

THE PARADOX OF PRECARIOUSNESS: EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF PART TIME AND FEMALE WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The concept of non-standard employment has gained increasing currency. Typically, it is closely associated with the notion of precarious employment. There is significant debate in the literature about the benefits and drawbacks of non-standard employment, ranging from increased flexibility to poor salaries and working conditions. Drawing on a national survey of one thousand employees, this paper explores the experiences of part time and female workers in Australia. The survey reveals unexpected findings, indicating that a segment of the female and part time workforce are highly satisfied and have organisational citizenship. These findings reiterate that non-standard employment is a core element of the contemporary labour market, yet the notion of unevenness between different types of employment arrangements is at times questionable and requires a more thorough analysis. The relevance and importance of non-standard working arrangements in the Australian labour market is further reinforced by the ACTU's current policy initiatives to strengthen protection and extend benefits to employees in non-standard arrangements, through the Work Family Test Case (2004).

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INTRODUCTION

Two of the most fundamental socioeconomic changes in the Australian labour market since the 1970s have been the increase in non-standard employment and in female labour force participation. These changes are closely interlinked, with women accounting for much of the growth in non-standard employment. The importance of non-standard employment and female participation in the labour force are evident at the policy level, as illustrated by the ACTU's historic Work Family Test Case currently being considered in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. Non-standard employment and the increased participation of women in the labour force are closely associated with the notion of precarious employment, and there is significant debate in academic and policy circles regarding the benefits and drawbacks of non-standard employment for individual employees.

Despite a large body of literature examining the causes and consequences of non-standard employment and the diversity of employment forms available in Australia, there has been little exploration of the attitudes and perceptions of non-standard workers. Drawing on a national survey of one thousand employees, this paper explores the experiences of part time and female workers in Australia. These two groups are selected as representative of non-standard employment for two major reasons. First, at a policy level, the Work Family Test Case launched by the ACTU in 2004 attests to the importance of both part time employment and the increased participation of women in the labour force. Second, part time employment, defined as less than 35 hours per week is strongly feminised and concerns over work-family balance are at a peak in this country (e.g. Pocock 2003). Despite extensive knowledge of the nature and incidence of non-standard work in Australia, gaps remain in studies of individual's perceptions and experiences of their own employment arrangements (see Pocock 2003 as an exception). Drawing a large, comprehensive national data set, the findings reveal that a segment of the female and part time workforce are highly satisfied and feel that they enjoy citizenship in the workplace.

NON STANDARD EMPLOYMENT AND PRECARIOUSNESS IN THE AUSTRALIAN LABOUR MARKET

Standard employment in Australia is declining rapidly and non-standard forms are taking their place (Burgess & Campbell 1998). Part time work in Australia has been increasing at faster rate than full time positions. The increase in part time employment arrangements in western nations is linked, at a macro level, with the imperative of competition in a globalised marketplace, the deregulation of industrial relations and the growth of the service sector. A key driver at the micro level has been employee preferences, following increased concerns about work-life-family balance, and the increase in female labour market participation (Hang-Jue 2002; McIntyre 2000). The growth in non-standard employment in Australia has been accompanied by the spread of working time arrangements (Watson, Buchanan, Campbell & Briggs 2003).

There is an ongoing debate in the literature about the benefits and drawbacks of non-standard employment. On the positive side, non-standard work arrangements offer employees and employers greater flexibility and autonomy. Employees for example, can balance multiple roles, particularly work-family responsibilities (Higgins, Duxbury & Johnson 2002; Barker 1993). McIntyre (2000) also suggests that working part time helps to maintain continuous employment or prevent 'downward mobility', by allowing employees to maintain their work confidence and build and update their knowledge. For employers, non-standard employment reduces labour costs and allows the creation of a flexible workforce to adapt to market fluctuations (Buchanan 2004; Hang-Yue 2002). On the negative side, non-standard work arrangements are characterised by: lower levels of pay and a lack of job security; time management difficulties, role conflict and irregularity of working

hours; unequal access to training and career progression; the under-utilisation of skills, qualifications and experience; poor relations and communication with managers; and such workers are more vulnerable to redundancy or layoffs because they do not have access to the same level of employment protection as their full time counterparts (Barker 1993; Higgins et al. 2002; Goldberg, Finkelstein, Perry & Konrad 2004; Lane 2000; McIntre 2000; Buchanan 2004).

