

Governments of 20 Countries Ahead of US in Promoting Workplace Flexibility

According to a new report, although there has been progress in workplace practices, high-quality flexible work arrangements are still the exception in the U.S. When lack of flexibility and lack of affordable child care and elder care combine, many women stop paid work altogether, or trade down to a job with more feasible work hours, at the cost of having to work below their professional potential.

The report, *Statutory Routes to Workplace Flexibility in Cross-National Perspective*, from the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) and the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, charts what governments in high income countries are doing to speed up the pace of workplace change.

Based on a review of statutory employment rights in 21 high-income countries, including the United States, aimed at increasing workers' ability to change their working hours and arrangements to balance work and family, and facilitate lifelong learning and gradual retirement. It argues that, in the context of U.S. demographic and economic changes, an explicit right to request flexible work could play an important role in preparing the U.S. economy for the future.

"In the U.S., the choice tends to be either to work full-time all the time, or work reduced hours, with low pay, no benefits, and little opportunity for advancement. Faced with that choice, and the high cost of child care and elder care, many women are forced to leave the labor market," says Barbara Gault, IWPR Vice President and Director of Research.

Of 21 countries reviewed, the report found that 17 countries have statutes that allow parents to move to part-time work or otherwise adjust their working hours; 12 have statutes to help workers adjust work hours for training and education; 11 allow reduced hours with partial pension prior to full retirement; 5 allow working time adjustments for those with family care-giving responsibilities for adults; and 5 countries give everyone the right to alternative work arrangements.

According to the latest data from the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation, college-educated women in the United States are now less likely than women in many other high-income countries to participate in the labor market. Participation in the U.S. labor force for women aged 24-54 has stalled in the last decade while 19 of 20 other high income countries surveyed have seen growth during the same period.

Most countries target statutory regulation at specific circumstances, such as family caregiving responsibilities, old age or lifelong learning. More recent is an all encompassing approach that provides a mechanism for changing working time arrangements to all employees, irrespective of why they want change. As long as employers have some scope for refusing proposals on business or organizational grounds, such a universal approach is least likely to cause resentment between

employees and creates the greatest diversity of time availability for employers to draw on in getting work done. And it reduces the association of flexible working with a 'mommy track'.

"Most flexible work statutes try to find solutions that are workable for both employer and employee. While employers might have protested before the laws were introduced, once implemented most found them workable," Says Ariane Hegewisch, Scholar-in-Residence at IWPR, and co-author of the report.

Many of these rights to flexible or reduced hours were introduced in the last decade in response to looming demographic changes which put a premium on encouraging people to stay in work.

"There is a big incentive for policymakers to support flexible work. When more people work, more people contribute to taxes and social insurance and thus provide for those who can no longer work," says Janet Gornick, Professor of Political Science and Sociology, CUNY, and co-author of the report.

How other countries are encouraging workplace flexibility:

- Changed working hours and/or scheduling for any employee. (In Belgium, all employees over the course of their working life can take a career break of up to one year full-time, and may stretch this out to a maximum of 5 years, working 80 percent of usual hours, to look after children or family; return to education; volunteer in the community or whatever else they would like to do.)
- Gradual return to work after childbirth. (In Norway, parents, for the first two years after the birth or adoption of a child, can return to work for 50, 60, 75, 80 or 90 percent of their usual working hours.)
- Breast feeding breaks. (In Portugal, mothers or fathers, for the first year after the birth of a child, are entitled to breastfeeding breaks twice a day - or can reduce the overall length of the working day.)
- Alternative work arrangements for parents of younger children or children with disabilities. (In Spain, parents caring for children under eight years old are entitled to reduce their working hours between 20 and 50 percent.)
- The right to refuse overtime or shift patterns that clash with care responsibilities. (In Switzerland, for employees caring for children or relatives in need of care.)
- The right to request flextime, part-time work, rescheduling or home based work for employees caring for children or relatives in need of care. (UK and New Zealand.)
- Alternative schedules or reduced hours to go back to education. (In Denmark, for employees who left school without a high school diploma, for up to three -and-a -half years.)
- Reduced working hours on the way to retirement. (In Finland, from age 58 onwards, a reduction of usual full-time hours between 30 to 70 percent is possible with partial pension payments.)

The report concludes that enhanced rights to flexible work can improve work/life quality, support economic growth and prosperity, and contribute to greater gender equality.

The 21 countries surveyed were Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States.