



Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau

# Summary

# Starting out

## Young women and men on the labour market



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Editors:  
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## Summary and conclusions

Freek Bucx and Ans Merens

### 5.1 Background

Girls and women in the Netherlands have been outperforming boys and men in education since the end of the last century. They go on to higher education more often than male students, have lower drop-out rates and graduate from higher education more quickly. As a result, women aged under 45 have for some time had a better average education level than men. Yet these women are still in a weaker position on the labour market than men; women are less often in work than men, and where they do work, they are more often in part-time jobs. These are both aspects that impact negatively on their economic independence, whereas increasing women's economic independence is one of the central planks of Dutch emancipation policy (TK 2012/2013).

There is a suspicion that differences between the labour market and income position of women and men arise at an early age. It is against this backdrop that this study was carried out into the labour market position and experiences of young adults (aged between 18 and 35 years). The aim of the study was to identify at what point in this early career phase differences arise between young women and men, and which factors might explain this.

### 5.2 Research questions

The central research question was as follows:

*To what extent does the transition from education to work and the start of their career differ for young women and young men, and which factors play a role in this?*

This question can be broken down into five research questions; the first four questions are descriptive, the fifth is explanatory. The insights generated by our study are described below for each of these five questions.

#### 5.2.1 Research question 1: What is the labour market position of young people a year and a half after leaving education, and what differences are there in the labour market position of young women and men?

##### Young women already more often work part-time shortly after leaving education

Eighteen months after leaving education, young women appear to have found employment to the same extent as young men with the same education level: there is virtually no difference in the proportion who are in work. However, straight after leaving education



young women already work part-time (less than 35 hours per week) more often than young men, whereas around a third of young men with a senior secondary vocational (MBO) qualification work part-time, this applies for no fewer than nearly three-quarters of young women with the same qualification. For some of them, working part-time does not appear to be a matter of choice: around half of young women with an MBO qualification would like to work more hours.

The differences in working hours compared with young people with a higher professional (HBO) qualification are smaller, but still considerable: just over one in five young men in this category work part-time, compared with nearly half of young women. In an earlier report of this study (Merens et al. 2017) it was observed that women with a university degree also more often work part-time than men with a comparable qualification, though these differences appear to be slightly smaller than for those with an MBO or HBO qualification.

#### Young women see fewer career opportunities

Both women with an MBO qualification and those with an HBO degree are less optimistic regarding their career prospects in their current job than young men. Just under four out of ten young women with an MBO qualification are optimistic about this, compared with nearly five out of ten young men. Young HBO graduates are more positive about their career prospects, but here the differences between women and men are greater: just over five out of ten women are optimistic, compared with almost seven out of ten young men. Similar differences in perceived career prospects were also observed in an earlier report of a similar study of young people with a university degree (Merens et al. 2017).

Finally, there are also differences in a number of other areas which, while small, also work to the disadvantage of women. For example, we observed that young women who have left education a year and a half ago more often have a flexible employment contract than young men in a comparable situation. Young women with an HBO degree were also slightly less satisfied in their current job than young men with the same qualification.

### 5.2.2 Research question 2: What is the labour market and income position of young people aged 18-35 years, and to what extent do women and men in different age categories differ from each other?

#### Young women and men (aged up to 25) just as often in work

In the youngest age group (18-25 years), roughly the same proportion of men as women are in work; it would seem that men and women are equally able to find work after completing education. In the older groups, and especially among 31-35 year-olds, fewer women than men have jobs. This is not due to higher unemployment among women than men – they are about the same – but to a bigger share of women who are not (or no longer) active on the jobs market. Some women withdraw from the labour market after working for some time.



### Part-time work much more common among young women than young men

Strikingly, women aged 18-25 years already work part-time more often than men. Half these young people working part-time – men just as much as women – do so involuntarily; in other words, they would like to work more hours. In the 26-30 age group, women work slightly more hours than in the youngest group, and men far more. Despite this, half the men and a quarter of the women in this group who are working part-time would like to work more hours. Women aged 31-35 years work the fewest hours (compared with younger women), while men in this age group work the most hours. As women and men move up the age scale, therefore, the differences in the proportion who work and in working hours increase. Involuntary part-time working also becomes less common as age increases, on the one hand because young people succeed in obtaining more hours, and on the other probably because the number of hours they would like to work changes when women have children: further analysis shows that these differences in labour participation and working hours are influenced not just by education level, but also by having children. Lower-skilled women, especially if they have children, withdraw from the labour market more often than higher-skilled women; lower-skilled women who continue to work more often reduce their working hours than higher-skilled women. Differences in the preferences of women with different education levels as regards combining work and care tasks are also likely to be a factor here.

