

The forgotten labour force: Characteristics and trends for older female part-time workers in Ireland

Research Article

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Abstract: Changing labour markets, educational attainment, work experience, constraints and preferences have all been proposed to explain the features of contemporary female labour force participation. This engagement has been characterised as part-time and segregated in low status, poorly paid jobs. Despite the fact that almost half of all older female workers are employed part-time, there is a dearth of information on who these workers are (the forgotten labour force) and what, if anything has changed over time for this cohort. For the first time, key variables are drawn from three labour force datasets over a 16-year period to provide a likely profile of the older female part-time worker, highlight where they work and in what capacity, as well as shedding light on what has changed over this period. This trend analysis highlights significant changes for this worker cohort, the implications of which are discussed from individual, organisational and societal perspectives.

Keywords: *Part-time; older females; job characteristics; precarious employment*

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INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable and continuous academic interest in the rationale for so many women working part-time with much debate and little agreement on these reasons (e.g. Blossfeld and Hakim, 1997; Fagan and Rubery, 1996; Kalleberg, 2009; Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014; Yoon and Chung, 2016). In addition to occupation (Anxo et al., 2007; Galtier, 1999; Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014), recent studies have shown that personal characteristics such as age (Cassirer, 2003; Isusi and Corral, 2004), marital status (Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014; Thurman and Trah, 1990) and human capital attributes such as education and training (Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014) all contribute to the likelihood of women working part-time, as does the presence of children in the household (Anxo et al., 2007; Paull, 2008).

Factors associated with the workings of the labour market have also contributed to this trend (Cohen and Stier, 2006), including both demand- and supply-side influences in addition to institutional and regulatory factors. These factors include statutory provisions, collective agreements and family-friendly policies (Bönker and Wollmann, 2001; OECD, 2010; Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014). Demand-side factors such as the growth of the service sector (Blossfeld and Hakim, 1997; Buddelmeyer et al., 2008), product demand fluctuations (Reilly, 1998), short-term cost reduction techniques and production increases (Cassirer, 2003; Tilly, 1996) have all led to the increase in part-time employment.

Focusing on the supply-side of labour, women's increased labour market participation has occurred mostly in part-time employment with some groups of women showing a greater tendency toward part-time working such as younger women, older women and mothers of young children (Buddelmeyer et al., 2008; Isusi and Corral, 2004). Susan McRae (2003) points to factors such as parental sharing of household duties, greater childcare provision and women's changing lifestyles as having also contributed to a greater supply of female part-time workers as well as the flexibility part-time working offers in combining paid work with family demands, leisure activities and other interests (Fagan, 2003). In an Irish context, the number of women at work almost doubled between 1990 and 2014,

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mainly as a result of women moving from the home to part-time employment (Russell et al., 2002). This supply of female labour, especially women returners, has been labelled by Bruegel (1979: 12) as a 'reserve army of labour', to meet fluctuating labour demands.

Indeed much of the research in this area has focused on the reasons for younger, rather than older women working part-time. Consequently, little is known about why older women work part-time in Ireland, which characteristics are associated with these workers and what, if anything, has changed over time. In order to address this dearth of knowledge and to form a clearer picture of the characteristics associated with older female part-time workers (OFPTW), where they work and in which roles, an innovative profile was developed using demographic and socio-economic indicators drawn from the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) in 2014. In addition, these characteristics are explored at two time periods to conduct a trend analysis for this cohort of worker in the Irish context.

Research in this area is particularly timely in the context of current Government policy to extend working lives, the prevalence of part-time work among older women in Ireland and the increasing focus on precarious employment. As a result, the focus of this paper is on the *older* cohort of women (aged 50 to 64) working part-time in Ireland. This is a cohort worthy of examination for a number of reasons. Firstly, as people age, the probability of working part-time increases (Barrett et al., 2011). Secondly, this cohort is noteworthy given the high rate of part-time work among older women in Ireland – over one-third of all working women and almost half of those aged over 50 worked part-time in 2017 (OECD, 2019). Finally, increases in life expectancy among older people, combined with the extension of the period of dependency on pensions and the reduction in the proportion of the working age population will necessitate older people working into their late 60s and beyond (Ghosheh Jr et al., 2006; Payne and Doyal, 2010). By providing some clarity on the characteristics associated with these workers and what has changed over time, we address the lacuna in this area in the Irish context.

