



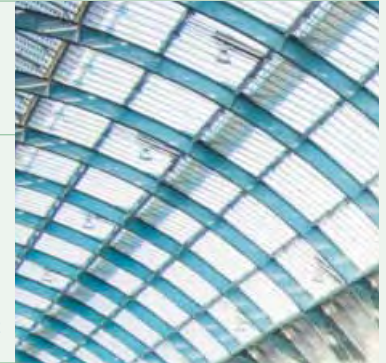
European Foundation for the  
Improvement of Living and  
Working Conditions



# Agriculture sector: Working conditions and job quality

*'Work plays a significant role in people's lives, in the functioning of companies and in society at large. But what is work? How can we describe it? Is it changing, and if so, is it for better or for worse? Is it fulfilling the numerous and at times conflicting expectations we have of it? How can we take steps to improve work for the well-being of all?'*

Eurofound, *Fifth European Working Conditions Survey: Overview report, 2012*



This report gives an overview of working conditions, job quality, workers' health and job sustainability in the agriculture sector (NACE 1).<sup>1</sup> It is based mostly on the fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), which gathers data on working conditions and the quality of work across 34 European countries. Additional information on the structural characteristics of the sector is derived from Eurostat data. The fifth EWCS contains responses from 1,293 workers in agriculture. This report compares aspects of work in the agriculture sector with the EU28 as a whole.

## Structural characteristics

In 2010, 4.9% of European workers worked in the agriculture sector. The sector saw a 1.3% decrease in employment between 2008 and 2010, which continued with a further 4.4% decrease between 2010 and 2012. Countries where the agriculture sector is relatively large are Romania (30%), Croatia (14%), Poland (12.4%) and Greece (12%). The sector has relatively little prominence in Malta (1.0%), Luxembourg (1.0%), the United Kingdom (1.1%) and Belgium (1.2%) (Eurostat, 2013).

A very large proportion of workers in agriculture (82%) work in micro-workplaces (1–9 employees), compared to 42% of workers as a whole in the EU28. Consequently, the percentages of workers in agriculture working in small and medium-sized workplaces (SMEs: 10–249 employees, 17%) and

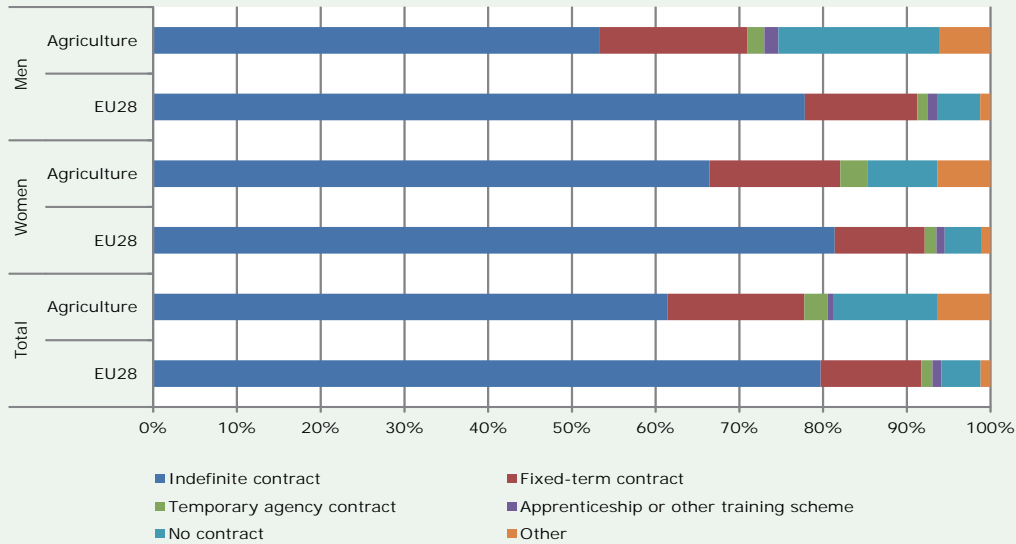
large workplaces (250+ employees, 1.0%) are smaller than in the EU28 (46% and 12% respectively). The sector is male-dominated: 60% of its workers are men. Workers aged 50 or over are overrepresented, with 40% of women and 43% of men in the sector falling into this age group, compared to 25% of women and 28% of men in the EU28. Young women and men are underrepresented. In agriculture, 6% of workers are self-employed with employees and 49% are self-employed without employees, compared to 4% and 11% respectively in the EU28. Figure 1 shows that indefinite contracts are much less prevalent in agriculture than in the EU28 as a whole, and are more prevalent among women than among men. The percentage of employees who report not having a contract is larger in this sector (12.5%) than in the EU28 (4.7%), especially among women (Eurostat, 2013).

## Agriculture sector in a nutshell

- Most of the workers work in micro-workplaces
- Self-employment is the most common employment type
- The introduction of new technologies and organisational restructuring has been much less frequent than in the EU28
- Workers in agriculture work more hours per week than the EU28 average and atypical and irregular working hours are very common
- The sector has a high proportion of absenteeism due to work accidents, with relatively many workers reporting poor health and their health to be at risk because of work

<sup>1</sup> Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne (statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community).

Figure 1: Employment status, by gender



## Working conditions

### Changes since the crisis

Figure 2 shows that the proportion of workers reporting increases or decreases in the number of hours they work is lower in agriculture than in the EU28 as a whole.

