

Working longer, living better – Women at work



Working for women

Regardless of age, women are less likely to be active in the labour market compared to men. This has been changing recently but still many women are neither employed nor looking for employment. The main reason for this inactivity, according to the European Commission's *Employment in Europe 2006* report, is family responsibilities. Younger women take care of children while older women shoulder the burden of care responsibilities for elderly relatives. The resulting difference in activity rates between women (62.5%) and men (77.8%) in the EU was 15.3 percentage points in 2005.

But Europe is increasingly tapping into this reserve of unused labour. The strongest contribution to raising the activity rate in recent years has come from women. For women aged between 55 and 64 years, the activity rate was up seven percentage points in 2005 compared to 2000. The increase for men in this age category was only five percentage points.

Only 36% of women aged 55 to 64 years were in work in 2005, 14 percentage points behind the target of 50% for older workers set by the European Council in Lisbon in 2000.

Striking a gender balance

Just as fewer women than men are in paid employment, many more women than men work part time, often in order to fulfil domestic and caring responsibilities. This has implications for women's income, career prospects and retirement provision, with the risk of women not having an adequate income in later years. Periods of maternity leave can also impact on women's career progress, as can parental leave (which is taken primarily by women).

In addition to the time spent in their paid job and commuting, women spend an average of 23 hours a week on unpaid work compared to 7.9 hours for full-time employed males.

Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005



Attracting and retaining women workers

Many companies in Europe are paying attention to their employees' family commitments and some have developed specific strategies to attract and retain female employees. This means not only accepting but actively supporting the work-life balance that women are struggling to achieve. The first step is recognition of the fact that the requirements of female employees change during the course of their working life.

Career paths of women tend to be less straight than for men, interrupted due to key life events and later re-launched.

The need to adapt working time arrangements and career paths to changing requirements has led some companies to systematically and regularly review the situation of their female employees. For younger women, this means in most cases finding and agreeing flexible or reduced working time arrangements and negotiating parental leave solutions. Now companies must also deal with the issue of demographic change and the need to enable retention and return to work of workers, primarily women, with significant care responsibilities for older family members.

Women have been the major beneficiaries of job creation since the launch of the European Employment Strategy: of the 14 million new jobs created between 1997 and 2004, nine million were filled by women.

European Commission, Equality report, 2005

Making work more attractive

Special attention is sometimes given to women above the age of 45, who are often considering extending their working time and advancing in their careers as childcare responsibilities diminish. By giving women the opportunity to shift the balance from more time spent at home to a greater focus on their paid work, means that those opting for a career break are not permanently penalised. This makes returning to work more attractive and is also likely to have an impact on how long women stay in work. If career advancement is possible, women are more likely to find themselves in jobs with more attractive conditions and higher levels of job satisfaction which will induce them to stay in work longer.

Further information

This fact sheet forms part of the Eurofound resource pack on *Working Longer, Living Better – Europe's coming of age*. The pack explores the impact of an ageing society and workforce, providing insights into developments at EU, national and company level.

For a copy of the pack or for further information on this area of activity, please send an email to: active-ageing@eurofound.europa.eu

To view the resource pack online and all other Foundation materials on this topic, please visit: www.eurofound.europa.eu/resourcepacks/activeageing.htm

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