CONTEXTUALISING PART-TIME WORK BY OLDER WORKERS

By 2050, the United Nations (UN) predicts that almost one-third of the working age population in developed countries will be over 50 years of age (Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2011). In order to meet the European target of increasing the EU's employment rate of those aged 20 to 64 to a minimum of 75 percent, higher employment rates are required by women, older workers and young people (European Commission, 2017). Table 1 highlights the proportion of the population aged 50-64 as a percentage of the total population in the EU28 countries from 2006 to 2016. These statistics suggest that although Ireland's proportion of older people aged 50-64 is comparatively low, relative to the total population, its proportion has increased in recent years in line with other EU countries. In 2016, there were 808,893 people aged between 50 and 64 years of age living in Ireland; an increase of 11 percent on 2011 figures (CSO, 2016). Among this age cohort, almost two-thirds of men and fewer than half of the female population are at work.

Recent decades have witnessed a rapid expansion of part-time employment in most OECD countries (OECD, 2017). In the 1970s and 1980s in Northern Europe, this growth was as a result of married women working in service sector employment at times of labour shortages and increased product demand (Blossfeld and Hakim, 1997; Buddelmeyer et al., 2008; Reilly, 1998). Recently, part-time work has been viewed as a method of reducing unemployment in Europe (Smith et al., 2002). Notwithstanding these changes, defining part-time work is problematic and definitions vary on a number of levels including geography, industry sector, organisation and business unit. The OECD states that a definition of part-time work based on a 30 hour usual threshold is appropriate in terms of international comparison (Van Bastelaer et al., 1997). For the purposes of this research, part-time employees are defined as those who normally work less than approximately 30 hours per week (CSO, 2008a). Table 2 highlights some of the most commonly-used definitions of part-time employment/part-time workers.

Despite this popularity, part-time work is not equally spread across genders, age cohorts, occupations or sectors. Women are more likely than men to work part-time, accounting for 70 percent of part-time workers in Ireland in 2017 when 33 percent of women worked part-time compared with 12 percent of men (CSO, 2017a). As people in Ireland age, the likelihood of working part-time increases; older adults in Ireland work fewer hours and are more likely to work part-time as they approach State pension age (Barrett et al., 2011). Indeed the proportion of part-time workers in an Irish context has consistently been higher than the EU average; in 2018, 20.8 percent of workers in Ireland were employed part-time, compared with the EU average of 16.6 percent (OECD, 2019).

Notwithstanding the growth in part-time employment in recent times, defining and measuring job quality can be challenging (Warren and Lyonette, 2018). The literature predominantly considers part-time work to be poor quality, occupying the secondary labour market, attracting lower hourly pay, few promotional prospects and high turnover, poorer terms and conditions of employment and fewer training and promotional opportunities (Anxo et al., 2007; Collins, 2015; Fagan and Rubery, 1996; Tilly, 1996). However seminal work by Tilly (1996) and Kalleberg et al. (2000) question the notion of part-time jobs being uniformly bad.

Table 1: Proportion of population aged 50-64 as a percentage of total population

COUNTRY	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016
EU 28	18.2	18.7	19.2	19.6	19.9	20.1
Austria	17.6	17.8	18.3	19.4	20.0	20.6
Belgium	18.1	18.8	19.3	19.5	19.7	20.0
Bulgaria	20.6	21.1	21.4	21.3	21.1	20.6
Croatia	19.2	19.7	20.5	21.2	21.4	21.5
Cyprus	16.5	16.9	17.4	17.7	18.1	18.0
Czech Republic	21.1	21.4	20.9	20.4	19.8	19.5
Denmark	19.9	19.9	19.6	19.2	19.1	19.3
Estonia	18.2	18.4	19.2	19.9	20.0	19.7
Finland	21.1	21.5	21.7	21.3	20.7	20.3
France	17.9	18.6	19.1	19.4	19.3	19.2
Germany	18.4	18.6	19.3	20.7	21.7	22.1
Greece	17.0	17.7	18.3	18.6	19.0	19.4
Hungary	20.1	20.4	20.3	21.0	20.5	20.0
IRELAND	15.4	15.4	15.8	16.2	16.7	16.9
Italy	18.5	18.7	19.1	19.5	19.9	20.6
Latvia	17.8	17.9	18.8	20.0	20.6	20.7
Lithuania	16.7	17.1	18.2	19.7	20.6	21.1
Luxembourg	16.9	17.3	17.8	18.2	18.7	19.2
Malta	20.2	21.6	21.7	21.6	20.9	20.1
Netherlands	19.0	19.7	20.1	20.3	20.4	20.6
Poland	18.2	19.6	21.0	21.5	21.3	20.8
Portugal	17.8	18.3	18.8	19.4	20.0	20.4
Romania	17.9	18.9	20.0	20.0	19.8	18.9
Slovenia	19.2	19.9	20.3	21.2	21.5	21.7
Slovakia	17.9	18.9	19.6	20.2	20.3	20.4
Spain	16.5	16.9	17.4	18.0	18.7	19.6
Sweden	19.7	19.6	19.1	18.5	18.1	18.1
United Kingdom	17.8	18.0	18.1	18.2	18.2	18.5