Workers in the agriculture sector were much more likely to have experienced a decrease and much less likely to have received an increase in their wages than

workers in the EU28. The differences are particularly pronounced for workers in micro-workplaces.

Workers in the agriculture sector in general were less likely to report the occurrence of restructuring and the introduction of new technologies than workers in the EU28 (Figure 3). As in the EU28, the proportion of workers in agriculture reporting the introduction of new production processes or technologies increases with workplace size.

Figure 2: Percentage of employees reporting changes in number of hours worked and salary or income in past year, by workplace size

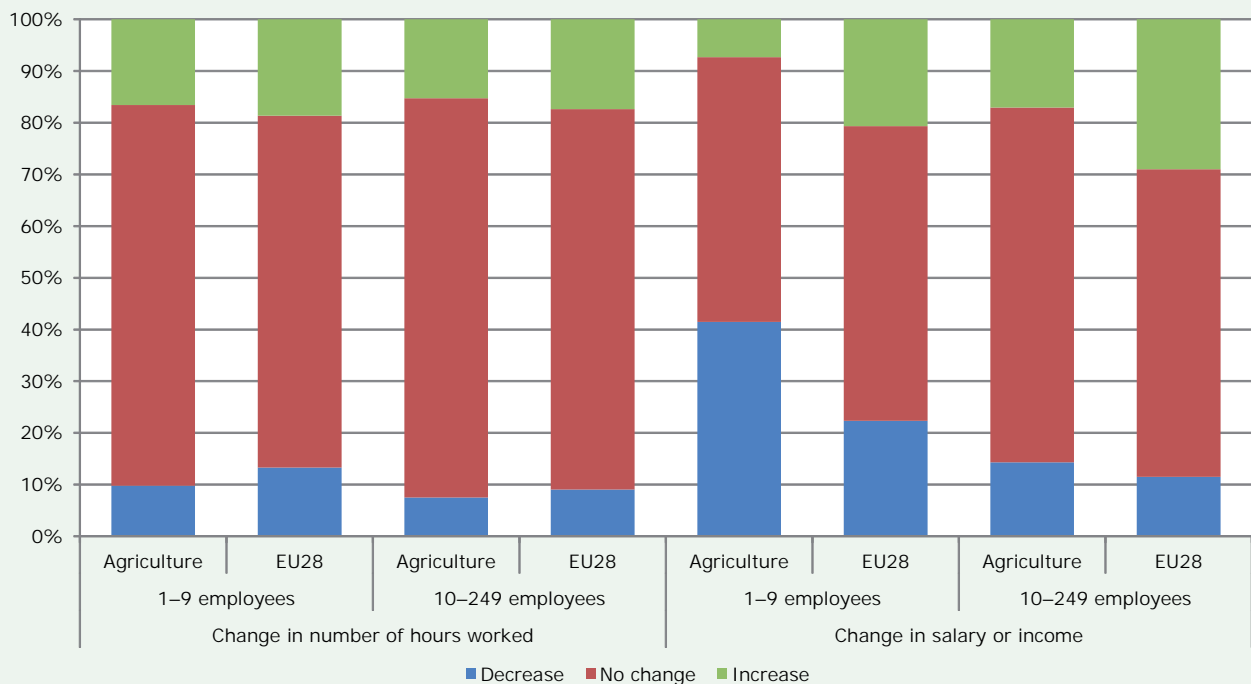


Figure 3: Restructuring and introduction of new technologies in past three years, by workplace size

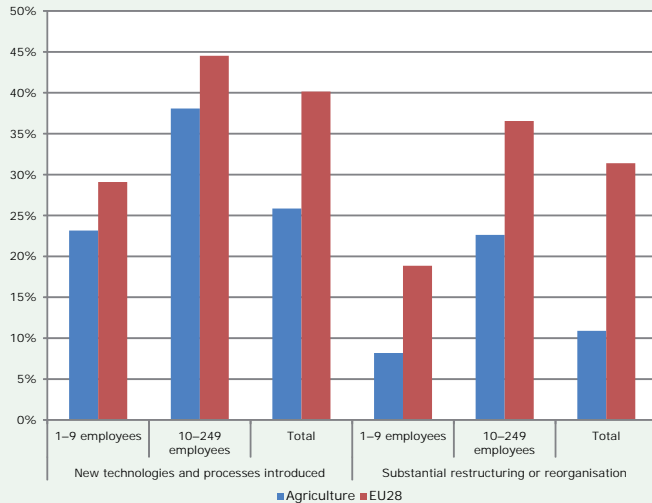
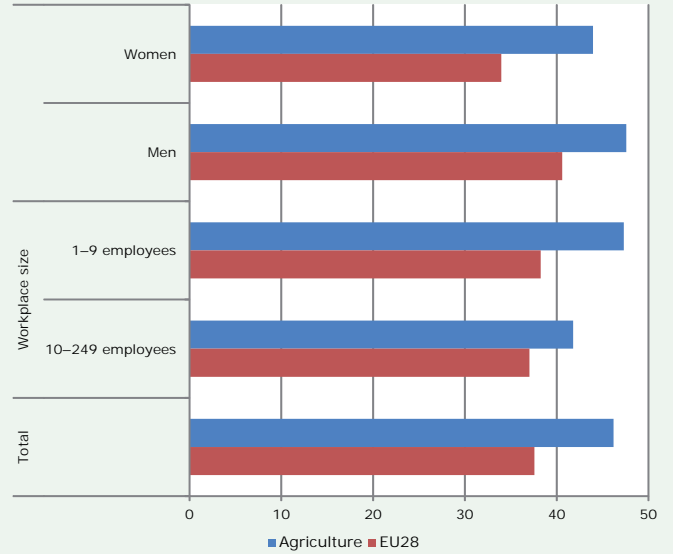