### Some gender differences occur only or mainly in the youngest group

It is notable that women in the youngest group of workers (18-25 years) are more often on temporary or other forms of flexible employment contract than their male counterparts; in the 26-30 age group, and especially among 31-35 year-olds, this difference is much smaller, probably because more and more young workers obtain a permanent contract as their experience grows. It is however notable that this process takes longer for women than for men. The reason for this is not entirely clear; it may be that discrimination against pregnant women plays a role (College of Human Rights (College voor de Rechten van de Mens) 2016).

In other respects, the youngest group of women (aged up to 25) are in a better position than men, more often working at higher occupational levels and earning more per hour – both factors that are (partly) related to these women's higher education level.

### Young women less economically independent than men

Despite the higher occupational level and hourly pay of the youngest group, young women overall earn less per hour than men and are less often economically independent (66% versus 82% in the group aged 30-34 years). This income gap widens as they spend longer on the labour market. The frequency with which women work part-time, in particular, ultimately results in a lower income and less economic independence compared with their male counterparts. The difference in working hours is thus the biggest determinant of the differences in the income position of young women and men. Differences in



hourly pay rates (for example between sectors and roles in which women and men typically work) and possible pay discrimination probably play a much more limited role here.

### 5.2.3 Research question 3: How do young people's careers progress (from leaving education until age 35), and to what extent does this differ for men and women?

#### Working hours of young men increase consistently; those of women fluctuate

Using pseudo-panel analyses, we investigated how the careers of young women and men develop in the first years after leaving education. At the start of their careers, there is virtually no difference in the share of women and men who have a job; only lower-skilled women are less often in work than men immediately after leaving education. A few years after leaving education, the share of women in work declines (further) not only among the low-skilled, but also to a slight extent among women with intermediate and higher education levels.

As we saw above, the pseudo-panel analyses also showed that young women work fewer hours than young men straight after leaving education. This difference is much greater among the lower-skilled than the higher-skilled. In the first years on the labour market, the number of hours worked by both men and women rises. This does not apply for women with higher education levels (higher professional and university): they begin by working a relatively large number of hours, but this starts to decline immediately thereafter. After six years on the labour market, the hours worked by lower-skilled women (preparatory secondary vocational education (vmbo) and senior secondary vocational education (mbo)) reduce, while the working hours of men increase further. The initial increase in the number of hours worked by young men and women with vmbo and mbo qualifications is probably related to some of them involuntarily working part-time in their first job and later obtaining more hours. The reduction in the working hours of women is likely to be influenced by family formation and a stronger desire (than men) to combine work with care tasks.

#### Young women and men more likely to receive a permanent contract if they are more experienced

A substantial share of young people begin their careers with a flexible (or other form of temporary) employment contract. After one year's experience, 60-80% are on permanent contracts; this rises to 70-90% after six years, after which it remains stable. There are few observable differences between women and men here. Women with primary education and those with a university degree are the only groups who less often start with a permanent contract than men. For university-educated women, that difference disappears as their experience grows; for women with a maximum of primary education, the difference works in their favour: the share of men with primary education on permanent contracts actually declines over time.

There is little or no difference in the occupational level (occupational prestige) of young women and men. The occupational level increases slightly in the first ten years of their



career, but the gender differences remain relatively small. The main differences in occupational prestige are between the different educational groups.

#### Proportion of young men in managerial positions increases with experience; women lag behind here

Few young people will begin their careers in a management role, which will usually require more experience. However, five years after joining the labour market, a clear difference begins to emerge in the share of men and women in such roles. Although the share of female university graduates in managerial roles does increase slightly in the early years of their careers, it subsequently falls slightly for this group (as well as for those with a lower education level), whereas among men with university and HBO degrees it increases rapidly.

#### Career progression of young lower-skilled women weaker than that of young lower-skilled men

Some gender differences (proportion in work, working hours, managerial roles) increase during the early career period. Other differences reduce or were not or barely present to start with (occupational prestige). The analyses also make clear that the differences in (the trend in) the labour market position of lower-skilled women and men are often greater than between their high-skilled peers.