Source: Eurostat

Table 2: Definitions of part-time employment/part-time workers

Country/Institution	Source	Definition
Ireland	(CSO, 2008)	Work less than approx. 30 hours per week
Finland, Canada, New Zealand, U.K.	(ILO, 2008)	Work less than approx. 30 hours per week
Australia, Austria, Iceland, Sweden, U.S.	(ILO, 2008)	Work less than approx. 35 hours per week
Hungary, Turkey	(ILO, 2008)	Work less than approx. 36 hours per week
Norway	(ILO, 2008)	Work less than approx. 37 hours per week
Japan	(Houseman and Osawa, 1998)	Explicitly related to status within the firm and not to hours worked
International Labour Office	ILO Part-Time Work Convention, 1994	Normal hours of work less than those of comparable full-time work
European Union	EU Part-Time Work Directive (1997)	Normal hours of work less than those of comparable full-time work

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the worker characteristics and demographic and socio-economic trends over as long a period as possible for older women working part-time in Ireland, the QNHS datasets from quarter four in 1998 and 2014 were analysed. The QNHS is a large-scale, nationwide survey of households in Ireland, designed to produce quarterly labour force estimates in line with International Labour Office (ILO) classification. Prior to its replacement by a labour force survey in 2017, 3,000 households were surveyed each week to give a total sample of 39,000 households in each quarter. As questions relating to educational attainment had not been introduced in 1998, data from the fourth quarter in 2001 are used as the first time period to address this question. In addition, the socio-economic characteristics of occupation, economic sector of employment and usual hours worked are analysed. The numbers of observations for the relevant quarter in each of the reference years are as follows (see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Number of observations for relevant QNHS datasets

Quarter and Year	Number of observations
Q4 1998	108,381
Q4 2001	106,909
Q4 2014	50,515

Source: QNHS 2014

Study population

The study population for OFPTW in 1998 was 31,965; this figure had more than doubled to 77,730 by 2014. The worker cohort included in this study, older female part-time workers, was chosen based on gender, age and employment status (full- or part-time). In terms of chronological age, older workers are conceptualised at different ages, however, they are generally referred to as those being aged 50 and over (Chou and Choi, 2011; ILO, 2008). In order to carry out the analysis, age was recoded into a new variable to capture individuals in the relevant age group. Accordingly, older workers are defined in this study as being those aged 50-64.

Part-time work is predominantly carried out by women (Kulik et al., 2014; OECD, 2012; Turner et al., 2017). In addition, the literature posits that gender may influence employment decisions in the later stages of working life (Duberley et al., 2014; Finch, 2014; Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2015). Consequently, gender was a variable which was included in the analysis to explore its relevance within this study.

OLDER FEMALE PART-TIME WORKERS: A PROFILE

Demographic characteristics

In 2014, there were 77,730 OFPTW in the Irish labour market. This cohort was predominantly Irish (95%), married (75.2%), living as part of a couple with children (50.2%) and had achieved higher secondary education (29.1%). Table 4 provides a breakdown of the demographic characteristics of OFPTW in 1998 and 2014.

Analysing these data in more detail, it can be seen that although more than three-quarters of this cohort was married in 2014, approximately half (50.2%) lived as part of a couple with children, more than one in three (35.7%) having no children and one in seven (14.1%) being in lone parent families. In terms of educational attainment, almost one-third (29.1%) had completed higher secondary education with almost half (44.5%) of this cohort having achieved post-secondary or third-level education.

Table 4: Demographic characteristics for older female part-time workers, 1998 and 2014 (%)

		1998 (%)	2014 (%)
At work	N**	31,965	77,730
Nationality	Non-Irish	2.2	5.0
	Irish	97.8	95.0
Marital status	Single	4.7	7.4
	Married	80.3	75.2
	Widowed	8.4	6.9
	Divorced/legally separated	6.6	10.5
Family type	Couple no children	26.2	35.7
	Couple with children	63.1	50.2
	Lone parent family	10.7	14.1
	Primary	34.3	10.0
Highest educational attainment*	Lower secondary	19.3	16.2
	Higher secondary	18.3	29.1
	Post-secondary	11.2	18.4
	Third level	16.7	26.1
	Doctoral	0.2	0.1

Source: CSO. * Reference years: 2001 & 2014

**Survey results are weighted to the population estimates broken down by age, sex and region

Socio-economic characteristics

In terms of socio-economic characteristics for this cohort, in 2014 the majority worked in the public sector (51.2%), in administration and clerical roles (25.3%), in health-related sectors of the economy (36.2%), working an average of 19 to 30 hours per week. Table 5 provides a breakdown of the socio-economic characteristics of OFPTW in 1998 and 2014.