Figure 4: Average working hours, by gender and workplace size



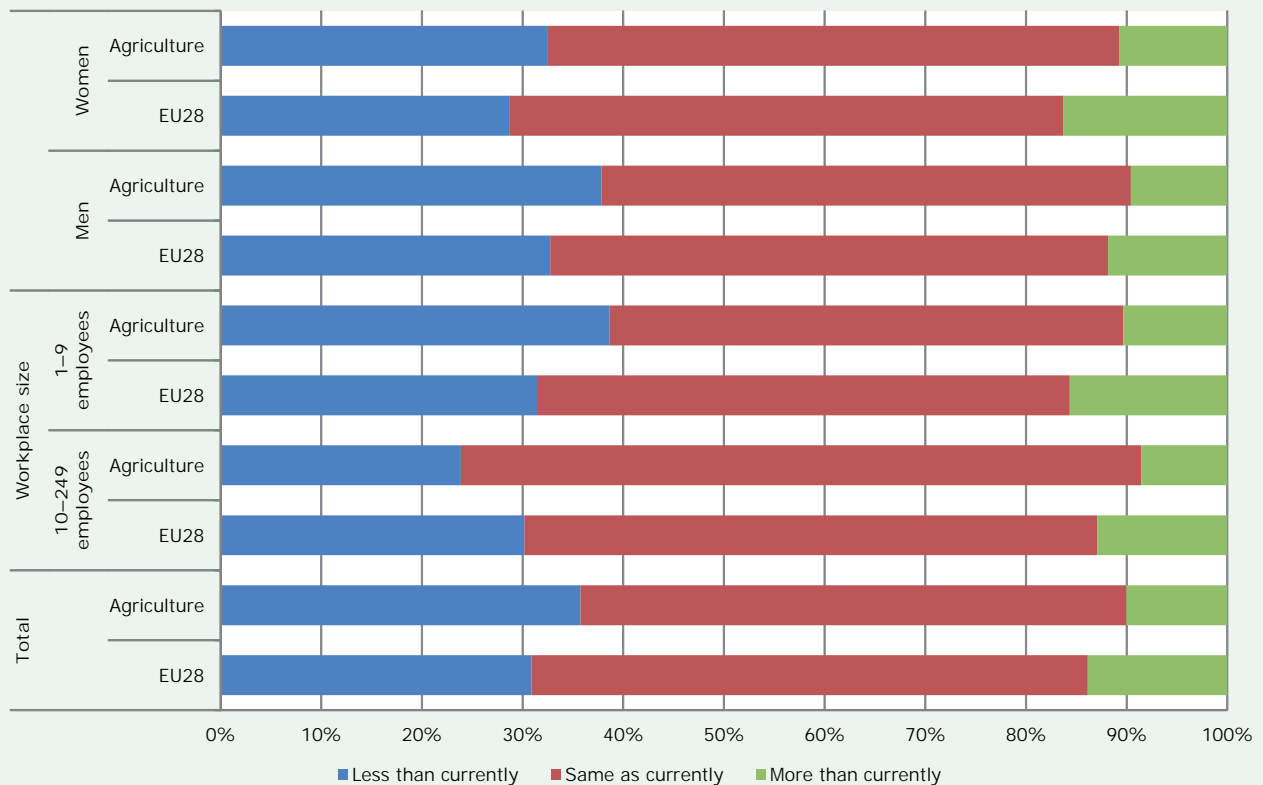
**Working time and work-life balance**

Workers in agriculture on average work 46 hours per week compared to 38 hours in the EU28. As in the EU28, men in agriculture tend to work more hours on average than women (Figure 4). Whereas the average working time in the EU28 does not show a clear pattern across the different workplace sizes, agricultural workers in micro-workplaces on average work more hours per week than those in small and medium-sized workplaces.

Not surprisingly, in the light of the long working weeks in the agriculture sector, overall, workers are more likely to prefer working fewer hours than workers in the EU28 (Figure 5). Interestingly, this is not the case for workers in small and medium-sized workplaces in agriculture, who generally report that they are happy with the number of hours they are working.

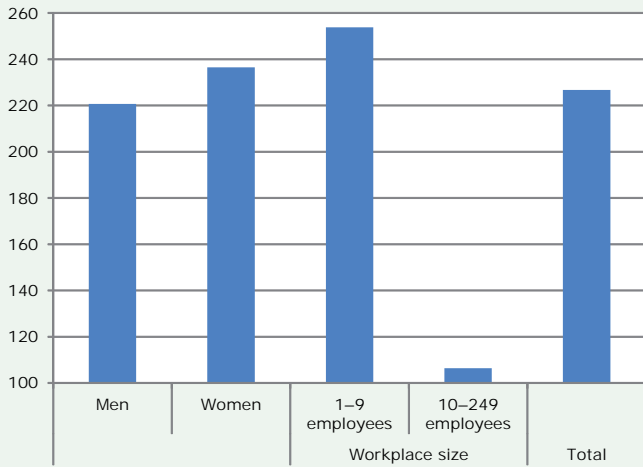
Figure 6 shows that working atypical hours (weekends, evenings or nights) is more than twice as prevalent in agriculture than in the EU28 as a whole. Again, this depends on workplace size: workers in small and medium-sized workplaces in agriculture