#### 5.2.4 Research question 4: What is the labour market position of young women and men in Europe, and to what extent is the situation in the Netherlands different from that in other European countries?

##### The Netherlands is not unique in Europe...

The Dutch situation is not unique in Europe. In fact, young women are in a worse labour market position than men in all European countries. This is despite the fact that, as in the Netherlands, young women often outperform young men educationally; they are overrepresented in higher education in almost all European countries. The fact that women are unable to convert their educational advantage over men into a better position on the labour market is not a specifically Dutch phenomenon, therefore, but is a (more) widespread occurrence.

There are however clear differences within Europe in the way in which young women's weaker position manifests itself. The situation in the Netherlands most closely resembles that in other Western-European countries such as Great Britain and Germany, where the differences in working hours between young women and men are the most prominent feature. In Central and Eastern-European countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania, by contrast, the differences in hours worked are small; on the other hand, the chance that young women in these countries will be in paid work at all is notably less than for young men. In Northern Europe – and especially Finland and Norway – the main difference is the lower likelihood that young women will have a permanent employment





contract compared with young men. In Southern Europe, finally, the picture is mixed: in some countries, such as Italy and Greece, the differences in labour market participation and working hours are fairly wide, while in other countries, for example Portugal, they are quite small.

### ...but it is unusual

The Netherlands is not unique in Europe, then, but it is unusual. There is nowhere else in Europe where the differences in working hours of young women and men are so great, and nowhere is the average number of hours worked by young women so low. On the other hand, the differences in the proportion of young women and young men who are in paid work are small compared with the rest of Europe.

The fact that so many young women work part-time in the Netherlands compared with other European countries may be due in part to the fact that the working conditions for those in part-time employment are better than in many other countries; there are lots of part-time jobs available, they are of high quality, and the terms of employment are largely the same as for full-time jobs. Moreover, the economic circumstances in the Netherlands are relatively favourable, and hourly pay rates are high compared with some other countries in Europe, so that the 'one and a half earner' model can provide enough income for a couple.

### 5.2.5 Research question 5: Which factors might explain any differences found between young women and men (see research questions 1, 2 and 3) in the Netherlands?

The main differences that emerged in our study between young women and men were in working hours, job satisfaction and satisfaction with career prospects. In answering this research question, we therefore focused on these themes.

#### Differences in working hours are partly related to education followed...

The differences in the working hours of young women and men cannot be explained by just one factor: the analyses of the quantitative data and the focus groups produced a complex interplay of different factors. First, our data suggest that whether or not someone works part-time is not determined only when young people enter the labour market. For some of them, this issue is already decided by that point, by the choices they make or the opportunities they are given regarding further or vocational education. The different education programmes often followed by women and men (care and technical disciplines, respectively) largely determine the sector in which they will later find work. Sectors in which lots of women work (care, education) offer ample opportunities for part-time work; conversely, this is much less the case in typically 'male' sectors (construction, transport). The level of education attained also helps determine the number of hours worked: full-time or, sometimes, large part-time jobs are the norm in roles occupied by those with higher education levels, while smaller part-time jobs are available in roles performed by women with low or MBO qualifications. As a consequence, the gender differences in hours



worked are smaller between high-skilled and lower-skilled young people. During their education, young people are probably not aware of the consequences of their educational choices for their later chance of finding part-time or full-time work.

### ... are partly related to the vulnerable position of those embarking on the labour market ...

Once they are in the labour market, some young women (and men) find they are involuntarily working part-time, reporting that their employer has no scope to offer extra hours. These women (and men) would like to work more hours. The employer or the sector has a strong influence over how many hours women and men are able to work in their first job. It emerged from the interviews that, at the start of their careers, young employees in any event feel that they have little influence over their working hours or their other terms of employment (salary, permanent contract). As they spend longer working for their employer, they have a greater say over how many hours they work; this applies for both full-time and part-time work. Young men use this influence more than women.

### ... but often also correspond with different preferences

By no means all young women in part-time work cite only to their employer as the reason. Young women sometimes deliberately choose to work fewer hours to make time available for hobbies, free time and (preparation for) caring for a family; this is less common among young men. This is in line with the relatively pronounced preference of women for combining paid work and care tasks (looking after children), whereas men attach more importance to their income and career opportunities.

