

Atypical Working Schedules and Childcare Responsibilities : What is at Stake for Working Parents in France?

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In France, as elsewhere, more and more people are working atypical hours, in particular night time and weekend hours. (Dex, Smith, 2002) Although the traditional work week has remained the most widespread work pattern "non-standard" working hours now affect a significant proportion of the labour market. Taking account of these facts we must therefore pose the following question: What are the current stakes insofar as the work/life balance is concerned and what are the possible repercussions on the gender division of unpaid care within couples subjected to “non-standard” hours?

We will begin to answer this question by presenting the results of research we have conducted on the impact of the 35-hour laws on the work/life balance of parents. This will be followed by an analysis of the results of studies on the impact irregular working hours have had on fathers’ involvement in family life. We will conclude with a discussion on how decision-makers involved in child care policies have been grappling with these new working patterns as well as the stakes that are involved.

I. A convergence of research data: non-standard working hours make it more difficult to combine a job with family responsibilities

In research investigating the issue of work/family life balance, Garner, Méda and Sénik (2005) have demonstrated that non standard work schedules (defined as before 7 AM and ending after 8PM) are an aggravating factor in the management of everyday life for parents. Professionals, managers and employees in the retail sector find themselves over-represented

among those who have difficulties in coping with their work/life balance. In their research on the effect of the intensification of work for male and female employees, Fagan and Burchell (2002) also confirm that unsociable hours (and long hours) have significant negative effects on the work/life balance; the greater the level of non-standard hours the greater the dissatisfaction.

Research was undertaken with MT Letablier (Fagnani and Letablier, 2004) on the impact of the 35-hour laws on the work and family life balance of dual-earner parents having at least one child aged under six years (2004). Among those surveyed, whether fathers or mothers, who had their working hours reduced due to the implementation of the laws, 58 % responded “Yes” to the question, “Do you feel that the law on the 35 hours has made it easier for you to combine your family life with your working life?” The figures were 59% among women and 55% among men respectively.

However, the views of parents varied greatly depending on whether or not they had non-standard working hours (*i.e.* after 6.00 PM, before 8.00 AM or during the night). More than six in ten of parents who had fixed and “standard” working hours felt that the reduction in working time had improved their daily lives, against only 50% of those who worked non-standard hours (Table 1).

Table 1: Parents’ statement according to whether or not they work non-standard hours *

	YES (has made it easier)	NO (has not made it easier)	TOTAL
Employees with non-standard working hours	50.4	49.6	100% (n=274)
Employees with standard working hours	64.1	35.9	100% (n=340)

Source: Survey on "Reconciliation of Family and Working Life", CNAF, 2000.

*The question was: “For those who work outside the home: do you work regularly or occasionally outside normal working hours?” (after 6.00 pm in the evening, at the end of the week, before 8.00 am in the morning or during the night)

p < 0.001 (significant at 0.1%)

Our research also demonstrates that this impact is more positive where the organisation of the working time is regular, with manageable and predictable hours. A recent literature review confirms the heterogeneity of the impact of this law on the work/life balance. Concomitant to the introduction of the 35-hours laws has been legislation which has made implementation of work regulations more flexible. Diversity has been the rule in introducing new forms of work organisation (Ulrich and Estrade, 2002). Against the background of unbalanced power relationships between employers and employees (taking into account a high unemployment rate and a low level of trade union representation) employees have sometimes been obliged to accept flexible working schedules and practices to which they traditionally objected. Therefore some of them have had to come to terms with flexible scheduling of their working time which doesn't always fit in with the operating hours of nursery schools or crèches. The aftermath of these changes in working conditions is that they often have to rely on complementary child care arrangements, particularly if the working hours of parents overlap, and have to use baby-sitters, grandparents or relatives. This situation serves to complicate the management of their daily lives, increasing the mother's stress and often leads to a rise in child care costs.

Our results confirm the dramatic role played by working conditions, working time schedules and the methods for introducing the RWT in the formation of respondents' opinions about the effect of the 35-hour week on family life. For instance, almost half of the respondents had their working hours imposed on them, while the others were able to negotiate, either through their trade unions or by choosing the hours themselves. Parents viewed the effect of the RWT on their family life to be positive where it had been possible to negotiate the working hours. They were more frequently discontented when their working hours had been imposed.