Figure 5: Working time preference, by gender and workplace size



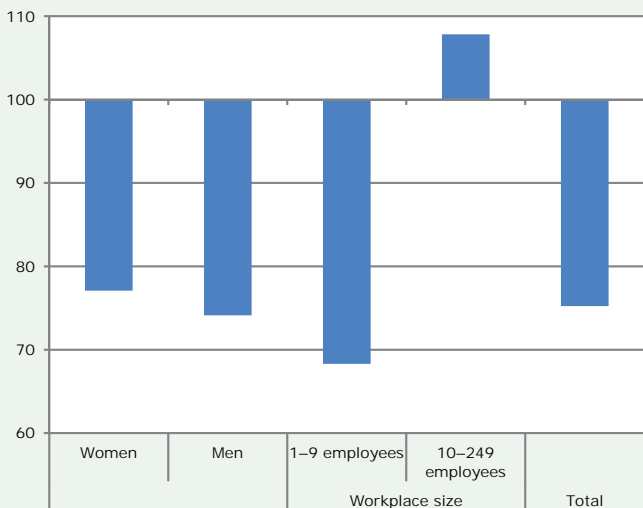
report only slightly higher levels of atypical hours than the EU28 average.

Figure 6: Index of working atypical hours (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



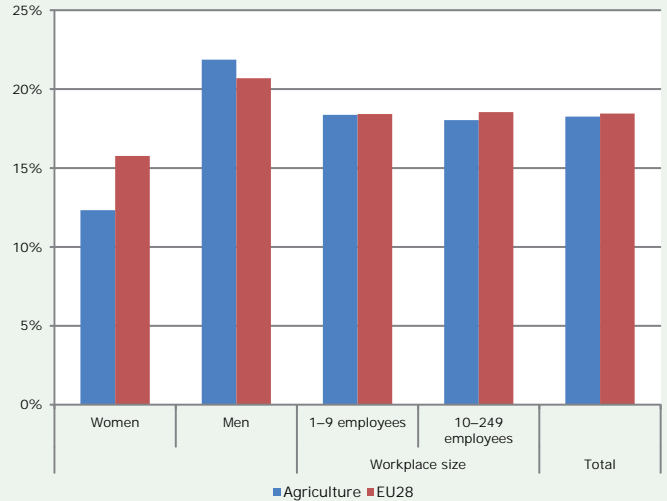
On average, workers in agriculture report having much less regular working hours than the average EU28 worker (Figure 7). Again, workers in small and medium-sized workplaces stand out, as they report having more regular working times than the average EU28 worker.

Figure 7: Index of regularity of working time (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



Interestingly, despite the long working weeks and the high prevalence of atypical and irregular working hours, workers in agriculture are very similar to the EU28 average in terms of achieving work-life balance (the fit between working hours and family or social commitments) (Figure 8): 18% of workers in agriculture report a poor work-life balance. As in the EU28, women in agriculture report a better work-life balance than men.

Figure 8: Poor work-life balance, by gender and workplace size

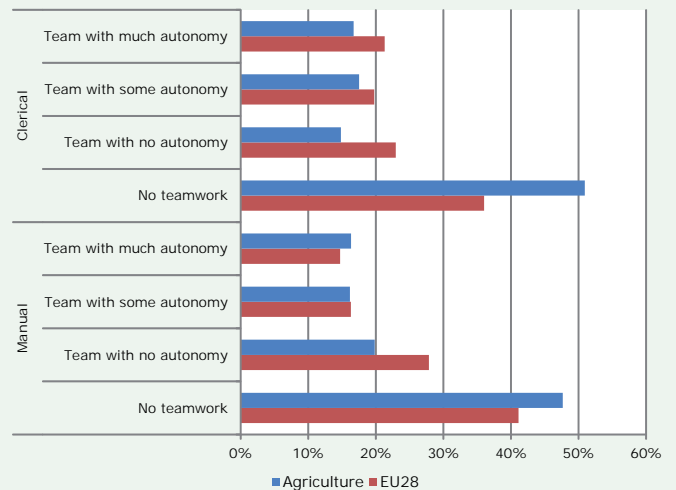


## Work organisation

### Teamwork

Teamwork has been seen as an alternative to work organisation models based on high levels of labour division. As teamwork reflects a variety of practices, it can also assume a variety of forms. Different types of teamwork can be identified using the EWCS by looking at the level of autonomy within the teams. Teamwork is less prevalent in agriculture (52%) than in the EU28 (62%; see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Teamwork and team autonomy, by occupational category



Among both manual and clerical workers in the sector, teamwork is less common than in the EU28, with 48% and 51% reporting 'no teamwork' compared to 41% and 36% in the EU28. The relative differences between workers in agriculture and workers in the EU28 are largest with regard to teamwork without autonomy.

**Task rotation**

Task rotation is also an important feature of work organisation. Depending on how it is implemented, task rotation may require different skills from the worker ('multiskilling') or may not ('fixed task rotation') and is either controlled by management or by the workers themselves ('autonomous'). Task rotation has been shown to be beneficial for workers' well-being, and autonomous multiskilling systems in particular are associated with higher worker motivation as well as better company performance.