### Differences in working hours help explain differences in satisfaction...

The differences in working hours in turn play a role in explaining why women are slightly less satisfied with their jobs than men shortly after leaving education (HBO graduates). Compared with full-time employment, a part-time job naturally carries less status as well as a lower income; the chances of promotion are also lower, and this could explain the lower job satisfaction of people who work fewer hours. Although most young women (nonetheless) prefer to work part-time, between around a quarter and half of young women (aged up to 30) do not, which could explain why on average there are differences (albeit relatively small) in satisfaction between young women and men at the start of their careers.

Low-skilled women are notably much more dissatisfied with their jobs than men (the differences are much smaller among young people with high education levels). Although both men and women think they could have continued to learn, women especially regret that they were not able to get the most out of their education. Men tell themselves that they are satisfied with their job because it enables them to play the role of breadwinner.



### ... and so do differences in career prospects

The fact that young women more often work part-time also partly explains their perception that they have fewer career opportunities than men. In many cases, that is a realistic assessment; it is known from earlier research that working part-time reduces the chances of promotion (Román 2006), either because employers associate part-time working with a lack of ambition, or because those working part-time build up less work experience than full-time workers.

As well as the actual reduction in career opportunities due to working part-time, the perception of fewer opportunities may also play a role. Some of the employers we spoke to talked about the ‘glass ceiling’ effect: young women see mostly men occupying the most senior positions in the organisation, and that makes them less optimistic about their own careers. Young women also more often say than men that they do not regard promotion as very important – though this by no means applies for all women.

### 5.3 Reflection on the findings

#### Despite some catching up, many women are already working part-time shortly after leaving education and are less often economically independent than men

Girls and women have made up lots of ground on men in terms of educational achievement in recent decades. Thus far, however, this has not been reflected in their position on the labour market, where women have still been at a disadvantage compared to men – a phenomenon also referred to as the ‘emancipation paradox’. However, our study shows that today women no longer always lag behind men on the labour market. On the one hand, young women appear to find work just as easily as men after completing their education. Young women are also more often employed at higher occupational levels than men of the same age, and the hourly pay of women aged up to 30 is as high or higher than that of men. These findings can be ascribed to young women’s higher education level. On the other hand, young women work part-time more often than young men. This difference often manifests itself right from the start of their careers and increases with age. As women more often work part-time than men, they are also less often economically independent and this applies especially for women in small part-time jobs (less than 20 hours per week). This may be seen as undesirable, as it makes them dependent on a partner or on benefits. Working part-time so early in their careers can also adversely impact on the future careers of many young women, and especially their progression to more senior positions. Many women seem to be aware of this; working part-time is a key reason for their more negative perception of their career opportunities compared with men with the same education level.

In the explanatory section of this report we looked in more depth at the most striking differences between young women and men, which moreover begin to manifest themselves early on in their careers: part-time working and satisfaction with their jobs and career prospects. It was already known that a substantial proportion of women without young children work part-time (Portegijs et al. 2008), but this study provides the first evi-



dence that this begins so early in their careers. This is striking, because most women do not (yet) have children in this phase of their lives. Something else is clearly (also) going on. As described above, there is no single clear explanation for this finding, but rather an interplay of factors which appear to interact with each other at different levels. The *characteristics of young people* themselves plays a role, for example their preferences and ambitions with regard to work (part-time or full-time); this is in line with the preference theory put forward by Hakim (2000). But *young people's experiences and choices* also have an impact, as would be expected based on human capital theory (Becker 1964): we saw, for example, that young people's earlier choices in terms of their education level and programmes followed appear to play an important role. Finally, the *characteristics of the organisation or sector* in which young people work also play a role, including the culture within that organisation or sector (Fischer 2002 et al., Benschop 1996, 2009): in this case the norms and usual practices surrounding part-time or full-time working.

#### Some young women prefer part-time work...

It is also worth re-emphasising that not everyone's situation is the same. Women can be broken down into different groups. As we have seen, some young women have a preference for working part-time; many women prefer working part-time over a high income or the chance of promotion, while for many men precisely the reverse is true. These (differences in) preferences of women and men appear to be present long before the start of their careers. That is in line with Hakim's (2000) preference theory, which posits that preferences emerge early in life and determine the later labour market behaviour of women and men.

