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Unions and work-life balance: lessons  
from France and the UK (and beyond)

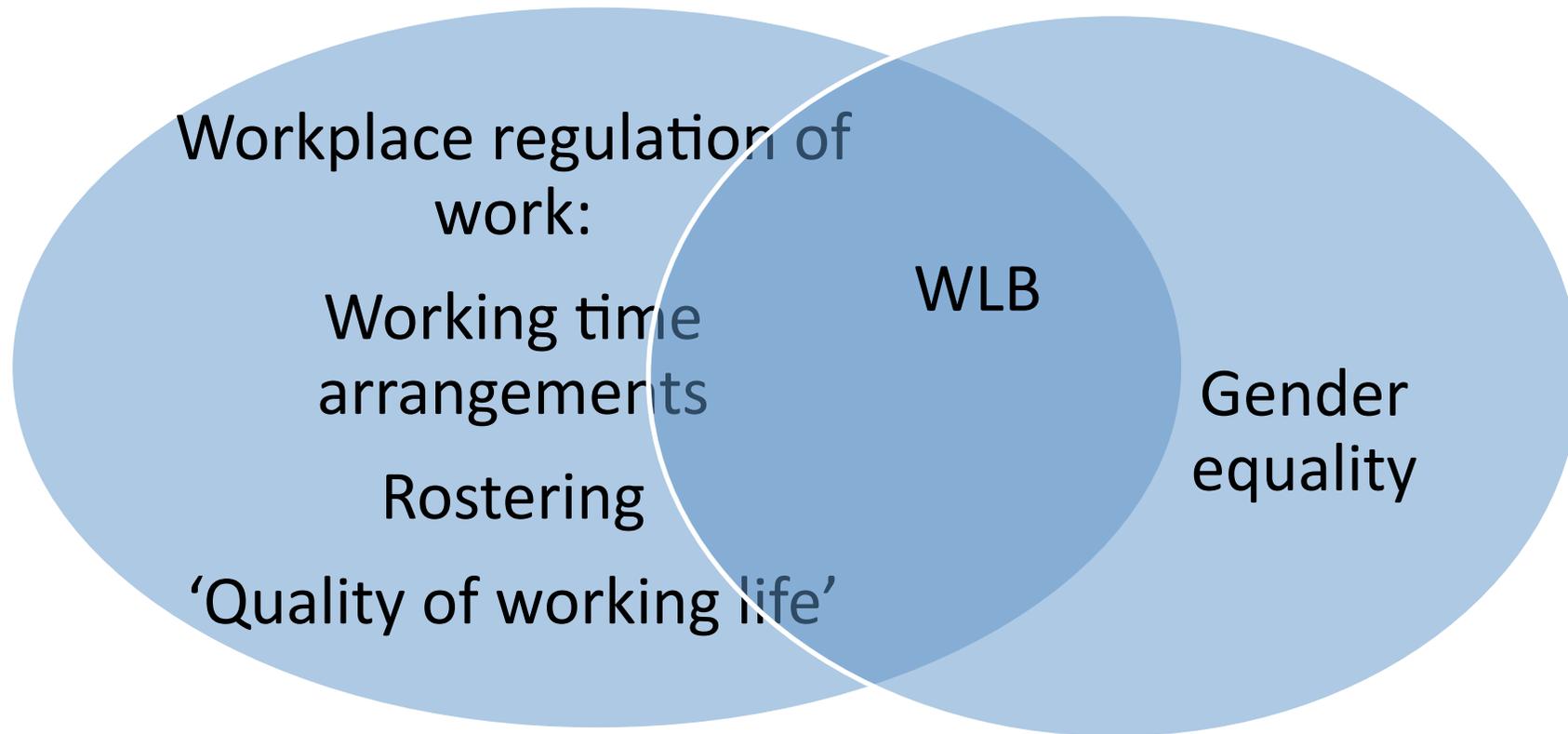
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ESRC Seminar Series (3) Work-Life  
Balance in Recession

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# Trade unions matter....

- Higher level of union density is an important factor determining the scope and nature of WLB policies and practices (at national level: e.g. Ferrangina & Seeleib-Kaiser, forthcoming; at workplace level: e.g. Haas & Hwang, 2013)
- ... but the relationship between union activity and WLB policy/practice is not straightforward: unions traditionally male-dominated in membership and priorities
- ... and unions (in most OECD countries) have been severely weakened since the early 1990s (and in policy terms, marginalised since 2008)



Workplace regulation of work:

Working time arrangements

Rostering

'Quality of working life'

WLB

Gender equality

# What role for unions?

- Collective bargaining: at relevant level, although probably most appropriate at workplace level. But even in Sweden and in most profitable companies with high density (80% mean), a minority pursuit (Haas & Hwang, 2013)
- Education/awareness: relatively weak activity
- Case work: potentially important (Haas & Hwang, 2013), but dependent on strong legal framework?  
*UK*: potential to develop case work in support of right to request flexible working? (see TUC, 2014)