The issue of part time workers and commitment has attracted considerable debate in the literature. There are two main arguments: the labour supply and labour demand arguments. According to the first, part-time workers have significantly lower work commitment than full-time workers, because they seek jobs which are characterised by convenient hours and a friendly work environment. It is then argued that these workers tend to exhibit higher levels of satisfaction because their jobs allow the balancing of responsibilities (Lane 2000). In contrast to the first argument which assumes women and part timers are self determining actors, the labour demand argument rests on the assumption that women's and part timer's choices of employment patterns are constrained. For example, one structural barrier to women seeking full time employment is the financial costs associated with childcare. An important distinction has also been drawn in the literature between voluntary and involuntary participation (e.g. Watson et al. 2003). Several studies have revealed differences in job satisfaction between voluntary part timers compared to those performing involuntary part time work, meaning working hours are an important predictor of part timer workers' job satisfaction (e.g. Thorsteinson 2003).

RESEARCH METHOD

The findings reported in this paper are taken from the Australian Worker Representation and Participation Survey (AWRPS) conducted in 2003-2004. One thousand employees were surveyed randomly between 22nd October and 10th March 2004. The interviews were conducted in the evenings between 5.30pm and 8.30pm allowing for time differences in each state. The sample was limited to Australian residents in paid employment of more than 10 hours per week who had left secondary school. Self-employed persons and company owners were excluded from the survey. Respondents were randomly selected from the Australian Telstra WhitePages residential telephone directory. Mobile, business and commercial telephone numbers were excluded from the sample. Proportionate sample sizes were selected for each Australian state or territory to reflect the spatial distribution of the population as reported in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing 2001.

Of the respondents, 60% were female and 40% male. The mean age of the sample was 41.5 years ($SD = 11.41$). Most respondents (78%) were born in Australia, which is slightly higher than the national census figure of 72%. The mean number of hours worked per week was 36.50 ($SD = 12.19$), with 65% working full-time (defined as 35 hours or more per week), which is identical to the national census figure. Just under half (46%) reported they worked in organisations with 500 or more employees. The mean number of years worked for their current employer was 8.46 ($SD = 8.02$). The majority (81%) were non-manual workers. Although the sample over-estimates women and non-manual workers, particularly professionals (census figures indicate that 45% of Australians are female and 70% work in non-manual occupations), it is reasonably representative of the Australian population in terms of demographic characteristics. However, there is significant skew by industry, with a large concentration of our sample in the heavily unionised health and education sectors (33.8% compared with 17.2% using national census data).

FINDINGS

The AWRPS comprised five major areas of inquiry: workers' experiences of work; involvement in workplace decision making; workers' influence at work; union membership; and, union-management relations.

Experiences of Work

Part time workers were more satisfied than full time workers on six aspects of their employment. These were: trust of their employer, influence at work, employer's understanding of family responsibilities, the development of skills, relations between the employer and employees and their loyalty to the organisation. The relationship between employment status and trust was statistically significant. Part timers (75.2%) were more likely to trust their employers than their full time counterparts (74.8%) ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$). Full time workers were more positive on two dimensions: overall job satisfaction and job security.

Female workers were more positive than males on every aspect of their employment. The relationship between gender and the variables of loyalty, development of skills and good employment relations were all salient and statistically significant. First, females (84.9%) were more likely to agree that they felt loyal to their organisation than males (78.6%) ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$). Second, females (83%) were more likely to agree that they were encouraged to develop their skills than males (75.8%) ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$). Third, females (78.5%) were more likely to agree than males (72.8%) that relations between management and employees are good ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$).

Involvement in decision making

A majority of the sample reported access to various forms of decision making procedures in their workplace. There was a significant relationship between gender and workplace meetings, with females (67.5%) reporting a higher incidence of regular staff meetings than males (60.6%) ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.07$). Interestingly, though the relationships were not statistically significant, female employees rated the incidence of all workplace decision making procedures (a full time HR person/department, regular meetings, an open door policy, employee involvement programs and employee committees) at a higher level than males. On the other hand, part timers rated the incidence of all decision making procedures; that is, a full time HR person/department, an open door policy, regular staff meetings, a committee of employees and employee involvement programmes, lower than full time workers.

