

Women's motives for part-time employment in the Netherlands: an analysis of survey data from 2008 to 2023

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Topic and background

Women spend substantially fewer hours in paid employment than men (Hipp & Kelley, 2025). The gender gap in working hours is concerning because it is associated with financial dependency on partners (Hogendoorn et al., 2020), the gender wage gap (Blau & Kahn, 2017), an unequal division of unpaid work within households (Pailhé et al., 2021), and pension inequalities (Möhring, 2015). The high prevalence of part-time work among women is also relevant in light of growing labour market shortages, especially because of the overrepresentation of women in sectors where shortages are particularly prevalent (Causa et al., 2025). A particular interesting case is the Netherlands, where the gender gap in weekly work hours is 9.13, one of the highest in Europe (Hipp & Kelley, 2025). Already in 2005, part-time employment among women was problematized in Dutch policy, in light of both economic dependency of women and in terms of labour shortage in the context of an aging society (Portegijs, 2022; Portegijs et al., 2008).

Many studies have looked at determinants of working hours of women, pointing to institutional, occupational, and individual factors that play a role in shaping women's working hours. Institutional factors relate to work-family policies and cultural norms (Andringa et al., 2015; Boeckmann et al., 2015; Misra et al., 2011). These studies find that more extensive policies and cultural support for working mothers decrease the difference in working hours between mothers and women without children (Boeckmann et al., 2015). With regards to occupational characteristics, a higher prevalence of part-time work is found in women-dominated sectors (Bächmann et al., 2022), for example in health and service sectors (Kitterød et al., 2013). Furthermore, on the individual level, studies suggest that part-time employment is associated with motherhood, having a partner, health restrictions, and lower educational attainment (Andringa et al., 2015; Antal et al., 2024; Boeckmann et al., 2015; Kitterød et al., 2013; Yerkes, 2010)

Next to looking at determinants of women's working hours, another way to understand women's part-time employment is looking at the motives reported by women *themselves* for working part-time. Quantitative studies include a diversity of motives for working part-time, such as caring for children or family, unavailability of full-time work, health, education, anticipation of retirement, and having more time to oneself (Björk et al., 2020; Chung, 2024; Mäkinen et al., 2023). Furthermore, qualitative studies on working time reduction suggest additional motives, such as negative aspects of employment like excessive workloads, or spending time in a more varied and enjoyable way (Balderson et al., 2021; Emslie & Hunt, 2009). Studying these motives is informative for understanding women's employment patterns, as different motives have shown to be related to different employment trajectories (Gash, 2008; Mäkinen et al., 2023). Studying motives provides insight in women's lived experience in shaping their employment and consequently which restrictions they might experience in doing so. For example, for some people working part-time might be motivated by a wish to have more time to oneself or coping with demanding work life (Björk et al., 2020), which could be

missed if we would only focus on more objective determinants, such as health or motherhood.

Therefore, this study aims to further our understanding women's employment patterns, by looking at women's motives to working part-time, their determinants and changes in motives over a sixteen year period. To date, there are few studies that aim to explain motives to working part-time. Most research on this topic has descriptive purposes, i.e. describing the distribution among the general population with the aim of policy monitoring (Brenke, 2011; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2024; Chung, 2024; Fagan & Rubery, 1996; Plantenga, 2002; Portegijs et al., 2008). The few studies that aim to explain motives for working part-time, show that motives relating to caring for children is associated with having young children, higher occupational status and educational attainment, while motives relating to demanding jobs or lives and caring for family members is associated with manual workers and older individuals (Björk et al., 2020; Persson et al., 2022; Walsh, 1999). Apart from these studies, our knowledge on who has which motives for part-time work is limited.

Looking at differences between different groups allows us to further understand who experiences part-time work as a constraint or as a preferred outcome, and under which circumstances these motives arise. This will uncover possible inequalities for individual in shaping their employment patterns. In this study, we look at differences in motives by key socio-demographic determinants such as educational attainment, household composition (children, partner) and age. Firstly, motives might differ by educational attainment. Education might offer resources that would make it easier for women to work part-time for leisure or health reasons, for example in terms of financial resources (Emslie & Hunt, 2009; Portegijs et al., 2008). Another possible explanation is norms on ideal parenthood associated with educational attainment, which might influence motives for working part-time (Björk et al., 2020). Secondly, we expect household composition to be associated with different motives. Logically, having children has been demonstrated to be an important motive for working part-time among individuals who have young children (Björk et al., 2020; Portegijs et al., 2008; Walsh, 1999). Other motives might also be at play when having children, such as a demanding work life or a wish for leisure time (Björk et al., 2020). In addition, our study gives insight in motivations to work part-time for women who do not have children living at home (Balderson et al., 2021; Portegijs et al., 2008). Finally, by examining the role of age, we examine whether at different times in one's life, different motives for working part-time might be at play (Emslie & Hunt, 2009). Motives to working part-time might change over the life course, for example due to changing caring responsibilities with children moving out of the house or aging parents. In addition, when getting older, people might evaluate their life and focus more on activities outside of employment (Emslie & Hunt, 2009). Another motive could be to take early retirement or to avoid sick leave (Björk et al., 2020).