# Recession/austerity and opportunity structures

	Gender equity	Union density	Bargaining coverage and features	Legal framework
Sweden (shallow recession)	Relatively high (i.e. leadership % aligned with membership %)	High (over 70%) and stable	High, decentralised but articulated	Supportive (e.g. parental leave pioneer)
France (recessions, very low growth, limited austerity but long-term wage depression)	CFDT push in 1980s; CGT later but recent 2007 push in line with GEB law. Formal structures, little evidence of progress, few recent initiatives	Very low (8% at most) but wider union presence due <i>inter alia</i> to 2008 reforms; no recent data to confirm but assumed stability	High but unevenly applied, weakly coordinated	Supportive but law is often weak and leaves detail to CB where unions are weak at decentralised level
UK (recession, low growth, sharp austerity)	Training academy and equality reps boosted equity pre-2008, still imbalance in structures	Slightly higher than EU average (26% in 2012: fell sharply post-2007 but rose in 2012)	Lower than EU average: 29% in 2012 (WERS 2011 shows slight fall from 2004)	(Weakly) supportive (always contingent on business case)

# UK: WLB in the 'shadow of recession'

(van Wanrooy et al, 2013)

- Private sector: WERS 2011 findings on impact of restructuring, shift in employer attitudes
- Public sector: 2014 Unison study on social workers showing work intensification and work-family conflict
- 2012 TUC Equality Audit: increased number of unions reporting difficulty of raising equality issues
- Combination of worsening WLB conditions despite some favourable legislation (e.g. ONS 2012, 2014) and 'crowding out' of WLB by pay and job security concerns

## **France:** activist policy framework, weak workplace unions

Gender equity: parity policy from 1980s (esp. CFDT), strong women's representation structures, but few specific initiatives within the confederations (CGT: 2007-9 initiative)

Institutional opportunities: (1) Bargained working time reduction and 'negotiated flexibility'  
(2) Legislation on gender equality bargaining and workplace gender equality plans  
(3) Negotiations on 'quality of working life' (2013)

# (1) WTR and 'bargained flexibility'

- Since mid-1980s, policy aim of extending 'atypical work' whilst also protecting it through 'bargained flexibility': CFDT strongly supportive, CGT critical of derogation from norms
- 1999-2000 Aubry laws: bargaining widened palette of WLB measures in organisations (Gregory & Milner, 2009), based on **norm of full-time employment**
- Since 2008: increased polarisation of WT – still limited compared to UK - leading to union demands to limit part-time work (and focus on low-paid, insecure work and under-employment) (CGT, 2014, n.a., 2014)

## (2) Gender equality bargaining: an 'empty shell'?

(Meilland, 2010; Milner & Gregory, 2014)

- WLB within GEB: focus on maternity, paternity and parental leave, and requested 'modulations' of WT, within wider GE perspective (CGT, 2012)
- Rise of number of companies engaged in GEB: from 1,214 (4.4% of the total) in 2007 to 6,334 (12%) in 2011 and 5,716 (18%) in 2012 (Ministère du Travail, 2013: 520)
- Bargaining to date largely procedural, although some substantive innovations, and some evidence of integrated approach in larger companies
- January 2014: law failed to strengthen enforcement mechanisms (only half of companies comply, and many of these do 'lip service')

### (3) Agreement on 'quality of working life'

- National agreement of 19 June 2013 (an 'important' agreement although not widely discussed: CFDT leader Berger)
- 'Experimental': to be assessed after 3 years
- Innovative in combining WLB and GE, also workplace employment relations quality; in encouraging companies to introduce employee 'voice' mechanisms (surveys, groups)
- Funding for 500 'resource' delegates
- CGT refused to sign a 'disappointing' agreement based on good intentions but insufficiently 'normative' but said it would participate in workplace activities
- *Les Echos* January 2014: agreement now 'forgotten' by government and even by CFDT

## WLB: a subsidiary concern in economic crisis?

- National social summits: 2012 gender equality & quality of working life one of five key themes; no longer in 2014 (now resolved by June 2013 agreement and January 2014 law?)
- Joint union statement (all but FO): need to focus on low pay, part-time work, pension inequalities, GEB → gender impact assessment in bargaining and policy
- WLB priorities focused on wider issues of low pay, under-employment and precarious employment

# Conclusions...

- UK: increased scope for awareness and casework support, but reduced scope for bargaining due to crowding out
- France: a state-driven opportunity framework which has pushed forward since 2008 but stalled in 2014; union agenda 'crowded out' by concerns over pay, under-employment and precarious work; 2013 agreement vague and unlikely to be followed up, overshadowed by government's new 'responsibility pact'
- *Room for optimism?* Moments of mobilisation can lead to wider awareness and more sophisticated agendas; longer-term trend towards feminisation of structures

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