The above results are consistent with Markey, Hodgkinson and Kowalczyk's (2002) findings that part time workers did not share the same sense and level of empowerment or the same level of employee participation as full timers. In addition, Markey *et al.* (2002) found that part time workers did not receive equivalent levels of consultation on organisational issues, and did not have the same access to unions, management and representation compared to their full time counterparts. This resonates with research in other countries which has shown that female part time workers feel excluded from organisational, interpersonal and skill enhancement opportunities, and, may be less included in the social system of an organisation (Barker 1993).

Actual levels of influence over work

Respondents were asked to rate their direct involvement and influence over selected aspects of employment. Females were more positive on four of six aspects of employment: work organisation, setting of working hours, decisions to work with new equipment/software and decisions over perks and bonuses. Statistically however, gender was only significantly related to levels of influence over work organisation, with females (87.8%) more likely than males (82.5%) to rate their influence highly ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.07$). In contrast to females, part timers were more positive than full timers on only one aspect of employment: the setting of working hours. On all other aspects they were less positive than full time workers. Of these ratings, employment status was statistically related to influence on decisions over pay rates and the pace of work. On both dimensions, full timers were more likely to rate their influence highly ($p < 0.05$).

Respondents were also asked to rate their desired level of influence over the same six aspects of employment. Despite rating their actual levels of influence more highly than males on four of the

six aspects, females reported higher levels of desired workplace influence on all six dimensions. In contrast, part timer workers only reported higher levels of desired influence on two of the six dimensions: setting of working hours and work pace.

Union Membership

Respondents were asked numerous questions about unions and their union membership or non membership. Despite a skew toward union members, a representation gap was uncovered in non-union workplaces. Part time and female workers both had a higher unsatisfied demand for union membership than full time and male workers, yet these differences were not statistically significant. Forty one per cent of part time workers were very/fairly likely to join a union compared to 33.6 per cent of full timers. In relation to gender, 49.8 per cent of female workers were very/fairly likely to join, compared to 31.9 per cent of male workers.

Union members were asked about their attitudes to unions. Part timers and females attitudes to unions were more positive compared with their full time and male counterparts. In relation to the extent that their union is perceived to fight hard when employee interests are threatened, 80.5 per cent of part timers strongly agreed compared to 79.7 per cent of full time workers. Females were also more positive about their union's performance on this dimension, with 82.9 per cent strongly agreeing that their union fights hard, compared to 76.1 per cent of males. Part timers were also more positive of their union's leadership. More than 86 per cent (86.9%) of part timers agreed that they trusted the union leadership to keep their promises to rank-and-file members, compared to only 69.3 per cent of full timers. This difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.19$). Part timers also agreed that their union leadership was less likely to have a political agenda not shared by the rank-and-file (76.9%), compared with their full time counterparts (75.1%).

The reasons part timers and female workers join unions were very different to those given by full time and male workers. Having friends/colleagues and family as union members were more important reasons for part time workers than full time workers. Whereas 40.6 per cent of part timers cited friends/colleagues being members as an important reason for joining, only 38.7 per cent of full timers cited this as important. Similarly, 24.2 per cent of part timers rated family being in a union as important compared to 22.3 per cent of full timers. Females were also more likely to join a union if family were members, with 24.9 per cent of workers citing this reason as important in their decision to join, compared to 19.8 per cent of male workers. Females were also slightly more likely to join unions for instrumental reasons, that is, the belief that the more people that join a union, the more effective it is. This belief was rated as an important reason for joining by 87.5 per cent of females compared to 87.1 per cent of males.

As would be expected, part time and female workers also had very different reasons for not joining unions compared with full timers and males. For part timers, five differences emerged. Compared to full time workers, part timers were more likely not to join because:

- Membership fees were too expensive (57% part timers v 44.4% full timers);
- People doing their type of work don't join (50.7% v 48.7%);
- The union does not achieve anything of value to the individual (47.2% v 42.2%);
- There is no point joining because they will receive the benefits anyway (67.6% v 57.6%); and,
- They do not believe in unions (26.6% v 22.2%).