There are in fact grounds for questioning whether this preference for part-time working by women is their own conscious choice, or whether it is much more the product of attitudes among those around them. Ruitenbergh (2014) shows that in many cases, women's choice in favour of part-time working is determined by attitudes to gender and work that are often a product of the way they are brought up. In later life the attitudes and support of others, such as a partner, managers and colleagues, and sometimes friends, play a role in their choice for part-time or full-time working. Other research also finds a relationship between a person's own labour market behaviour or preferences and those of their parents (Van Putten 2009; Wiesmann 2010). Young women and men in the focus groups used in this study also attribute their preferences to the example set by their parents. In most cases, those parents applied a one and half earner model (full-time job for the man, part-time job for the woman), and this therefore also appears the most logical choice for most young people.

#### ... but for many other young women working part-time is not an (entirely) voluntary choice

There are also some women – and men – for whom working part-time is not an (entirely) voluntary choice. Around half of women (and men) aged up to 25 years, including many school-leavers, would like to work more hours. To understand why these women have



nonetheless taken up working part-time, it is useful to imagine their current labour market situation as the result of a concatenation of all manner of smaller, more implicit choices and decisions, not just at the start of their careers but also a long time before this. We found that girls and young women relatively often choose educational programmes which generally predestine them to work in certain occupations and sectors which employ many women, in which working part-time is (more) usual and in which the opportunities for working full-time are less than in typically 'male' occupations and sectors. It seems likely that, in making the already difficult choice regarding further education or vocational training, girls and boys are not always able to grasp the consequences of this choice for their later career. The fact that the brains of boys and girls of this age are not yet fully developed also plays a role, making them more likely (than adults) to make rapid, less well-considered decisions (Giedd et al. 2012). The expectations and perceptions that many young women and men have of their future employment when they make these choices will moreover by no means always be explicit, and this may (also) be a reason for them making more traditional, gender-specific choices. In such situations, women – and also men – then often opt for the 'usual' path, making educational and occupational choices based on parental suggestions (Trice and Rush 1995; Lavecchia et al. 2016) or, as we saw earlier, on the way in which their parents themselves combined paid work and care tasks. Gender-specific choices and attitudes are stubborn and generally change only slowly.

#### Part-time culture in typically female sectors and occupations: employers' or employees' choice?

This begs the question of how such a strong part-time culture in 'typically' female sectors and occupations arises and, conversely, such a strong full-time culture in 'male' sectors and occupations. Earlier research (Merens 2008) has shown that this is the result of a process extending over recent decades in which part-time working has been introduced in an increasing number of sectors. Part-time working began at the end of the 1950s in the industrial sector, when employers began recruiting women to make up for the shortfall in labour. Later, the government also began offering part-time jobs, and other sectors followed. It is unclear whether this was more to do with employers offering part-time jobs or female employees requesting them. What is known is that the increase in the labour participation rate of women in recent decades has gone hand in hand with growth in part-time employment (Tijdens 2006).

The resultant part-time culture in 'female' sectors and the full-time culture in 'male' sectors could indicate self-selection by women with a preference for part-time employment and men who prefer a full-time job (Borghans & de Grip 2005). No evidence emerged from our focus groups that the choice of a particular occupation or sector had been made because of the opportunities to work part-time. Most young people had fallen into the first job more or less by chance, often via an internship. In a later phase – when young people have greater negotiating power vis-à-vis their employer or have a desire to have children – they are able to make a more conscious choice in favour of a particular occupa-



tion or sector based on a preference for part-time working. We cannot say this with any certainty, because we only spoke to the youngest group.

We do however know that working part-time involuntarily is no more common among young women (aged 18-35) in 'female' sectors, such as education and healthcare/welfare than in other sectors, except for women aged up to 25 working in education (see chapter 3). In fact this also applies for young men working in these sectors. We could deduce from this that, with the exception of childcare and home care, and for those starting out on a career in education, the sector has a limited effect in determining the working hours of young women and men. There may also be a self-selection effect by young women and men who would prefer to work part-time or who have other reasons for wanting to work in a particular sector regardless of the terms of employment. Another possibility is that young women and men who do not work the number of hours they would like, eventually move to a job in a different sector which meets their wishes more closely in this regard. We have no data on this.