The occupational categories used in this research are based on the nine groupings from the UK's SOC 2010. In terms of occupations, apart from administration/clerical roles, more than one in five (20.8%) of this cohort worked in the area of personal services in 2014 which includes childcare workers, sports and leisure assistants, nursing auxiliaries, care workers and home carers, hairdressers, cleaning managers and supervisors. Fewer than one in seven of this cohort (14.7%) worked in sales and customer services occupations with similar percentages working in elementary occupations (14.6%). This category includes packers, postal workers, cleaners, shelf-fillers as well as kitchen and catering assistants.

Overall, approximately 20% worked in management, professional or associate professional roles which generally require post-secondary education. However, almost half of this cohort had attained post-secondary or third-level education. Moreover, approximately three-quarters of all OFPTW (75.4%) were working in administrative, personal services, sales or elementary occupations which, in some cases, may require some vocational or on-the-job training rather than post-secondary education. An analysis of this cohort's educational attainment and occupation would suggest that many OFPTW were over-qualified for the occupations in which they worked in 2014.

Turning to economic sector of employment, based in NACE Rev.2 Economic Sector classifications, the sector which employed the greatest percentages of OFPTW in 2014 was the Health sector, employing over one-third of all workers from this cohort, with the Health and Education sectors combined employing almost half of all OFPTW (48.6%). Almost one in five of this cohort (19.7%) was employed in the Wholesale/retail sector. The data indicate that almost three-quarters (74.1%) of this cohort worked in the Health, Education, Wholesale/retail and Accommodation and food sectors with 11.8% working in administration or public administration activities, despite the fact that more than one in four worked in Administration/clerical occupations. In terms of usual hours worked, the majority of this cohort (58.3%) worked for between 19 and 30 hours per week with 6.2% indicating that their usual hours worked always vary.

Combining both demographic and socio-economic characteristics, it is possible to develop a likely profile of older women working part-time in Ireland in 2014. This person is Irish, married with children and has completed

secondary-level education, is employed in the public sector, most likely in a clerical role in the Health sector, working between 19 and 30 hours per week. Having developed a profile for the OPFTW in 2014, the following section will discuss this profile before moving on to analyse the trends for this cohort in the 16 years between 1998 and 2014.

Table 5: Socio-economic characteristics for older female part-time workers, 1998 and 2014 (%)

		1998 (%)	2014 (%)
Sector	Private	79.3	48.8
	Public	20.7	51.2
Occupation	Managers, Directors & senior officials	9.9	1.3
	Professional	6.0	12.7
	Associate professional	11.2	6.5
	Higher-level occupations	27.1%	20.5%
	Administration/clerical	16.1	25.3
	Craft	1.6	2.6
	Mid-level occupations	17.7%	27.9%
	Personal services	14.6	20.8
	Sales	13.3	14.7
	Plant Operatives	2.5	1.5
	Elementary	24.8	14.6%
	Lower-level occupations	55.2%	51.6%
	Industry	6.2	3.5
	Construction	0.7	1.0
	Wholesale/retail	17.3	19.7
	Transportation	1.3	1.2
	Accommodation/food	13.1	5.8
	ICT	0.8	0.8
Economic sector	Financial activities	2.5	4.0
	Professional activities	3.7	3.2
	Admin activities	5.8	6.1
	Public admin	2.0	5.7
	Education	12.9	12.4
	Health activities	24.2	36.2
	Hours always vary	6.3	6.2
	2 to 8 hours	7.1	6.8
	9 to 18 hours	33.0	27.9
	19 to 30 hours	51.7	58.3
Usual hours worked	Over 30 hours	2.0	0.8

Source: CSO

Discussion

Some writers (e.g. Blossfeld and Hakim, 1997; Bothfeld et al., 2005; Hakim, 2000; OECD, 2004; Wielers and Van Der Meer, 2003) point to the growth in part- rather than full-time employment being as a result of the increased participation of married women in the labour market. In addition to marital status, previous research has identified personal characteristics of age and the existence of children in the household as contributory factors to the likelihood of women working part-time (Anxo et al., 2007; Barrett et al., 2011; Cassirer, 2004; Galtier, 1999; Isusi and Corral, 2004; Paull, 2008; Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014; Thurman and Trah, 1990). Findings from our study concur with the likelihood of these factors contributing to part-time employment. Our innovative profile from 2014 indicates that the typical older female part-time worker is Irish, married and living as part of a couple with children. These findings may speak to one demand-side perspective of female labour market participation which suggests that married women in particular may act as a 'reserve army of labour' (Bruegel, 1979, p.12) or contingent workforce.