The difference between part time and full time workers with respect to membership fees was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.13$).

Females' reasons for not joining unions were different on two dimensions. Fifty three per cent of females were more likely to agree that they did not join a union because membership fees were too expensive, compared to 42.8 per cent of males. In relation to free riding, 63.6 per cent of

females agreed that there was no point joining because they would receive the benefits anyway, compared to 57.6 per cent of males.

In addition to examining members' attitudes to their unions, the survey included measures of union performance. Respondents were asked to rate union performance on numerous dimensions. Part time and female workers were overwhelmingly more positive about their union's performance on many dimensions. As is shown in Table 1, both groups of workers rated union performance significantly higher than full time and male workers on: their ability to win fair pay increases, the protection of existing jobs, the union's understanding and knowledge of the business, the union's openness and accountability to members; working with management to improve quality or productivity; making work interesting and enjoyable and helping management to develop long term business plans. Interestingly, part time workers also rated the performance of unions in terms of their ability to protect workers against unfair treatment, higher than full time workers. This was the only dimension where females did not rate union performance more highly than males.

Table 1: Ratings of Union Performance

% of Workers Who Rated Performance As Good/Excellent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Gender								
Male	50.5	57.4	69.7	62.6	45.2	27.6	76.4	30.6
Female	61.4	66.5	74.6	72.9	53.5	34.0	76.0	37.0
Employment Status								
Full time	56.3	61.6	70.7	66.3	46.4	29.9	75.8	32.1
Part time	58.6	65.4	77.4	74.2	59.2	34.7	77.0	39.8

- 1 = winning fair pay increases
- 2 = protecting existing jobs
- 3 = understanding and knowledge of the business
- 4 = openness and accountability to members
- 5 = working with management to improve quality/productivity
- 6 = making work interesting and enjoyable
- 7 = protecting workers against unfair treatment
- 8 = helping management develop long term business plans

Several of the differences between the different groups of workers on union performance were statistically significant. Gender was significantly related to the ability of union's to win fair pay increases ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.12$) and ability of the union to protect existing jobs ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.12$), with female workers more likely to rate union performance on both dimensions as excellent. Employment status was significantly related to perceptions of union performance in terms of the extent to which the union works with management to improve quality or productivity. Part timers (59.2%) were significantly more likely than full time workers to rate union performance as good/excellent ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.12$).

The positive attitudes of female and part time workers are consistent with Walters' (2002) findings in the UK. In a study of female part-timers' attitudes to unions, Walters' (2002) found favourable attitudes towards unions, particularly in relation to the 'protective' function afforded by union membership. Female part-timers were also found to support the ideals of unionism and had positive experiences of the effectiveness of the union at the workplace. These findings reinforce the importance of attracting non-standard groups in organising and recruitment campaigns.

Union-Management Relations

Respondents were asked to report on the employment relationship and the results were favourable. More than 72 per cent of workers agreed that unions try to cooperate with

management, while more than 67 per cent agreed that management try to cooperate with unions. Though not statistically significant, female and part time workers both reported higher levels of cooperation by management with the union, than their male and full time counterparts. Female workers also reported higher levels of cooperation by their union with management than male workers. Gender however, was statistically related to management attitudes to unions. Females (32.2%) were significantly more likely than males (17.7%) to report that management at their workplace were in favour of unions ($p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.18$).

In addition to rating relations between unions and management, respondents were asked to rate the performance of management on numerous dimensions. Females were more positive than males on six of the seven dimensions. These were: concern for employees, understanding and knowledge of the business, willingness to share power and authority, keeping workers up to date with changes, promoting equal employment opportunities and making work interesting and enjoyable. The only dimension on which male workers rated management performance more favourably was giving fair pay increases. Gender was statistically related to the willingness of management to share power and authority, keeping everyone up to date with proposed changes and making work interesting and enjoyable ($p < 0.05$). On all three dimensions, females were significantly more likely than males to rate management performance as good or excellent.

The results were identical for part time workers. These workers were more positive than full timers on the same six dimensions as females: concern for employees, understanding and knowledge of the business, willingness to share power and authority, keeping workers up to date with changes, promoting equal employment opportunities and making work interesting and enjoyable. Full timers on the other hand were more positive of management performance in relation to the awarding of fair pay increases and this was a statistically significant relationship. Employment status had no other statistically significant relationships with dimensions of management performance.