#### Starters on the jobs market feel they have little negotiating power

To gain a good understanding of why many women – even if they would like to work more hours – still make do with a part-time job, it may be useful to bear in mind the specific situation of those just starting out on the jobs market. It has to be remembered that many young people feel unsure of themselves at the start of their careers: in most cases they are happy to have found a job at all, especially so in the recent crisis period. In addition, the majority begin with a temporary or other form of flexible employment contract (see also Van Echtelt et al. 2016), which can be experienced as a vulnerable position from which to negotiate about working hours or other terms of employment. This applies for both women and men, but as women more often end up in part-time sectors due to their earlier education, their first job is more often part-time than is the case for men.

Once young people have gained more experience, their negotiating position is stronger. It emerged from the focus groups that young men who began working part-time involuntarily are more likely than young women to ask their employer for more hours once they have been in the job for some time. Some women do not do so because of their (already existing) preference for part-time employment; others may simply have got used to working part-time: they have already filled their free time with activities to the extent that this now represents the normal situation for them. It is also possible that they have come to regard working part-time as normal because most of their colleagues also work part-time.

#### Obstacles to changing the situation

The question which then arises is what obstacles these women might face in seeking to change their situation, for example talking to their employer about working more hours or, if that is not an option, looking for a different (full-time) job. It is known from earlier research that neither employers nor women with small part-time jobs themselves play an active role in increasing the number of working hours; only a minority raise this matter in appraisal interviews, for example (Keuzenkamp et al. 2009). Employers also sometimes



have an interest in offering some roles on a part-time basis because this gives them more flexibility in the event of staff shortages (Portegijs et al. 2008; Keuzenkamp et al. 2009). Recent research has shown that employers in the education, care and welfare sectors relatively often receive requests from employees to increase their working hours. At the same time, such requests are more often turned down in these sectors than elsewhere (Van Echtelt en De Voogd-Hamelink 2017). It is unclear how many employees are affected each year, but these findings do suggest that there may be obstacles to increasing working hours in typically female sectors.

It also has to be borne in mind that, compared with other European countries, the employment conditions for part-time working in the Netherlands are relatively good. A large number of part-time roles are available and – though not for some more senior positions, such as management roles – part-time work is available at virtually all occupational levels. People are therefore able to make ends meet with one and a half salaries (man full-time, woman part-time), thus reducing the (financial) need for women to work more hours. Finally, the members of young women’s networks – their parents, friends, partner where present, employer – generally do not expect them to work full-time (Portegijs et al. 2008). Women themselves expect their partner to earn the majority of the household income, which means that partner has little choice other than to work full-time. Just as women are often in a ‘part-time trap’, therefore, men are equally caught in a ‘full-time trap’.

Whilst compared with many other countries, the opinions of the Dutch on the division of tasks can be described as more egalitarian (Meuleman et al. 2015), stereotypes nonetheless occur frequently in Dutch public opinion on the division of tasks between women and men and the suitability of women for bringing up children (Portegijs & Van den Brakel 2016); these stereotypes also exist among young people (Hartgers et al. 2012). From this perspective, too, therefore, young women will not always be encouraged to try to change their part-time situation.

Another striking finding to emerge from the focus groups with young people is that they sometimes regret particular educational choices they made, often at a young age. Those with a lower education level, in particular – women more than men – see little scope for embarking on a different career path. They already, so early in their careers, appear to be somewhat trapped in the financial situation in which they find themselves. This finding is all the more pertinent if we consider that lower-skilled women are already in the weakest position on the labour market. They are less active on the labour market, are more likely to withdraw when children arrive, and if they do work, they do so mainly in small part-time jobs. The gender differences are therefore most marked among the low-skilled, and the difference in economic independence is therefore also the greatest between lower-skilled women and men.



