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Introduction to The Theme of The Special Issue

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Published in:
Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.18291/njwls.v9iS6.114688](https://doi.org/10.18291/njwls.v9iS6.114688)

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Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Ilse, A., Larsen, T. P., & Rasmussen, S. (2019). Precarious Work in the Nordics: Introduction to The Theme of The Special Issue. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 9(S6), 1-5.
<https://doi.org/10.18291/njwls.v9iS6.114688>

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Precarious Work in the Nordics: Introduction to The Theme of The Special Issue¹

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In recent years, we have seen a growing body of literature with a strong focus on labour market inequalities. In the Anglo-Saxon literature, concepts such as the working poor and bad jobs have been applied to jobs in, for example, the US to describe jobs with low pay and inferior working conditions (Kalleberg 2011; Klein & Rones 1989). In the UK and other parts of Europe, the concept of the precariat is often used to capture the employment situations characterized by fragmented and insecure employment and low income (Standing 2011). Also in Germany, the discussion on labour market inequalities has been revitalised. The emergence of mini jobs and various forms of bogus self-employment (Scheinselbständige), etc. have gained momentum in the political and academic debates as part of a larger trend of labour market dualization in line with some of the early works on labour market segmentation (Brady & Biegert 2017).

Although the Nordic labour markets in general demonstrate comparative high wage levels, generous unemployment protection and high employment rates, there has also been a discussion on precarious work within the Nordic literature on working life (Håkansson & Isidorsson 2015; Ingelsrud et al. 2019; Mailand & Larsen 2018; Neergaard 2016). This discussion has focused on identifying traits or aspects of precariousness in Nordic working life, as it is rare to find entire groups of workers, which can be labelled a precariat in the Nordic sphere due to the Nordic welfare states and collective bargaining systems. In the Nordics, precarious work is often discussed in relation to various forms of nonstandard work and how these forms have developed in recent years (Gleerup et al. 2018; Ilsøe et al. 2017; Sutela & Pärnänen 2018; Svalund & Berglund 2018). This special issue on 'Precarious Work in the Nordics' presents a number of single-country and comparative analyses that investigate developments in selected forms of nonstandard work across the Nordic countries and discusses whether or not they can be said to include elements of precarious work.

Well-known forms of nonstandard employment such as part-time work, fixed term employment and solo self-employment are not new trends on the Nordic labour markets.

¹ You can find this text and its DOI at <https://tidsskrift.dk/njwls/index>.

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These employment forms have coexisted alongside the full-time open-ended contract for centuries. However, the ‘standard employment relationship’ became the very foundation of most Nordic welfare and labour market institutions, when they developed throughout the 20th century. In recent years, this foundation is challenged by the growth in novel ways of organizing work such as digital platform work, temporary agency work and zero-hour contracts. Also, some traditional forms of nonstandard employment are in some instances becoming more prevalent, although with significant national and sectoral variations. Today, the full-time open-ended contract continues to dominate the Nordic labour markets accounting for about two-thirds of the labour market, whereas nonstandard contracts accounts for about one-third (Larsen & Ilsoe 2019).

Contributions

The first article ‘Nonstandard employment in the Nordics – toward precarious work?’ by *Stine Rasmussen, Jouku Nätti, Trine Pernille Larsen, Anna Ilsoe and Anne Helene Garde* is a quantitative comparative analysis of nonstandard employment and precariousness in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland). Based on data from the Labour Force Survey from 1995 to 2015, the article first investigates and compares recent developments of certain known forms of nonstandard employment in the four countries (marginal part-time, fixed-term employment, temporary agency work and solo self-employment). Second, the article investigates whether and to what extent the four nonstandard employment forms have certain precarious elements (income insecurity and/or job insecurity). The article shows that at a general level, nonstandard employment has remained rather stable in all four countries in the investigated period. However, the countries still have different distributions and levels of distinct forms of nonstandard employment and have recently witnessed different developments. For instance, marginal part-time jobs have recently increased quite remarkably in Denmark, while fixed-term employment has been on the rise in Sweden. In terms of precariousness, the article shows that precariousness is connected to nonstandard employment in all four countries, but to a lesser degree in Norway and Denmark compared with Finland and Sweden. The authors argue that these differences may be explained by differences in the institutional contexts in the countries as well as by differences in the degree of voluntariness associated with nonstandard employment.