Task rotation and multiskilling are less prevalent in agriculture than in the EU28 as a whole (Figure 10). The difference is mainly accounted for by the lower prevalence of management-controlled multiskilling and management-controlled fixed task rotation in agriculture.

**Female bosses**

Agriculture is a male-dominated sector but the percentage of workers with a female boss (7%) falls far below the proportion of women working in the sector (40%). Only 12% of women and 3% of men

report having a female boss. These figures are much lower than the EU28 average of 47% for women and 12% for men.

**Skills and training**

Overall, the majority of workers in agriculture say that their present skills correspond well with their duties (Figure 11). Workers in the sector are slightly more likely to be 'over-skilled' than in the EU28, especially women, and also slightly less likely to be 'under-skilled' across all age groups.

The percentage of workers in agriculture reporting to have received training is much lower than in the EU28 for all ages and for both men and women (Figure 12).. Men participate more in training than women in the sector and this gender difference is larger than in the EU28. Younger workers in the sector are more likely to report having received training than older workers, and again this difference is more pronounced than in the EU28 as a whole.

Figure 10: Prevalence of task rotation, by workplace size

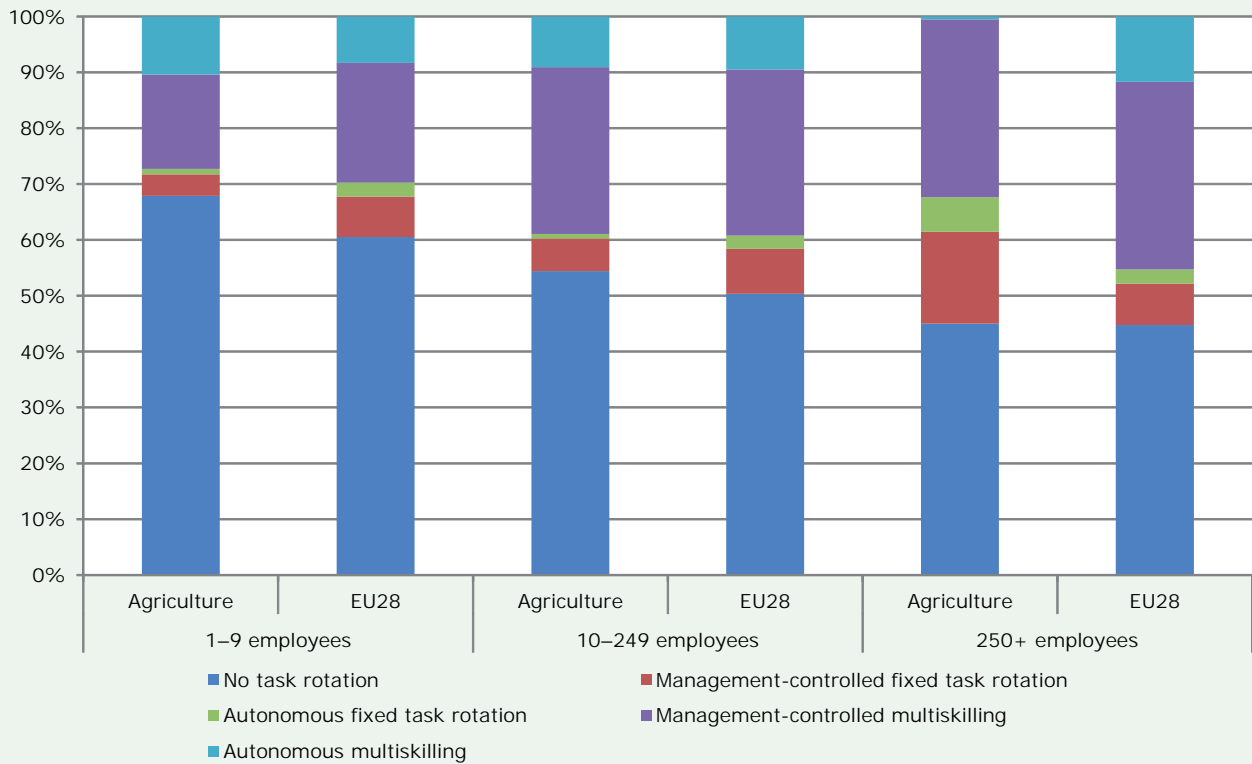


Figure 11: Match between skills and tasks, by age group

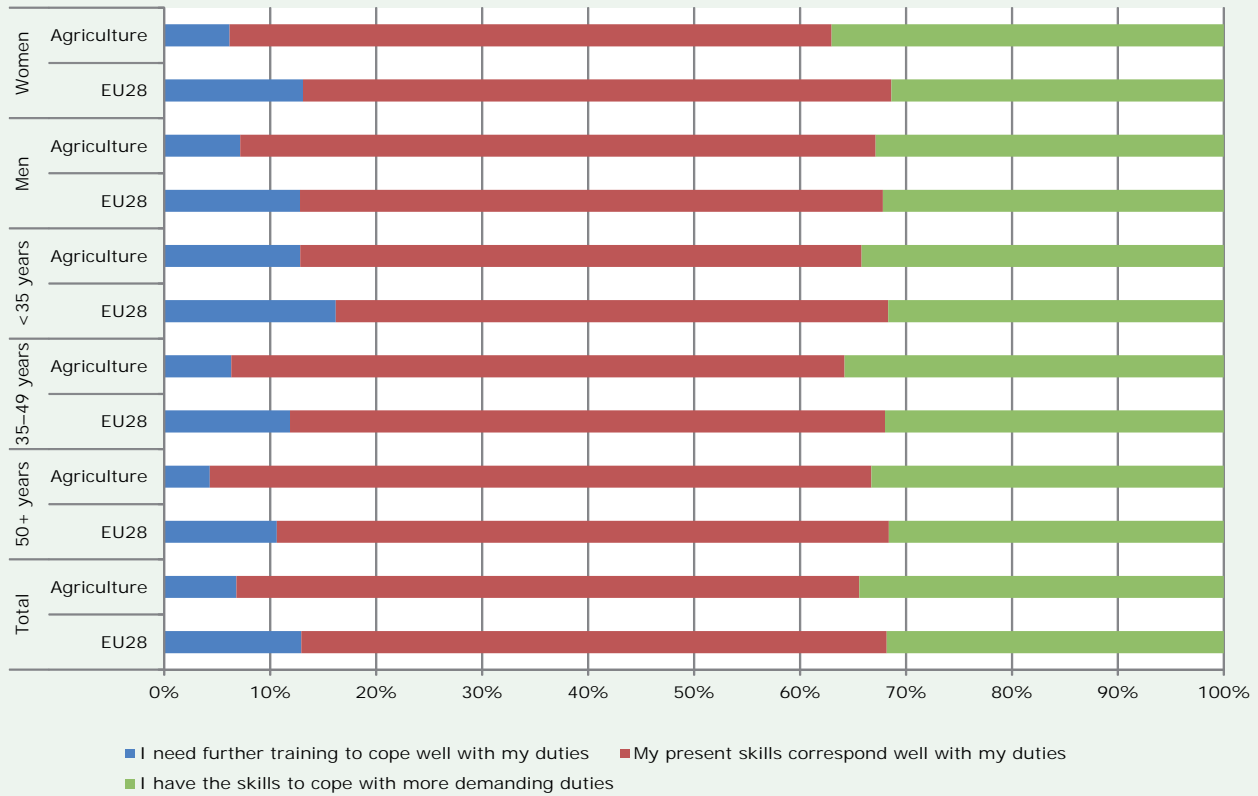


Figure 12: Employer-paid training, by gender and age

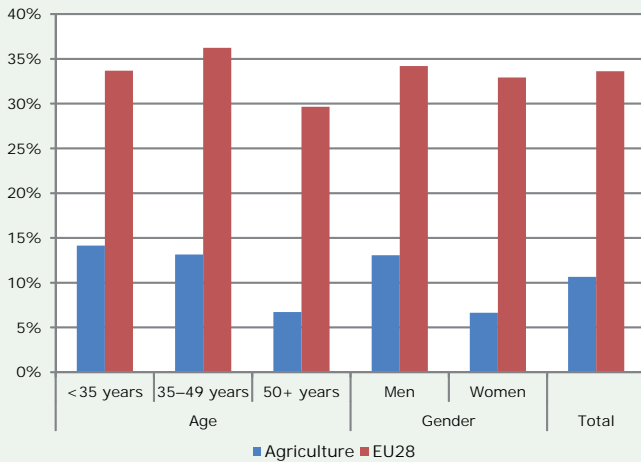
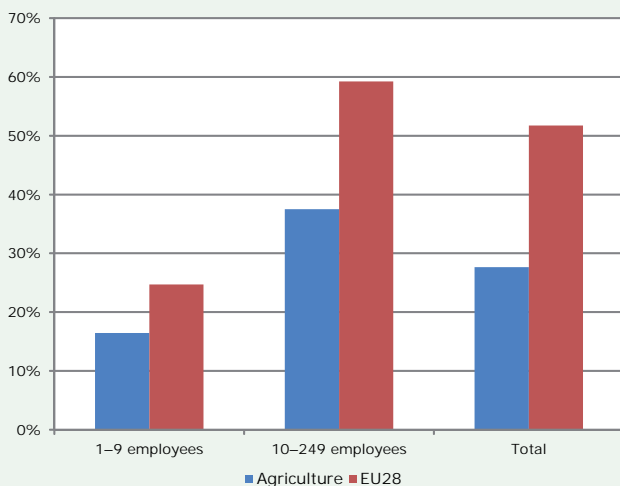


Figure 13: Availability of an employee representative at the workplace, by workplace size



### Employee representation

The EWCS contains fairly limited information on formal employee representation. It asks whether an employee representative is present at the workplace and whether workers have raised an issue with an employee representative in the past year. Figure 13 shows the combined results of these questions (an employee representative has been considered to be 'available' if they were present at the workplace or when an issue was raised).

In 2010, 28% of employees in agriculture reported that an employee representative was available compared to 52% of workers in the EU28. Similar to the pattern for the EU28 as a whole, employee representation in the agriculture sector increases with workplace size. The low level of employee representation is partially due to the predominance of micro-workplaces in the sector, but even within micro-workplaces the difference between the sector (16%) and the EU28 average (25%) is quite large.

