has to be agreed upon by both employee and employer, and the employer sets the core working hours during which the employee must be at work (Labour Code No. 262/2006 Coll.). Concerning working from home, the Labour Code only notes that the workplace should be specified in an employment contract. From the perspective of the employee, overtime work is not compensated by the employer (Labour Code No. 262/2006 Coll.).

When we look at the legislative framing of part-time employment, the only regulation associated with part-time work is related to wages that should be set in a way that corresponds to the shorter working hours. However, overtime work is compensated only if the workload exceeds the full-time equivalent. Therefore, part-time employees are

rarely compensated when working above their contractual hours. Employees providing care for children and relatives can demand a reduction of working hours. Concerning home-based work, the Labour Code only states that the workplace should be specified in the employment contract. From the perspective of the employee, overtime work is not compensated by the employer (Labour Code No. 262/2006 Coll.).

According to Eurostat, 32.7 per cent of women and 9.8 per cent of men in the European Union 28, in 2014, have part-time work arrangements. Part-time employment in the Czech Republic does not follow the European trend as indicated by very low part-time rates (e.g. part-time employment as percentage of total employment): in the Czech Republic, only 11 per cent of women and 3.3 per cent of men work part-time, and other types of flexible jobs are even rarer. However, we do see a trend of the rising prevalence of part-time employment, especially within the female population.

However, the question might still be asked why the level of flexible working arrangements is then so low. One reason could be that demand does not meet the supply (e.g. less than 10 per cent of employers offer part-time or flexible working regimes to all categories of its employees) (Plasová, 2008). Another reason could be that part-time work is often connected with lower job quality and worse working conditions (Kuchařová *et al.*, 2006; Vohlídalová and Formánková, 2012). However, some Czech mothers still see part-time work as the best way to balance work and family, while at the same time often having to sacrifice some job security and quality (Plasová, 2008). Autonomously determined flexible working regimes are available more at decision-making levels and, therefore, are more accessible for Czech men (Víznerová and Vohlídalová, 2007); thus, this kind of regime often means longer working hours, which can deepen the imbalance rather than solve it. The few part-time positions available in the Czech Republic are generally taken by people already marginalised in the labour market, such as disabled, low educated or people in pre-retirement ages (Hora, 2009).

The use of flexible forms of employment as a tool to combine career and family expectations in the Czech Republic is differentiated by gender and the presence of pre-school-age children. In 2008, of those with children under 7 years old, the percentage of men working part-time was 0.3 per cent, whereas for women, it was 17.6 per cent. However, according to 60 per cent of the Czech population, part-time employment is considered ideal for mothers of children between the age of 3 and 6 years; in 2010, more than 50 per cent of Czech women with a child under the age of 3 years and 75 per cent of the mothers of children between the age of 3 and 6 years had fixed and full-time work hours (Höhne *et al.*, 2010; CSO, 2011).

The lack of availability of flexible working arrangements in the Czech Republic can be partly explained by the tradition of a long parental leave, which is deeply rooted in Czech culture. The three-year parental leave period is utilised by most Czech mothers. This period can be extended for subsequent children without taking up employment between the births (Kuchařová *et al.*, 2006). Another work-family reconciliation strategy could be provided by the parental leave being shared by fathers. However, at present, a mere 1.5 per cent of Czech fathers resort to this model (CSO, 2013). Research has shown that the long parental leave, however, can become an unemployment trap for women (Gornick *et al.*, 1997; Křížková *et al.*, 2011). For those women who wish to return to work earlier, public childcare services provide only a few places for children under the age of 3 years (Hašková *et al.*, 2012). Women, who seek to pursue their careers, or at least maintain their qualifications during the parental leave, may opt for a form of part-time



work or a combination of home-based and in-office work. The efforts of women to avoid a long parental leave to prevent subsequent isolation from the labour market reveal itself as a major factor in the analysis below.