In 2014, almost half of the OFPTW cohort had attained post-secondary or third-level education with one in ten have achieved primary education only. In terms of occupational downgrading, Connolly and Gregory (2009) argue that one-quarter of British women in high-skill jobs downgrade occupationally when switching from full- to part-time jobs. Additionally, a study by Manning and Petrongolo (2008) indicates that there is a significant part-time

occupations gap with many of these women being over-qualified for their roles in these occupational areas. An analysis of this cohort's educational attainment and occupation suggests that many OFPTW were over-qualified for the occupations in which they worked in 2014. This suggests agreement with Russell et al. (2002) who concluded that women returners are often forced into jobs with lower pay or status than those they left, leading to occupational downgrading.

Turner and McMahon (2011) suggest that, compared to the public sector, companies in the private sector are likely to offer inferior family friendly benefits to female workers and are therefore less attractive to women. Findings from our research show that more than half of this cohort worked in the public sector in 2014. Moreover, our study reveals that more than one-third of OFPTW was employed in Health sector of the economy in 2014. To put this in context, the Irish public health service was the largest employer in the state in 2016 with over 128,000 personnel employed directly by the Health Service Executive and via employment agencies in the provision of public health and social care services (HSE, 2016). In 2016, four out of every five workers in the Health sector was female (81.7%); this proportion is higher than the EU average of 78% (CSO, 2017b). On the subject of pay, a health care assistant with 10 to 20 years' experience can expect to earn an average of €28,000 per annum, compared with average annual earnings for full-time employees in 2016 of €45,611 (CSO, 2017a). Given that one in five of all OFPTW was employed in Personal services occupations in 2014, these findings highlight the low pay rates associated with the roles performed by many from the older female part-time worker cohort. In light of Ireland's ageing population, it is probable that there will be increased numbers of workers in the Irish labour market employed in personal services roles in the future. Looking ahead to 2050, it is predicted that Ireland's old age dependency ratio will increase to over 45% - almost half the country's population (European Commission, 2005) - suggesting that there will be one pensioner for every two people of working-age; a significant change from the ratio of six people of working age to every pensioner in 2010.

OLDER FEMALE PART-TIME WORKERS: TREND ANALYSIS

Having discussed the most common profile of the OFPTW in 2014, attention now turns to analysing the trends for this cohort, explored using QNHS data relating to the fourth quarter in both 1998 and 2014. The demographic trends are analysed using indicators of nationality, marital status, family type and educational attainment. Socio-economic characteristics for this cohort are then parsed using indicators of public/private sector employment breakdown, economic sector of employment, occupation and usual hours worked.

Demographic trends

As can be seen from Table 4, there were substantial increases over time in the percentages of OFPTW who were non-Irish (from 2.2% to 5.0%), single persons (from 4.7% to 7.4%), those who were divorced/legally separated (from 6.6% to 10.5%), in couples with no children (from 26.2% to 35.7%) and in lone parent families (from 10.7% to 14.1%). Consequently, significant decreases were recorded in percentages from this cohort who were married (from 80.3% to 75.2%) and those who were in couples with children (from 63.1% to 50.2%).

One of the most note-worthy trends observed from this research was the substantial increase in educational attainment among OFPTW over time. As educational attainment was not recorded in 1998, data from quarter four in 2001 is the baseline reference period used in this research. At that time, OFPTW were mainly educated to primary level (34.3%). By 2014, this cohort was predominantly educated to higher secondary level (29.1%). In terms of tertiary education, more than one-quarter of this cohort had achieved this level of educational attainment in the latter period (26.1%), compared with 16.7% in 2001.

Socio-economic trends

As can be seen from Table 5, our analysis of socio-economic characteristics shows a significant shift between the time periods towards public sector working among OFPTW. One in five of this cohort worked in the public sector in 1998 (20.7%), compared with over half of this cohort in 2014 (51.2%).