The second article ‘Truck Drivers in the Grey Area between Employment and Self-employment: Swedish Experiences’ by *Annette Thörnquist* focusses on one particular sector that has been characterized by a well-known form of nonstandard work for decades. It addresses the problems of fraudulent contracting of work in the Swedish road freight transport industry. The focal point is false (bogus) self-employment and the author discusses the wider social context of the problems of bogus self-employment, using a variety of written sources that are triangulated with interview data involving representatives from Swedish Transport Workers’ Union, the industry and the Swedish Tax Agency. The analysis is based on the only case tried in the Swedish Labour Court in recent decades, and a related case that resulted in conciliation. The author points to the importance of the mandatory Swedish notion of employee when tackling misclassification of drivers’ employment status as well as when considering new regulations aimed to prevent misclassification.

The third article ‘Employment models of platform companies in Norway’ by *Kristin Jesnes* addresses a more recent form of nonstandard work – platform work – and its implications. In the article, she pursues two main questions. First of all, she investigates in which ways platform work in Norway differ from standard employment and second she examines to what extent the employment strategies of platform companies put workers in a precarious position. The article takes an employer perspective and is therefore based on qualitative interviews with representatives from platform companies in Norway. Jesnes’ main contribution is the development of a typology of platform companies and the employment forms, they use. Based on this typology, it becomes evident that some platform companies depend on labour from solo self-employed and these companies do not regard themselves as employers (the typical model), while other platform companies (the hybrid model) hire labour in more known employment contracts (for instance in marginal part-time contracts). Both employment models differ from the standard employment relationship and can lead to precariousness. However, Jesnes concludes that the risk of precariousness is higher for platform workers in the typical model than workers in the hybrid model, since the hybrid model allows for a wider access to income security, social security, etc.

The fourth article ‘Defining and Regulating Zero Hours Work: Lessons from a Liberal Market Economy’ by *Lorraine Ryan, Jonathan Lavelle, Michelle O’Sullivan, Juliet McMahon, Caroline Murphy, Tom Turner, Patrick Gunnigle and Mike O’Brien* seek to define and explore the rising phenomenon of ‘zero-hour contracts’ (i.e. part-time work, casual work, low hours and on-call work) as well as the associated risks of precarious employment of such contracts. The authors use Ireland as the empirical example and draw on qualitative interview data with key stakeholders to inform the debates on how to define and analyse zero-hour contracts, which are lessons that may prove helpful in analysing the phenomenon in the Nordics. Lorraine Ryan and colleagues emphasize that the concept of zero-hour contract is ambiguously defined in the literature and often differs depending on the national setting under consideration. They thus call for in-depth individual country analysis to understand and facilitate cross-country comparisons of the dynamics at play regarding the phenomenon of zero-hour contracts. They argue that their qualitative research findings provide nuanced insights on the reality of precarious work not captured by the national survey or register data. Therefore, the authors call for considering such qualitative insights in future studies on precarious work and they also stress that rather than talking about zero-hour contracts, it seems more appropriate to use the term zero-hours work. The term ‘zero hour work’ is argued to allow scholars to capture the variations in contemporary employment practices and overcome some of the challenges often associated with the strict legal definition of a zero-hours contract. According to the authors, this will also assist in developing a common cross-national interpretation of zero-hour work/contracts.

All four articles deal with nonstandard work and how it interacts with exiting labour market regulation and welfare state provisions and discusses its potential implications for workers in the Nordics. Some forms of nonstandard work are on the rise in some sectors, others are shrinking and finally new forms are emerging. Conclusions on whether nonstandard work in the Nordics also implies precarious work are mixed. In some cases, it can be argued to coincide, whereas in others it cannot. This seems to depend on the institutional and regulatory framework and thus echo other comparative studies that among others stress that nonstandard employment and associated risks

of precariousness are in some instances coined by the established welfare and labour market institutions (Palier & Thelen 2010; Trygstad et al. 2018). In other instances, the very same institutional settings may act as a buffer against risks of precariousness and growth in nonstandard employment (Rubery 2015; Thelen & Weidemann 2018). The Nordic countries are known worldwide for their organized labour markets and their relatively generous welfare state provisions. This has contributed to equality and inclusiveness on the Nordic labour markets. However, most Nordic labour market and welfare institutions have developed around standard employment relationships, that is full-time open-ended contracts. Insofar that the Nordic countries are unable to secure a social safety net also for nonstandard workers, where they form significant minorities or even majorities, they face the risk that the very foundation of their models could be challenged in some industries.

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