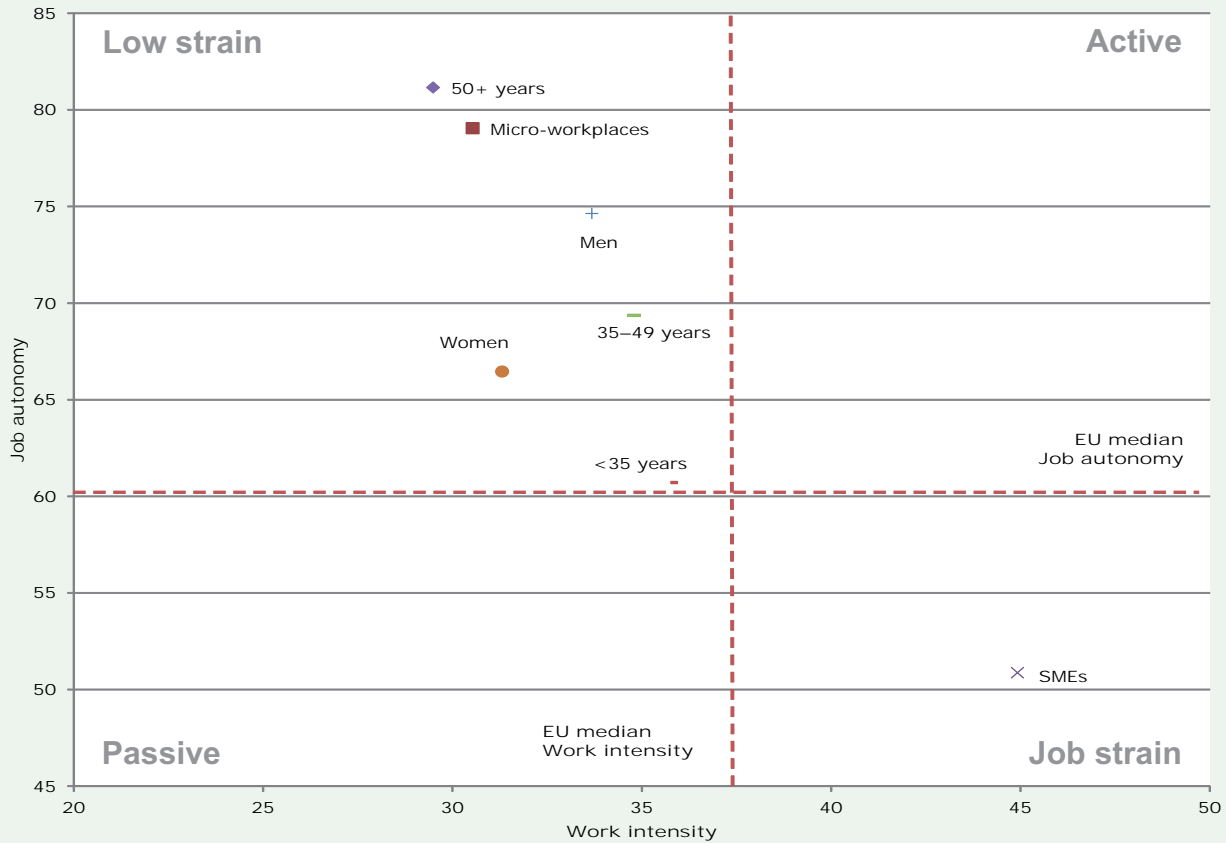
### Psychosocial and physical environment

#### Job autonomy and work intensity

The psychosocial and physical environment impacts heavily on workers' well-being. According to the job demand and control model of the American sociologist Karasek (1979), workers are more likely to suffer from work-related stress when they are faced with a high level of demand while being limited in the control they have over the way in which they carry out their job.

Figure 14 shows the likelihood of workers in agriculture suffering from work-related stress. Groups of workers are plotted along two axes: job autonomy and work intensity.

Figure 14: Distribution of groups of workers by average levels of job autonomy and work intensity



In agriculture, the bottom left quadrant of Figure 14 is empty. Workers in the bottom left quadrant are likely to be in 'passive' jobs, characterised by relatively low levels of intensity and relatively low levels of autonomy. Their jobs are not sufficiently challenging and workers in these types of jobs are not very much at risk of work-related stress, but are at risk of frustration and low motivation. They are not in the position to change much about what they do in their job and how they do it.

The top left quadrant indicates 'low strain' jobs, characterised by relatively low levels of work intensity and relatively high levels of job autonomy. Agricultural workers of all ages, both genders and those working in micro-workplaces fall in this category. Workers in this category are usually at low risk of stress, and are not as likely to suffer from frustration and loss of motivation as those in passive jobs. However, their jobs might not challenge them to realise their full potential.

The top right quadrant is also empty for agriculture workers. Workers in this category tend to be in 'active' jobs with relatively high levels of work intensity but also with relatively high levels of job autonomy. Although their jobs can be very demanding, they have sufficient discretion to choose the way in which they do their job and to develop coping strategies through active learning, and are challenged into developing their potential to the full.

Finally, the most problematic category is 'job strain' in the bottom right quadrant which contains the

averages for workers in small and medium-sized workplaces in agriculture. These jobs are characterised by higher than average levels of intensity and lower than average levels of autonomy. These workers therefore run the risk of accumulating high levels of unresolved strain, which can cause unhealthy stress levels and consequently a range of stress-related illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and mental health problems.

**Social environment**

A good social environment is characterised by the existence of social support and the absence of abuse at work. Social support can help workers deal with high levels of work intensity.