### **Sample description and methodology used**

A case study of one organisational environment allowed for the mapping of the personal experiences of female professionals on employee and managerial positions working under part-time arrangements within a corporate environment in the Czech Republic. The data collected were part of a larger study of corporate environments, which included 35 interviews and a series of participatory observations carried out during a six-month period in the Prague branch of a multinational food-processing company.

The analysis is based on seven semi-structured interviews with part-time employees and six months of intensive participatory observation. In the analysis, the following questions are discussed:

- Q1.* What is the position of employees working within flexible working arrangements in a specific corporate culture?
- Q2.* Which aspects of flexible working arrangements affect the professional recognition and evaluation of the employees?
- Q3.* To what extent and how do flexible working arrangements affect employee satisfaction with their working and private lives?

The larger study, initiated by the company's human resource (HR) department, sought to examine attitudes of executives and professionals towards flexible working arrangements. The purpose of the study was to contribute to the design of a company-level project introducing flexible working arrangements to as many employees in specific situations (e.g. illness, care-giving) as possible, while causing the lowest possible economic burden to the company.

Most interview contacts were provided in close cooperation with the company's HR department, whereas some were obtained through a snowballing technique. All seven employees working within part-time arrangements at the time of data collection participated in the study. Because no men were working under such an arrangement at the time of data collection, no data on male experiences could be collected.

With the approval of the informants, an audio recording and written transcript of all interviews were completed. The length of the recording varied between 45 and 70 minutes. The data were managed and analysed with Atlas.ti Software for Qualitative Data Analysis. Open coding was applied to identify the main themes of the analysis. At a further stage, theory-driven coding, informed by the project's theoretical framework, was undertaken.

The analysis focussed on personal attitudes to and experiences with flexible working arrangements and its problematic nature. The intensive participatory observation served to better understand the company processes and contexts described below. It enabled us to better understand the subtle features of the corporate culture and to grasp the framework in which flexible employment arrangements are utilised and evaluated. The results of the observations were not systematically included in the analysis of the work experiences of part-time professionals and managers.



### The company context

The enterprise analysed is one of the largest food-processing companies in the Czech Republic. An international corporation, it has branches throughout Europe and in other parts of the world. Its administration headquarter is in the Czech capital of Prague, where the data were collected; at the time of research, the company employed about 550 people.

The percentage of women in the company could be seen gradually declining towards the higher levels of company management. Although overall more women (56 per cent) than men (44 per cent) were employed, only 24 per cent of all managerial positions were held by women. Upper management consisted of two women and eight men.

The company features a rather aggressive, dynamic corporate culture. Its management emphasises on the performance and quality of work. Accordingly, it offers an elaborate system of employee education based on an internal assessment of individual efficiency and related systematic career planning. A benefit system offering a broad range of possible uses of an annual financial bonus for activities in healthcare, leisure and education is an important aspect of employee care.

The company provides internal labour flexibility programmes at two levels. Some of these programmes are intended for the entire staff and some only for employees in specific situations. All employees can take advantage of flexible working hours (flex-time) with an obligatory “core” time of in-office presence between 9 am and 3 pm, and until 1 pm on Fridays. Employees can work the remainder of their hours at any time outside these intervals.

The company also allows select employees to change their work regime to types of part-time or home-based work. The people entitled to participate can set-up a suitable workload with a relatively high degree of flexibility. Subject to the agreement of their manager and depending on their job description, employees are permitted to adjust their number of working hours a week as well as their place of work. In addition, it is possible for them to combine remote work with part-time programmes. However, in practice, eligibility conditions for these flexible arrangements are vaguely defined. At the time of data collection, these schemes were only used by women, and more specifically mothers of small children. This does not necessarily mean that other life situations were evaluated as ineligible by the company, but rather that this type of arrangement was most often requested by mothers of pre-school children.