## 5.4 Implications for policy

### Part-time work has a negative impact on women's economic independence

From the perspective of emancipation policy, the Dutch government has for a long time encouraged part-time working as a means of boosting the labour participation rate of women. This could be seen as making it easier for women to combine paid work with carrying out care tasks. In the 1980s and 90s, numerous measures were taken in the Netherlands to safeguard the position of part-time workers and the right to reduce or increase the number of hours worked. In recent decades, it is mainly women who have gone to work part-time, with only few men doing so. However, since 2005 part-time work has been seen as a problem in the emancipation policy (TK 2005/2006; TK 2007/2008; TK 2012/2013). Women working part-time is regarded as undesirable for various reasons. In the first place, it can be regarded as a waste, or at least a failure to make optimum use of their talents and education. Second, working part-time often has a negative impact on a person's individual career: part-time workers have less chance than their full-time peers of progressing to higher incomes and positions (Román 2006). Third, working part-time reduces women's chance of achieving economic independence – though the size of the part-time job does make a difference here. Large part-time jobs (28-34 hours per week) and medium-sized part-time jobs (20-27 hours) generally do lead to economic independence, whereas most women in small part-time jobs (less than 20 hours per week) are not economically independent (Herbers et al. 2016).

(Promoting) economic independence for women has long been a core objective of government emancipation policy (TK 2012/2013) because it makes women less dependent on a partner or benefits. This was initially promoted mainly through measures aimed at increasing the labour participation rate of women (in terms of numbers of women working), but since 2005 it has also been encouraged by seeking to increase the number of hours worked by women in small part-time jobs.

Our study found that more young women are economically independent than older women, but also that they are much less often economically independent than young men. Of all factors which influence income, the part-time factor is found to be far and away the most important for the economic independence of young women (Loog 2014). Seen from the perspective that people today increasingly combine tasks in different domains (work, education, family, informal care, hobbies), working part-time can in itself make a positive contribution, by making it easier to combine these different tasks than in a full-time job. On the other hand, from the perspective of raising economic independence, part-time working, especially in small jobs (less than 20 hours per week) can be seen as an impediment. Given the central focus on economic independence in this study, we therefore explore this policy in more depth below.

### Attention in policy

This study has shown that the economic independence of young women, especially low-skilled young women, is a topic that warrants attention. Low-skilled young women work





less often than women with senior secondary vocational qualifications (MBO) and women with a higher education (higher professional (HBO)/university), and where they do work, this is mostly in small part-time jobs. Young women with a Turkish or Moroccan migration background also less often work (in terms of both persons and hours) than native Dutch women. Government policy programmes aimed at raising the labour participation rate and economic independence of women (*Eigen Kracht* and *Kracht on Tour* (ocw) (TK 2012/2013; 2014/2015)) could ensure that sufficient attention is devoted to young, lower-skilled women and women with a migration background. More generally, the emancipation policy aimed at raising economic independence does not focus explicitly on young people.

The general labour market policy (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, szw) devotes attention to young people and work, for example with policy on active integration of young people who are not in work, education or training (Rijksoverheid 2016). The Ministry collaborates with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (ocw) in policy attempts to combat early school drop-out and promote the attainment of a basic qualification. It is notable that this general policy focusing on young people does not devote separate attention to young women and men. However, the findings described in this report show that, in active integration efforts aimed at young people who ‘miss the boat’, it is especially important to take into account differences between young women and men.

Something that touches on this is the finding from the focus groups that lower-skilled young people, in particular – and women more than men – have a sense that they did not grasp all the opportunities available to them by continuing their education. They already (aged 20-25) think they are too old to continue studying. The loss of income if they were to attend full-time education may play a role here: those in these income groups cannot afford to lose this money. None of these young people in the focus groups say they have thought about following part-time evening classes under the General Adult Secondary Education scheme (vavo). They also do not have employers who encourage them to continue learning through company training schemes or courses. Today, Dutch citizens are expected to continue learning and developing as part of the government policy on lifelong learning (LLL) (TK 2015/2016). However, it is precisely lower-skilled employees who are less likely to follow courses and internal training programmes provided by their employer compared with those with MBO or higher qualifications (Vlasblom et al. 2015; Van Echtelt et al. 2016)<sup>1</sup>. Although continued learning is more urgent for young men than young women – because men have a lower education level than women on average – it is important in the context of lifelong learning that every citizen is as well-trained as possible. Our findings appear to suggest an underutilisation of both talent and opportunities. It is therefore desirable to offer low-skilled young people more information on the opportunities for adult education or courses and programmes provided by employers.