Turning to occupational trends for this cohort, there were significant decreases over time in the percentages employed in some higher occupations, such as the Manager and Associate Professional occupational categories (from 9.9% to 1.3% and from 11.2% to 6.5% respectively). Contrary to this trend, the proportion of this cohort working in the Professional occupations had more than doubled during this time (from 6.0% to 12.7%). Turning

to mid-level occupations for OFPTW, Administration/clerical occupations recorded substantial increases in the percentages working in these categories between periods (from 16.1% to 25.3%). Focusing on lower-level occupations, the proportion from this cohort working in Personal services occupations had increased considerably between periods (from 14.6% in 1998 to 20.8% in 2014). In 1998, almost one in four (24.8%) of this cohort was employed in Elementary occupations; this proportion had fallen to 14.6% in 2014.

In terms of economic sector of employment, the Health sector employed the highest proportion of this cohort in both time periods, with a 50% increase in the percentages employed in this sector in 2014 (from 24.2% in 1998 to 36.2% in 2014). This increase may be due to the fact that the majority of this cohort worked in the public sector in 2014 with more than 1 in 5 employed in Personal services occupations. In both time periods, the economic sector which recorded the second-highest proportion of OFPTW was the Wholesale/retail sector (from 17.3% in 1998 to 19.7% in 2014). The Accommodation/food sector recorded the greatest reduction in the percentages employed from this cohort between periods (from 13.1% in 1998 to 5.8% in 2014).

An analysis of usual hours worked by this cohort shows little change between periods with over half of this cohort usually working 19 to 30 hours per week on average in both periods. Indeed, more than nine out of 10 OFPTW (91.3%) usually worked between nine and 30 hours per week in 2014.

Summary of trends for older female part-time workers

Comparing the key demographic trends for OFPTW between 1998 and 2014, the main highlights were as follows. In the latter period, the numbers at work had more than doubled, as had the proportion of non-Irish among this cohort. There was a reduction in the proportion that was married, with increased percentages among those of single status and divorced/legally separated and greater percentages of this cohort being in couples with no children or lone parent families. The most significant demographic change between periods relates to education levels. Highest educational attainment had increased substantially by 2014 with the largest proportion having received higher secondary education, compared with primary/none in 2001.

Regarding an analysis of the socio-economic trends for the period being studied, notwithstanding the Government's public sector recruitment embargo in operation between 2009 and 2015, there was a significant rise in the percentages working in the public sector between time periods. The other substantial change over time occurred in the economic sectors of employment where more than one-third of all OFPTW were employed in the health sector in 2014. Other notable trends include increases in the proportions working in professional, administration and personal services occupations with significant decreases recorded in the proportion from this cohort working in manager/administrator, associate professional and elementary roles. Public administration and health activities were the economic sectors which saw the greatest increases over time with moderate growth in the wholesale/retail economic sector. The usual hours worked by this cohort remained largely unchanged between periods with a slightly higher proportion working 19 to 30 hours per week on average in 2014. To recap on the main socio-economic trends over time, in 1998 workers from this cohort were predominantly employed in the private sector in elementary occupations in the Health sector, usually working 19 to 30 hours per week. By 2014, the majority of this cohort was working in the public sector in clerical roles in the health sector, working an average of 19 to 30 hours per week.

DISCUSSION

Significantly, findings from the trend analysis reveal that the number of older women working part-time in the Irish labour market had more than doubled between 1998 and 2014. To put this in context, between 1994 and 2007, the numbers employed in the Irish labour market had practically doubled from 1.2 million to 2.1 million (Russell et al., 2017). Indeed, as noted by Sheehan et al. (2017), female employment numbers practically tripled in the 40-year period from 1966 to 2006 (from 289,144 to 822,808). Our findings show that female participation in the Irish labour market rose from 44.5% in 1998 to 52.4% in 2014, despite the Irish economy being plunged into deep recession between 2008 and 2014.

Our trend analysis demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of older women working part-time in both time periods were married, despite a slight decrease in the latter period. In both 1998 and 2014, almost half of all older women in the Irish labour market were employed on a part-time basis with the majority living as part of a couple with children.