### Data analysis

#### *Working part-time in an overtime-oriented culture*

“Competitive presenteeism” (Simpson, 1998) is deeply embedded in the analysed corporate culture. The intensive participatory observations revealed that certain volume of hours worked beyond normal working hours is considered an indicator of extra efforts and a sign of loyalty and commitment to work. Many employees work for more than one additional working week through overtime each month. With regards to employees caring for small children, the HR manager admits that they are exposed to a great deal of pressure:

And I can imagine, and I even know about one specific case, when they can feel disadvantaged. But it's not because of the firm, but because of the manager. Because this man is a bit weird, I mean as a workaholic and this scenario did not involve a parent, but a single man – he called for him and reprimanded him – you ONLY had 20 hours of overtime last month? [...] So I can

imagine that in this environment mothers must feel a bit under pressure or a lot under pressure (HR manager, 46, 2 adult children, full-time employed).

The above-mentioned quote clearly demonstrates the challenge women face in an androcentric corporate culture, where employees' private lives are not taken into account. It also indicates the problematic situation of part-time professionals, especially working on managerial positions, which will be discussed below. It is also not surprising that during our stay in the company, the possibility of using flex-time had little impact on work time flexibility or the combination of work-family duties in the everyday lives of employees.

The informants employed under alternative working regimes experienced great pressure. Wanting to keep their jobs, they were trying to fulfil expectations on work intensity and workload. At the same time, part-time arrangements for specific positions and specific workloads were not divided or reduced; the amount of work stayed the same. Therefore, the employees had to cope with the volume of full-time work in a shorter time frame. Jiřina, who holds a senior post, points out the system of the establishment of part-time programmes in the company:

Since it is a part-time job, but with the workload of a full-time one, you really have a lot of work [...] I mean, I think it is important to use part-time schemes for these positions. But you have full responsibility (Jiřina, 36, two children, manager, employed at 75 per cent of full-time).

The high level of commitment described by Jiřina can be seen mirroring the overachieving performances required of tokens as described by Kanter (1977). Part-time workers are faced with a token position in an environment focussed on working long hours. However, overtime work by part-time workers remains "invisible" when it is performed during the standard working hours of other employees. Women working part-time jobs outside the workplace are pushed to meet the requirements of corporate culture by over-performance. However, their overtime hours are less transparent. Therefore, they appear to be less productive and less devoted to the job than other employees. This stereotype leads to the tokenisation of part-time workers, which results in multiple discriminations.

#### *Working part-time to increase work-life reconciliation*

As discussed above, in an androcentric corporate culture, the employees prove their qualities by staying at work long after office hours. If the part-time employees want to cope with the expectations of the majority, they have to spend their free time catching up. Therefore, they are not only working beyond office hours but also at home in the evenings and on weekends. Manager Karla, mother of two, experiences an excessive workload and overtime work every day:

[...] I basically don't manage to finish my work within the time I am contracted for. And then I have to work at home in the evenings and it's not too good. All the time you're thinking that you have to send the kids to bed quickly so you can work, etc. As a matter of fact, the hours I'm here would cover full-time employment, but I cannot go full-time because I'm really afraid I would have even more work then (Karla, 37, children aged 5 and 6, part-time, manager, 25 hours a week).

Karla's experience reveals the increased pressure on free time that part-time managers and professionals are facing. As there is a lack of sufficient protection for part-time workers, the part-time work then represents the equivalent of full-time work. In an

androcentric company culture, the only way to work as a manager is to work full-time, regardless of the number of hours agreed in the employment contract. Female managers often work in male-dominated cultures where there is the belief that “good” management practice is incompatible with commitments and responsibilities outside the workplace, particularly roles relating to care work (Marshall, 1995; Oakley, 2000; Burke and Collins, 2001).