The prevalence of motives and its determinants may have changed over time, as economic, institutional, and cultural factors are related to the hours women work (Boeckmann et al., 2015). For example, economic crises (Canon et al., 2014), expansion of parental policies (Yerkes & Peper, 2025), the decrease of work obligation norms (Wielers & Raven, 2013) or the increase of support for egalitarian gender roles (Kraaykamp, 2012; Scarborough et al., 2019) could lead to shifts in motives such as presence of children in the household, preference for leisure time, or not being able to find a full-time job. Data from the EU shows that over the last decade working part-time

because of unavailability of a full-time job has decreased, which also holds for the motive of other family and personal reasons. Part-time work for caring motives has remained fairly constant among women (Chung, 2024). With the exception of Chung (2024), to our knowledge no previous study examined how motives for working part-time have changed over time, and whether the associated between these motives and their determinants has changed over time. Therefore, in our study we research how motives and their determinants have developed between 2008 and 2023.

All in all, this study contributes to the literature of women's part-time employment in three ways. Firstly, it adds to the literature that uses motives to working part-time that women report *themselves*. Secondly, we study how motives differ by socio-demographic profile. We will develop and test hypotheses about how motives are stratified along lines of social inequality. Thirdly, we analyse how the importance of different motives and its determinants change over time. We will analyses survey data covering a sixteen year period from 2008 to 2023.

Data and methods

In this study, we use sixteen waves (2008-2023) of the *Work and Schooling module* of the LISS (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences) panel. To analyse motives over time, we approach the waves as pooled cross-sectional data. For motives for working part-time, respondents working less than 36 hours were presented a list of possible reasons to working part-time and were asked to choose the reasons applicable to them. Motives relate to care or household work, availability of part-time work, health, activities outside the home, retirement, leisure time, and other reasons.

For each motive, we conduct a logistic regression analysis with robust standard errors (to account for the panel structure of the data). We first examine the relationship between the respective motive and age, household composition and educational attainment. Next we test whether the survey year is related to the different motives. Finally, to examine whether the relation between the motives and the different sociodemographic variables has changed over time, we include an interaction term of survey year and each sociodemographic variable.

Preliminary findings

Figure 1 show the proportion of women mentioning a certain motive. A (change in) family situation is the most prevalent motive for working part-time, followed by leisure motives. Unavailability of a full-time job and other activities at home were mentioned equally often. Informal caregiving and retirement motives are mentioned the least (less than 5%). Figure 2 shows the development of motives between 2008 and 2023. We see a decrease of the family motive to working part-time, while there is an increase of the leisure motive. Unavailability of a full-time job is increasing until 2015, whereafter it is decreasing. Other activities at home has decreased, but is increasing in the last few years. The prevalence of motives of retirement, informal care, and other activities outside home remain relatively stable over time.