Clearly, it requires more than a simple reduction of hours worked for parents to feel comfortable with their work and family life balance. Other conditions are required, such as a conscientious organisation of working time that is compatible with family needs and childcare arrangements. Dual-earner families being affected by irregular hours could be forced to adopt individually tailored arrangements in order to provide adequate care for their children. These couples will often adopt childcare strategies which result in a more equal division of child care responsibilities than in couples with standard hours.

II. Non standard work schedules and fathers' involvement in child care responsibilities

Non standard working hours : a driver for change in the gender division of unpaid caring work?

Parental preferences for 'flexible work' are thought to arise out of inadequate or costly childcare provision as demonstrated by Perrons (1998) in the UK. Recent American studies (Glass, 1998, Presser, 1994) have also shown that fathers who are personally invested in child care responsibilities within a couple are frequently motivated by a desire to reduce their child care expenses. Furthermore, parents are deliberately choosing to work hours which don't overlap with one another so that one parent is able to remain at home with the children while the other is at work. Mothers with dependent children sometimes structure their jobs around their partners' employment, allowing them to take advantage of the fact that if their partner is at home while they are at work they needn't worry about finding outside help for childminding responsibilities. It may come as a surprise that the same trend is visible in France in spite of a child care policy which is much more developed and generous than those of the UK and the US.

Drawing on results of a research carried out with M. T. Letablier on a representative sample of families having at least one child aged under six (Fagnani, Letablier, 2003), we could analyse the degree of involvement of fathers in child care responsibilities¹.

Table 2: Average earnings and working conditions of fathers according to the degree of their involvement in child care responsibilities

	The less involved Fathers N=565	The more involved fathers N=62
Average earnings per month (in French francs)	10,608	8,947
Average number of work. hours per week	41.6	37.1
% who have a	31	46

¹ This research targeted dual-earner couples having at least one infant aged six years or less and gave fathers a score between 0 and 5 according to the number of daily tasks they perform which were the following: collecting children from school; driving them to school; after-school childminding; looking after children on Wednesday afternoons (no school in France) or for a portion of the week; looking after the children in the evening (after 6:30pm); and taking charge of the children for part of the weekend if the mother works on Saturday or Sunday.

partner who works non-standard working hours		
% who have a partner whose work. Hours don't overlap with their own work. hours	56	88

Source: Survey on "Reconciliation of Family and Working Life", CNAF, 2000.

Table 2 shows that the more involved fathers work less hours than the less involved fathers. The spouses of the more involved fathers are frequently found to work non-standard hours and 88 % have a partner whose working hours don't overlap with their own working hours compared with 56 % for the less involved fathers.

The time constraints imposed by the difficulty of finding a suitable child care solution for parents working atypical hours combined with the financial limitations felt by many couples would seem to have resulted in a conscious decision by many fathers to spend more time looking after their children. Of the questions raised by this scenario one of the most salient would seem to be do fathers who devote time to their children on a daily basis see the reduction in child care costs as merely an added benefit of this arrangement or indeed, the primary benefit?

Couples with non-overlapping working hours: a deliberate strategy or an unexpected opportunity to share childminding responsibilities?

In the previously mentioned study we identified that 57 % of the women surveyed do not work the same hours as their spouse. In three out of every four cases (75%) husbands take advantage of this fact to look after the children, at least some of the time, while their wives are at work. More than a quarter of the women surveyed have said that this situation is the result of a deliberate choice. As for the men, nine out of every ten surveyed said that their spouses took advantage of staggered hours to spend more time with the children.

A third of all parents with non-overlapping working hours have stated that they do so in order to reduce their childminding expenses which tend to be much lower than in couples where the father ignores the opportunities presented by such an arrangement. Additionally, couples for

whom working non-standard hours is a deliberate strategy demonstrate higher savings than those who have had their working hours imposed against their will. These findings would seem to validate the hypothesis that parents are motivated primarily by financial considerations when making the choice to alternate their childminding responsibilities by working non-overlapping hours.

Making use of data provided by a DREES study on the childcare options available to parents, Danielle Boyer and Muriel Nicolas of CNAF have been able to confirm the relationship between atypical hours and the behaviour of fathers in the family unit. More precisely, they have revealed that there is a correlation between mothers who work non-standard hours and the level of participation of fathers in the upbringing of their children.