Another type of part-time work arrangement directly combines work at the office with work from home (telework). Compared to the workplace office, work from home allows higher levels of flexibility in the distribution of time and energy between the household and work obligations. The informants had more options of adapting their working hours to family obligations. Věra combines working from home and the office, which helps her care for her two children:

I'm in the office for three days and one day working from home. That one day I can arrange everything for myself, nobody checks if I'm at my computer all the time. For me, this flexibility is an advantage. I can organize these days the way I need to and I don't have to sit in the office (Věra, 36, children aged 4 and 5, employee, three days full-time in office, one day home-based).

Although home-based work allows for free structuring of the work day, employees lose their conventional leisure time such that they work during the evening when their children are asleep or during weekends when/if their partner can take over responsibilities (Kyzlinková and Svobodová, 2007). Work from home also brings the risk of loss of contact with other employees (Kyzlinková and Svobodová, 2007). Unsuitable working conditions in a home office, insufficient technical facilities or disturbance by children are other negative aspects of home office work:

When my daughter is awake I can see her and the computer is on my lap and I can talk to her if it's something easy, plus I do something else and don't have to think. If I locked myself in the study it wouldn't be good because she would want to come in (Hana, 29, child aged 1, part-time, employee, home-based work).

The lack of adequate working conditions when working from home often complicates the performance of more challenging work tasks. Many women with small children, like Hana, gave up her prior position to provide routine administrative work that was easy to combine with care. In general, part-time employees are experiencing work-family conflicts, as they are finishing their work tasks in the evening and during weekends. The advantage of working officially from a home office is the higher flexibility in using the time to also serve one's family. However, the women working from home are adapting their work time for the family's needs and are also fulfilling the gender contract. Then, they compensate by working in the evenings and weekends, which can influence their life with their partner. Similar to the women working shorter hours, access to various benefits is limited. The corporate culture of long hours reduces the sense of being entitled to work in ways compatible with family life (White *et al.*, 2003). As a result, a work/family conflict is likely to occur (Frone *et al.*, 1997). The work/family conflict, in turn, impairs an employee's well-being in different domains of life (Erickson *et al.*, 2010; Rutherford, 2001).

#### *The penalty of lower pay and cuts on benefits*

Corporate documents stipulate equality in remuneration and benefits. However, the everyday experiences of women working part-time show signs of severe discrimination

in these areas. Certain types of benefits, such as a company car or a company phone, are distributed in the company as a form of special reward associated with managerial and other executive positions. However, women working part-time in managerial positions do not receive these corporate benefits. The fact that these “statutory” benefits for executives are not provided shows the low prestige of employees working part-time and signals a failure to recognise these types of arrangements as legitimate forms of managerial (and other) positions:

My predecessor had a car. I don't need one so much, but I think it is strange that I don't have a car and I think that it is only a one day difference in the volume of work [she works 4 days instead of 5][...] it is in my opinion unfair, why I couldn't have a car. But I don't think so much about it because it is not a priority for me as I use the tram to get to work, so I wouldn't need a car for work so much. I just don't understand why I do not have it as it is attached to the position (Alena, 36, children aged 4 and 5, manager, 75 per cent of full-time, one day home-based).

Afraid to lose both – their managerial positions and part-time arrangements – part-time professionals remain loyal even under discriminatory circumstances. Karla, a mother of two, reasoned that she cannot have at the same time the benefits other employees have *and* a part-time working arrangement:

With every position comes responsibility [...] and you have to deliver results. So when somebody has a responsible position and wants to keep it, they have to sacrifice the amount of time which is needed. But all the benefits are not available with the position. The salary is naturally cut down according to the arranged reduction in the working hours. The solution is simply to work full-time. Only this makes all material and non-material privileges assigned to a particular position immediately available (Karla, 37, children aged 5 and 6, manager, part-time, 25 hours a week).

Working conditions in a home office seem to be perceived by employers as being solely the responsibility of the employee. For example, Hana, who is employed part-time from home for the accounting department, has to use her own computer to manage her work tasks, and Alena, a manager of a small team, describes the investments she had to make to be able to recreate the company office at home:

And of course, when I was negotiating to work from home [...] I had to buy my own printer, fax machine and copier – a multifunctional device [...] and of course the company did not contribute financially (Alena, 36, children aged 4 and 5, manager, 75 per cent of a full workweek, one day home-based).