Figure 1. Motives of part-time employment among women

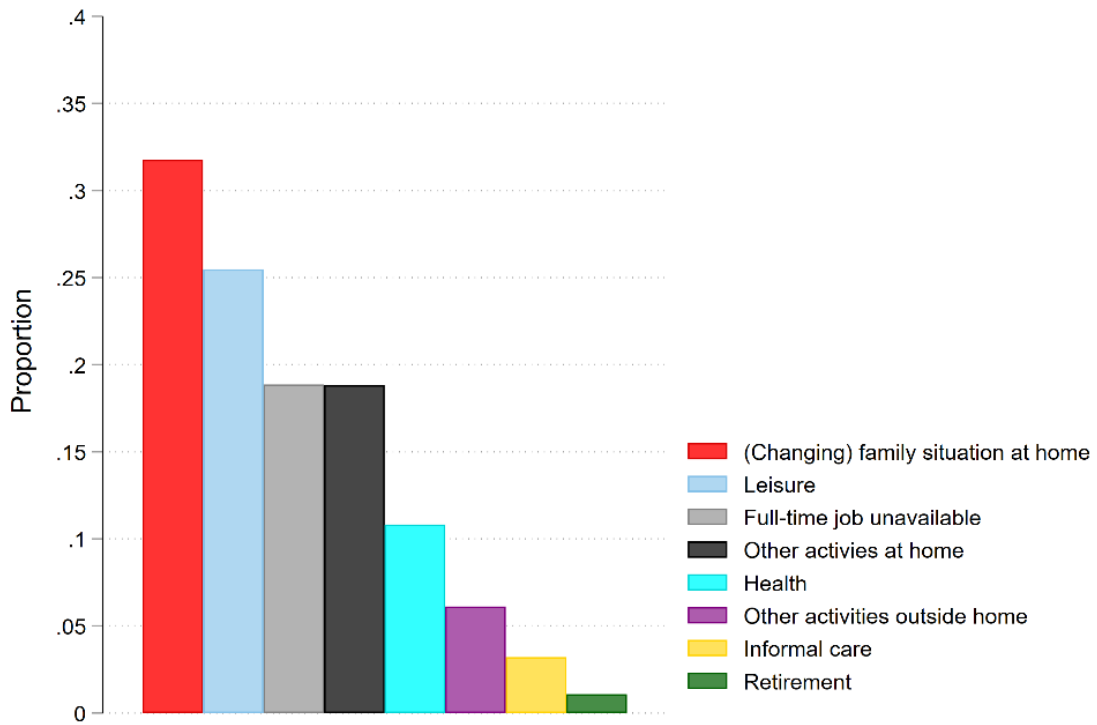
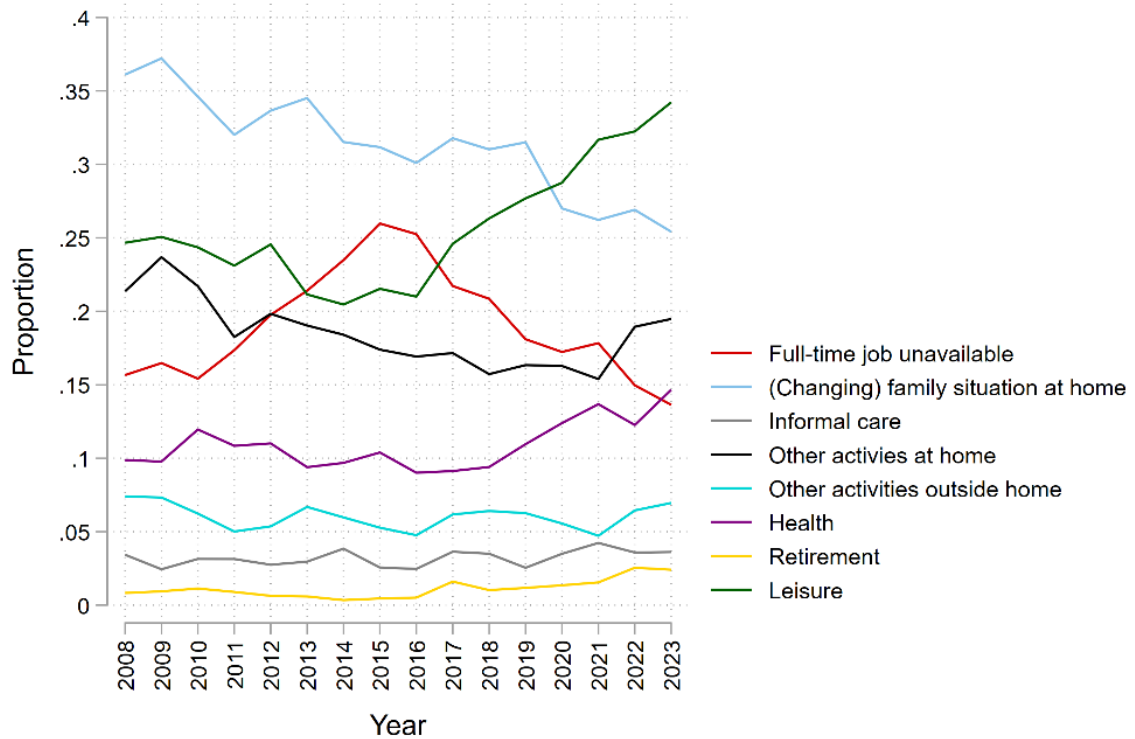


Figure 2. Motives of part-time employment among women over time (2008-2023)



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