The authors began this study by identifying different groups among fathers described as “involved”² : blue-collar workers and middle management or supervisory employees are clearly over represented in this category (Table 3). They are more likely to work at night than fathers from other groups and their partners often work longer and less flexible hours than is typical of the female working population. *An econometric analysis shows that a father is four times more likely to be an “involved father” when his partner is working on Saturdays.*

Table 3: Characteristics of “involved” fathers

	“Involved fathers”	The whole population of fathers	
Economic Sector			
Agriculture	1,0	3,7	0
Business Owners/Executives	2,1	5,1	0
Senior Management	11,9	18,4	ref
Services	27,4	25,1	+ Odds Ratio= 2,769
Salaried Employees	14,7	14	0
Manual Labour	42,9	33,7	+ Odds Ratio= 2,730
	100	100	
Atypical Hours			
Father works nights			
Never	73,1	76,8	Ref

² Defined as fathers of children aged three years or less who spend more time than the median (0.57h/day) alone with their children.

Occasionally or often	26,9	23,2	+ Odds Ratio = 1,86
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Source : DRESS survey on childcare facilities for young children, 2002 (Conducted by CNAF)

Criteria : Dual-earner parents having at least one child aged under 3 years

From the same study we can also conclude that the children of “involved” fathers (Table 4) are much more likely to have mothers working atypical hours, 26% as opposed to 15% in the general population.

Table 4 : Breakdown of children three years or under according to whether parents work standard or non-standard hours with a comparison of all children and those children with an ‘involved’ father.

% of children having parents working with non-standard schedules	All children	Children with an involved father
Both parents	9	8
Only the father	14,2	14,8
Only the mother	14,9	25,8
Total	39,1	48,6
% with parents having standard working schedules	62,9	51,4
Total	100	100

Non-standard working schedules : Schedules which regularly include working Saturdays(mornings and/or afternoons) and/or Sundays (mornings and/or afternoons) and/or evenings and/or nights.

Involved father : Fathers who spend time with their children superior to the daily median of 0,57 hours.

Source : Childcare Survey DREES/CNAF/ CERC, 2002, Conducted by CNAF

Let us now look at the results of another study on the subject of fathers who receive the APE, a flat-rate child rearing benefit offered to parents who stop working or work only part-time.

This study confirms the hypothesis that it is above all, constraints placed on the mother's working hours which affect the behaviour of fathers in regard to childcare responsibilities (Boyer, 2002). Partners of fathers who receive the APE are more likely to work non-standard hours than the partners of fathers who did not claim APE (Table 5).

Tableau 5: Atypical hours (evenings and nights) of men and their partners where fathers are/aren't recipients of the APE (Child Rearing Benefit)

Night	Fathers recipients of APE (1) (n=261)	Eligible fathers who did not claim APE (2)
Fathers	22	25
Their partners	19	9
Evening		
Fathers	47	44
Their partners	44	28

(1) Source : CNAF 2002 (Field: Fathers recipients of APE who were holding a job just before the APE period).

(2) Source : Labour Survey, March 2003 (Field: Fathers of at least two children where the youngest is aged less than three years).

Conclusion.

Against the background of organisational changes and work reorganization in the labour market we can't help but notice the ambivalent effects of atypical hours. On one hand they have tended to aggravate the difficulties faced in reconciling work with the family. On the other hand they have in many cases had a positive impact on the dynamics of child care within couples. Fathers who are more active in childminding responsibilities are frequently the partner of a spouse who works atypical hours which allows parents to alternate the hours they spend with their children. This type of arrangement is often the result of a conscious decision by couples to share equally the responsibility of childrearing but it is also just as likely to be the consequence of the financial constraints suffered by the majority of young couples.

Drawing on our discussion we must ask ourselves whether lawmakers should support the expansion of atypical hours in the labour market in order to permit parents, particularly mothers, to remain in the labour market while also spending time with their children in order to reduce child care expenditures ? The indirect and sometimes perverse effects of this policy suggest that some prudence may be required.

There is increasing pressure to expand the opening hours of community resources such as crèches and other childcare facilities. The staff of these institutions have remained reticent about these proposals fearing a deterioration in the working conditions and quality of life they currently enjoy. We can observe the same dynamic in regards to the hours worked by professional childminders. By favouring the development of atypical hours we risk unleashing a domino effect that could see the destruction of our daily routines and the upsetting of the social rhythms at the heart of the family unit for both parents and childcare professionals. (Eydoux, 2005a, Eydoux, 2005b)

Finally we must ask ourselves whether these measures are compatible with society's desire to assure the well-being and quality of life of all children, with particular attention paid to the time all children should have a right to enjoy with their parents. Perhaps businesses and employers when conducting negotiations with their staff could guard against creating conflicts in the work/family balance of their staff by limiting demands for atypical hours to those employees who are willing to volunteer for such assignments.

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