DISCUSSION

This paper has explored the perceptions and experiences of work of female and part time workers, drawing on a national survey conducted in 2004. A key finding is that these 'non-standard' employment groups consistently report high levels of satisfaction in major aspects of their work and overwhelmingly positive experiences. In some areas these findings are at odds with the large body of literature which characterises non-standard employment arrangements as precarious. The survey findings challenge conventional wisdom, revealing that those in precarious employment do not actually feel precarious. The fact that these workers have workplace citizenship requires a rethinking of the term, non-standard employment because if these workers do not feel any different, how can they continue to be classified as marginalised? Alternative employment arrangements are now sufficiently embedded in the Australian labour market and positive perceptions of these arrangements by part timers and women have implications for employers, employees and unions.

While it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the survey, particularly the fact that women were over sampled, the findings do reveal that women and part timers are generally the more optimistic group across five dimensions: experiences of work, involvement in workplace decision making, influence at work, union membership and union-management relations. There are however, several salient issues to be noted. First, consistent with Pocock, Prosser and Bridge (2004) who identify a group of "positive casuals", one key condition underpinning satisfaction and positive work experiences is workplace citizenship, embedded in employee voice in organisational decision making, communication and relations with managers and the performance of management on issues of importance to employees, including the promotion of equal employment opportunities and making work interesting and enjoyable. However, the distinction between consultation and involvement in decision making emerged as a critical factor for part timers. Part time workers rated their levels of influence over workplace decision making, including work organisation, setting of working hours, pay rise decisions, pace of work, technological change

decisions and decisions pertaining to perks, consistently lower than lower than full timers. Unequal access to employee participation among part timers is a major issue for employers, employees and unions, because employee involvement has been identified as a major ingredient of workplace efficiency (Markey et al 2002).

Second, the lack of employee participation among part time workers was coupled with levels of unmet demand for union membership among both part timers and females. Contrary to popular assumptions, females and part timers held positive attitudes toward unions, the performance of their unions and exhibited a willingness to join. Unsurprisingly, membership fees were the major barrier to these groups joining. These findings reaffirm the importance of part timers and females to membership growth and renewal in Australia, and the importance of tailoring membership to suit their needs. The level of unmet demand for union membership among these workers and their generally positive perceptions of unions suggest that they are more alike than different from the mainstream of workers.

Third, pay and pay decisions emerge as a major factor underpinning dissatisfaction for female and part timers. Both groups identified very little influence over pay related issues and reported a greater desire to have influence in this area. These findings reinforce concerns in the literature that part time jobs are often characterised as 'second rate' due to low levels of pay and conditions. The ever increasing growth in non-standard employment in Australia coupled with the importance of this type of work for employees and employers mandates a review of pay related issues in part time employment. As illustrated in the Work Family Test Case, equity in pay and conditions for parents and carers balancing work and family life is the central underpinning of the ACTU's policy initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The concept of non-standard employment has gained increasing currency over recent decades in Australia and is closely associated with the notion of precarious employment. There is significant debate in the literature about the benefits and drawbacks of non-standard employment, yet little research has investigated the attitudes and perceptions of non-standard workers. Drawing on the AWRPS, this paper explored the experiences of part time and female workers in Australia. The findings reveal high levels of satisfaction with work, unions and management, and suggest that a segment of the female and part time labour force have workplace citizenship. These findings challenge but do not overturn conventional wisdom that much non-standard work is precarious. They also serve to reinforce that such working arrangements represent a core element of the contemporary labour market. We point out that this requires a rethinking of the term 'non-standard employment'. Quite simply, those employment arrangements which are labelled non-standard are now entrenched in the labour market, and if these workers have workplace citizenship, then the notion of unevenness between different types of employment arrangements is questionable.

This is not to argue that labour market disadvantage has disappeared but that its identification and analysis requires a more fine grained approach. Indeed, further research is needed to explore inconsistencies in the data and to uncover the reasons why female and part-timers have such positive experiences of work. These issues are best addressed through in-depth qualitative research to allow for a rich and detailed analysis of social phenomena at the workplace.

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