Again the situation is framed so that the company is perceived as having done enough by “generously” granting an individual employee the concession of working from home. Other informants also interpreted their loss of right to benefits and to equal remuneration as a form of compensation for the “advantages” of a flexible working regime. They appear to have assimilated the stereotype about part-time work in the company. It is evident that in the company's culture, which is based on overtime work and androgenic company culture (Acker, 1992), the evaluation mechanisms for quality of work overlook women, who work part-time. Moreover, as part-time professionals are tokenised (Kanter, 1977), flexible employment arrangements are seen as a privilege, a benefit *per se*. This, in fact, damages the negotiating position of those who make use of them.

## Conclusion

The paper has addressed the experience of female professionals and managers working under flexible working arrangements in one specific corporate culture in the Czech Republic. Given the statistical evidence and evidence from previous studies conducted on the topic, it is possible to integrate the findings from this study into the broader context of discrimination against female professionals working in flexible-hour regimes.

The findings confirm that flexible working arrangements function as a reconciliation tool for parents with children of pre-school ages. These policies serve as partial compensation for the persistent lack of childcare facilities for children under the age of 3 years in the Czech Republic. Part-time work or work from home enables a return to employment for those who have been (temporarily) excluded (e.g. due to childcare), so the policies have the potential to increase the employability of women with children, a group which has been traditionally marginalised in the Czech labour market.

However, the data also show the negative consequences of alternative working arrangements. As the legal norms are vaguely described, the real conditions of alternative working arrangements are often tied to the organisational environment and company-specific conditions, which is obvious in the data. As a result, women working part-time, even when employed in professional and managerial positions, are discriminated against and marginalised in the workplace.

Female employees working with alternative working arrangements do not have equal bargaining power in comparison to other employees, regardless of whether they are professionals, and sometimes in managerial positions. Flexible working arrangements, even in the case of professionals and managers, remain highly gendered and discriminatory. Overall, part-time work for female managers and professionals leads to an entrapment between the needs of their family and the expectations of their employer.

Kanter (1977) notes that if there are only a few part-time workers in a particular company, they stand out as tokens. However, we can see from this discussion that discrimination does not come solely from the low number of employees working part-time. Rather, flexible arrangements stand out against the ideal of a male-oriented company culture – the unencumbered worker (Acker, 1990). Part-time managers and professionals stand out in a company environment which is concerned with competitive presenteeism. Moreover, because of the principle of polarisation (Kanter, 1977), the remainder of full-time employees see part-time employees as privileged. This happens despite the fact that, by working part-time, women also fulfil the traditional expectations of Czech society towards mothers of small children. This stereotyped view is accepted by female part-time managers and professionals themselves, and they try to justify their status by excessive overwork and overachieving performance. Women in alternative working arrangements receive lower remuneration but remain highly loyal to the employer who made the alternative work arrangements possible because they have little opportunity for mobility in a tight labour market. Flexible working arrangements without job protection or defined working conditions have a negative impact on gender equality.

The results show the need to focus on promoting better conditions for employees working part-time. Also, it shows that managerial and highly demanding professional positions can be executed on a part-time basis if the work environment is open towards accepting this arrangement. Moreover, the findings outline the possibilities of developing workplace practices in the Czech Republic in a woman-friendly direction.

Specific legislative arrangements should be enacted, providing better protection for employees in non-standard employment, as is the case in France, Sweden or in The Netherlands. In these countries, specific legislation protecting part-time employees ensures equal treatment in terms of working conditions, benefits, remuneration and also better possibilities for parents of small children to demand their right to part-time employment if needed. At the same time, the incentives for employers to enable part-time working arrangements should be provided, for example, deductions from social insurance payment schemes for part-time employed parents of children under the age of 15 years.

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