On one hand, part-time working arrangements have been lauded as both facilitating caring responsibilities and allowing women to maintain a presence in the labour market, avoiding skills obsolescence and depreciation of their human capital (Hakim, 1996; Houseman, 2001; Rubery et al., 1994). However, despite its apparent benefits, women working part-time are more likely to be less educated, older and working in temporary, lower occupational jobs with poor job tenure (Manning and Petrongolo, 2008; Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014). In addition to the above characteristics, part-time jobs have typically been described as being rooted in the secondary labour market, which consists of 'low level, unskilled jobs which require no specific training' (Dekker et al., 2002, p.109; Tjidsens, 2002). Salladarré and Hlaimi (2014) suggest that limited human capital attributes such as education and training contribute to the likelihood of women working part-time. These jobs are often inferior in nature, attract poorer conditions and rates of pay, offer fewer promotional prospects and provide less security of employment compared with full-time positions (Collins, 2015; Fernandez-Kranz and Rodriguez-Planas, 2011; Glover and Arber, 1995; Gornick and Jacobs, 1996; Ketsche and Branscomb, 2003; McDonald et al., 2006; Pembroke, 2018; Tjidsens, 2002). Interestingly, in terms of the link between lower human capital accumulation and part-time employment, our trend analysis shows that highest educational attainment among this cohort had improved significantly over time. In the first period, more than one-third of this cohort had primary only as their highest educational attainment but by 2014, the highest proportion from this cohort had achieved higher secondary level education. These findings may however be partly as a result of cohort effect, thus reflecting an increase in educational attainment of the general population over time.

Our trend analysis shows a significant shift towards public sector working among OFPTW between time periods. In 1998, one in five workers from this cohort was employed in the public sector compared with more than half in 2014; a trend which was also reflected among the older cohort of females working full-time. This increase is noteworthy, particularly given the Irish Government's public sector recruitment embargo which was in place between 2009 and 2015. In terms of occupations, our analysis shows that the Administration/clerical (mid-level) and Personal services (lower-level) occupations recorded substantial increases in the percentages from this cohort working in these categories between periods. Indeed in both periods, over half of all OFPTW were employed in lower-level occupations. In addition to increases in the proportions of those working in Personal services occupations, our trend analysis shows reductions in the proportion working in Elementary (lower-level) occupations. There was also a decrease in the proportion working in higher-level occupations with increases in the proportions of OFPTW employed in mid-level occupations.

Our study reveals that the highest proportion of OFPTW was employed in Health sector of the economy in both time periods with a significant increase in the percentages employed in this sector in 2014. These increases may be partly due to factors including an ageing population and policy changes such as the National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013) and the introduction of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) which seeks to provide special needs education in mainstream settings as far as possible.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the feminisation of the paid labour force in recent decades, more than one-third of all working women and almost half of all older women work part-time in Ireland. This phenomenon is not restricted to Ireland; part-time work has also become more prevalent across the EU in recent times (Eurostat, 2019; OECD, 2019). A better understanding of the demographic and socio-economic trends for these workers is vital, particularly in an era of population ageing where national governments and international organisations are promoting the extension of working lives and delayed retirement.

To understand what changes, if any, had occurred over time for this cohort, this study's revealing trend analysis shows that the numbers at work had more than doubled with a reduction in the proportion of those married with children. Highest educational attainment had increased significantly by 2014 with the largest proportion having received higher secondary education. Regarding socio-economic characteristics in 1998, this cohort predominantly worked in the private sector in lower-level (elementary) occupations in the Health sector, usually working 19 to 30 hours per week. By 2014, the majority of this cohort was working in the public sector in mid-level (clerical) roles in the Health sector, working an average of 19 to 30 hours per week.

This research makes a significant empirical contribution to the literature on older part-time workers by providing, for the first time, a detailed and descriptive profile of the older female working part-time in Ireland using key demographic and socio-economic variables from a 2014 representative labour force dataset. In doing so, it informs

many of the key debates and gaps evident in the older female labour market participation literature. Our analysis shows the likely profile of older women working part-time in Ireland in 2014 to be Irish, married with children, having completed secondary-level education, employed in the public sector in a clerical role in the Health sector working between 19 and 30 hours per week.

In addition to this unique profile, variables are drawn from three labour force datasets over a 16-year time period to address the literature gap by giving a descriptive analysis of who the typical older female part-time worker is, where they work and in what capacity, as well as shedding light on what has changed over this 16-year period. This novel trend analysis highlights significant changes in demographic and socio-economic characteristics for this worker cohort over time. Over this period, the numbers at work had more than doubled, as had the proportion of non-Irish among this cohort. There was a reduction in the proportion that was married, with increased percentages among those of single status and divorced/legally separated and greater percentages of OFPTW being in couples with no children or lone parent families. The most significant demographic change between periods relates to education levels. Highest educational attainment had increased substantially by 2014 with the largest proportion having received higher secondary education, compared with primary/none in 2001. In terms of socio-economic trends, in 1998 OFPTW were predominantly working in the private sector in elementary occupations in the Health sector, usually working 19 to 30 hours per week. By 2014, the majority of this cohort was working in the public sector in clerical roles in the Health sector, working an average of 19 to 30 hours per week.