### Opportunities for intervention in education

Women's preference for part-time working and men's preference for full-time employment, and more generally for the one and a half earner model, appear difficult to change. Moreover, these preferences manifest themselves in both women and men at an early age. There is a possible role for education in raising young people's awareness here. Students in secondary school (preparatory vocational secondary education (VMBO)/senior general secondary education (HAVO)/pre-university education (VWO)) receive information in the careers and vocational orientation programme (LOB) on the content of further education programmes and occupations and the job opportunities associated with various educational disciplines. They could also be given information on the terms of employment in different occupations and sectors, and especially the opportunities for working part-time or full-time and the consequences this has for their economic independence. These lessons could also deal with the expectations of young people regarding the future sharing of work and care tasks with their partner. This could in turn encourage boys to think about their potential role as a father. In the focus groups, it was found that when boys think about the future they are mainly focused on their ambitions for career progression and growing their incomes. Schemes such as parental leave can in principle encourage young fathers to take on (more) care tasks. In practice, however, more mothers than fathers take parental leave; fathers make relatively wide use of this leave if it is (partly) paid (OECD 2016). The extension of partner leave to six weeks announced in the government Coalition Agreement includes a partly paid leave (Regeerakkoord 2017).

There is also another way in which schools and universities could play a role in preparing young people for their employment careers. In their first jobs, young people have little say over their terms of employment. Once they have gained more experience, they acquire greater negotiating power to secure more hours, a permanent contract or an increase in salary. It is important that young women actually make use of this negotiating power. It is known from earlier research (Van den Brakel et al. 2014) that fewer women than men (25% versus 42%) negotiate about their salary. This may play a role in the pay differentials between women and men (aged over 30). Negotiating skills can also be important in obtaining more hours, and training these skills could be a useful element in job application courses provided to young people about to graduate from senior secondary vocational (MBO), higher professional (HBO) and university education.

### Attention for labour organisations and sectors

A substantial proportion of young women and men who work part-time are doing so involuntarily. To some extent this appears to be a problem for starters in all sectors, which gradually resolves itself as young people – men more than women – are able to obtain more hours from their employer. However, it also appears to be partly a structural problem in a number of specific female sectors (childcare and home care), especially in jobs at MBO level. Earlier research on part-time employment (Portegijs et al. 2008) also showed that young women saw it as a problem that they were unable to obtain full-time jobs in these roles. The argument put forward by employers for this – that full-time work is physi-



cally too strenuous – also emerged in our study. Sometimes, however, employers' need for flexibility also plays a role (Portegijs et al. 2008; Keuzenkamp et al. 2009); when there are staff shortages, for example due to illness, employers can call upon female part-time staff to temporarily work more hours. Interestingly, in sectors such as the construction industry, where men perform physically heavy work, full-time employment is never regarded as problematic. It therefore seems that different gender norms apply in different sectors. Further research could be carried out to determine the views of employers on the desirability of part-time working for and by women, and the motives for honouring or refusing requests by employees to increase their working hours. That research could also investigate whether employees work part-time rather than full-time because of a strong preference for one or the other, or whether other motives are at work in typically female and male sectors.

From the perspective of promoting economic independence, it is regrettable that young women in the prime of their lives do not have the opportunity to work full-time and earn a concomitant salary. This is primarily a matter for employers and trade unions in individual companies and sectors. The government could place part-time employment on the agenda in the discussions with these social partners. It may be that staff shortages in the care and education sectors now or in the near future (StatLine 2017c; Adriaens et al. 2016) could lead to a stepping up of the increase in the number of working hours.

If the work is genuinely physically too strenuous, adaptations in working conditions could be made to avoid or reduce overstrain. Beyond this, a rethink might be in order regarding the practice of offering part-time jobs to young women and men as standard. The position of young women and men with a preparatory or senior secondary vocational education background (VMBO/MBO) also warrants more attention from employers. It emerged from the focus groups that employers are largely concerned with the needs and position of their more highly educated starters. They appear to have a blind spot for lower-skilled staff.

It is also recommended that working hours be made a fixed element in appraisal interviews with all employees, just as the level of salary or permanent employment contract are already. Earlier research (Keuzenkamp et al. 2009) showed that this was not common practice among employers, but women with small part-time jobs also rarely take the initiative of discussing the number of hours they work with their employer.

## Note

- 1 scp is currently carrying out research on the backgrounds and characteristics of citizens who do or do not take part in lifelong learning (Maslowski, forthcoming (2018)).