This comprehensive descriptive trend analysis provides extensive empirical evidence to enlighten our understanding of the demographic and socio-economic changes which have occurred over time for this worker cohort employed in the Irish labour market. These insights are crucial to inform public and organisational policy on part-time labour market participation. Research on part-time working by females has primarily focused on younger, rather than older, working women (e.g. Blossfeld and Hakim, 1997; Fagan and Rubery, 1996; Kalleberg, 2009; Salladarré and Hlaimi, 2014; Yoon and Chung, 2016). Accordingly, this study addresses this chasm by enriching our understanding of who the 'typical' older woman working part-time in Ireland is and what has changed over time for this cohort.

Despite the fact that Ireland has witnessed a dramatic increase in the proportion of women in the Irish labour force in recent times, females are more likely than males to work part-time and as people in Ireland age, the likelihood of working part-time increases. The findings from this study demonstrate that, irrespective of educational attainment, older, female part-time employment in Ireland is mainly limited to certain occupations and economic sectors of employment, typically associated with low-pay. These findings raise serious concerns for the potential and likelihood for precarious employment for OFPTW and have implications at the individual, organisational and societal levels and speak to the value which is placed on the work undertaken by older females who work part-time. Policy changes are required to enable older women returners to re-enter a workforce which has changed significantly in recent times. Government plans announced in Budget 2020 to develop 'returnships' is a welcome first step. Despite initiatives such as the introduction of a universal preschool year in 2010 and an Affordable Childcare Scheme (2017), childcare costs in Ireland are among the highest in the OECD (Daly, 2011; Holland, 2016; McGinnity et al., 2015; Ní Léime et al., 2017). Organisations must also play their part by introducing family friendly, flexible work practices in addition to offering part-time jobs in a wider range of occupations and economic sectors.

Researchers (e.g. Fredman, 2004; Pollert and Charlwood, 2009) highlight the vulnerability of women who alternate between paid and unpaid work. Indeed previous studies indicate that the combination of low pay and part-time employment increases the risk of in-work poverty, with older working women representing one of the most economically vulnerable social groups (Axelrad and Mcnamara, 2017; Brülle et al., 2019). In addition to short-term consequences of low pay and employment insecurity, many researchers (e.g. Collins and Murphy, 2016; King, 2019; O'Connor, 2009) highlight precarious employment in the Irish context as leading to inadequate pension provision in later life. A better awareness is required among women of the short- and long-term financial implications of intermittent work attachment and part-time employment. In January 2018, the Irish government announced that it is seeking to address the anomalies brought about by the changes to eligibility for the State pension (contributory) which has reduced pension entitlements by up to €1,500 annually for 20,941 women from 2012 to 2016. In addition, the Irish Government recently legislated for improved working conditions for low-hours' workers through The Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2018. From an organisational perspective, the implementation of this legislation, in addition to recent increases in minimum wage rates, may lead to increased costs associated with employing part-time workers.

Increases in life expectancy among older people, combined with the extension of the period of dependency on

pensions and the reduction in the proportion of the working age population will necessitate older people working into their late 60s and beyond (Ghosheh Jr et al., 2006; Payne and Doyal, 2010). Given that adults are living longer and will not be eligible for state pensions until older ages, Kulik et al. (2014) posit that the challenges are threefold for management practice regarding older workers: who is to be managed – an older and increasingly female workforce; what is to be managed – altered traditional norms for career entry, progression and exit and also how older employees are recruited, motivated and retained in line with national positive ageing strategies. Despite these challenges, employers benefit from having access to an older, experienced, educated supply of workers and older workers profit by extending their working lives, boosting their pension contributions and having the opportunity to grow their savings (Maestas and Zissimopoulos, 2010).

Given the prevalence of part-time employment among older women in Ireland, our analysis challenges Picchio and van Ours (2016) contention that the quality of part-time employment increases in line with the growth in the proportion of part-time workers in the labour market. In agreement with many researchers (e.g. Bardasi and Gornick, 2008; Collins and Murphy, 2016; Gash, 2008; Kalleberg, 2011; King, 2019), these findings raise questions regarding the availability of good quality part-time jobs in Ireland, suggesting that part-time employment by older females in Ireland (the forgotten labour force) may be more about 'avoiding unemployment rather than enhancing work-family balance or working preferences' (Fagan and Walthery, 2013, p.197). This study's findings lead to the conclusion that it is primarily the characteristics of the job, rather than the person, which dictate the terms and conditions of employment in Ireland.

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