Figure 15: Index of good social environment (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size

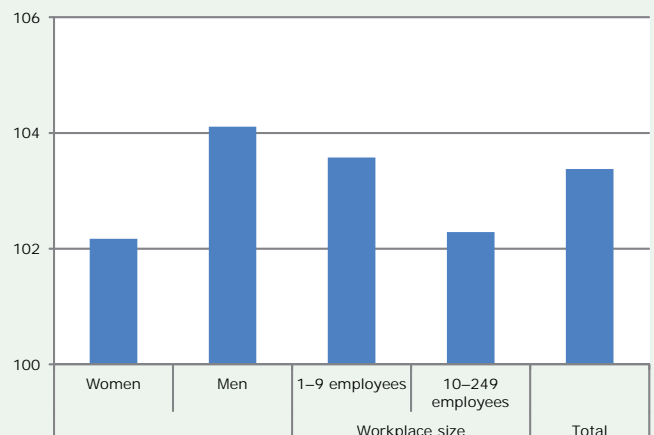
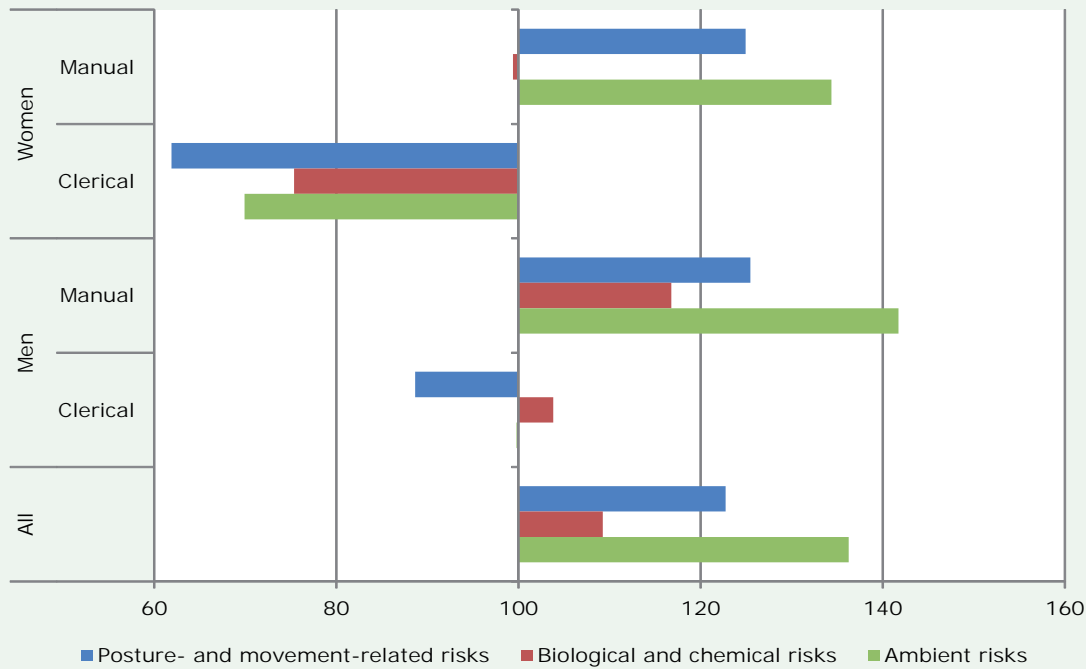


Figure 16: Indices of exposure to physical risks (EU28 = 100), by gender and occupation



The social environment in workplaces in the agriculture sector tends to be slightly better than in the EU28 as a whole (Figure 15). Within the sector, men report a slightly better social environment than women, and the social environment tends to be better in micro-workplaces than in small and medium ones.

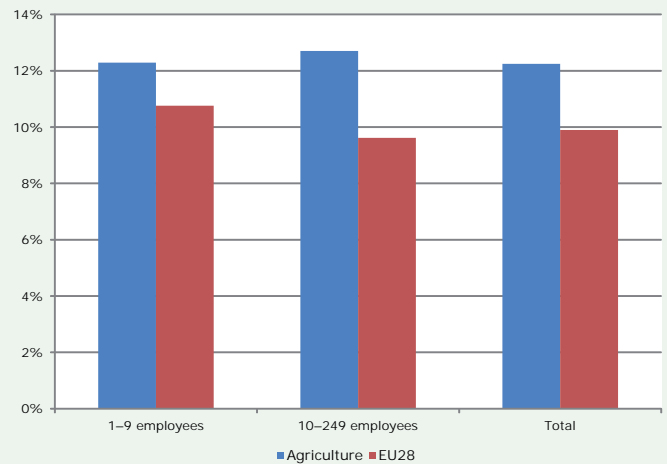
### Physical risks

Overall, levels of exposure to physical risks in agriculture are higher than in the EU28. Workers in agriculture are most likely to be exposed to ambient risks, followed by posture- and movement-related risks, and biological and chemical risks (Figure 16).

Exposure levels are highest among male manual workers in the sector, compared with female manual workers. Clerical workers in the sector report much lower levels of risk exposure than manual workers, and in the case of female clerical workers in the sector, reported levels of risk exposure are much lower than the EU28 average.

In terms of being informed of health and safety risks at work, 12% of workers in agriculture report they were not very well or not at all well informed about such risks, compared to 10% in the EU28 (Figure 17). A similar difference is found in both micro-workplaces and SMEs.

Figure 17: Not very or not at all well informed about health and safety risks at work, by workplace size



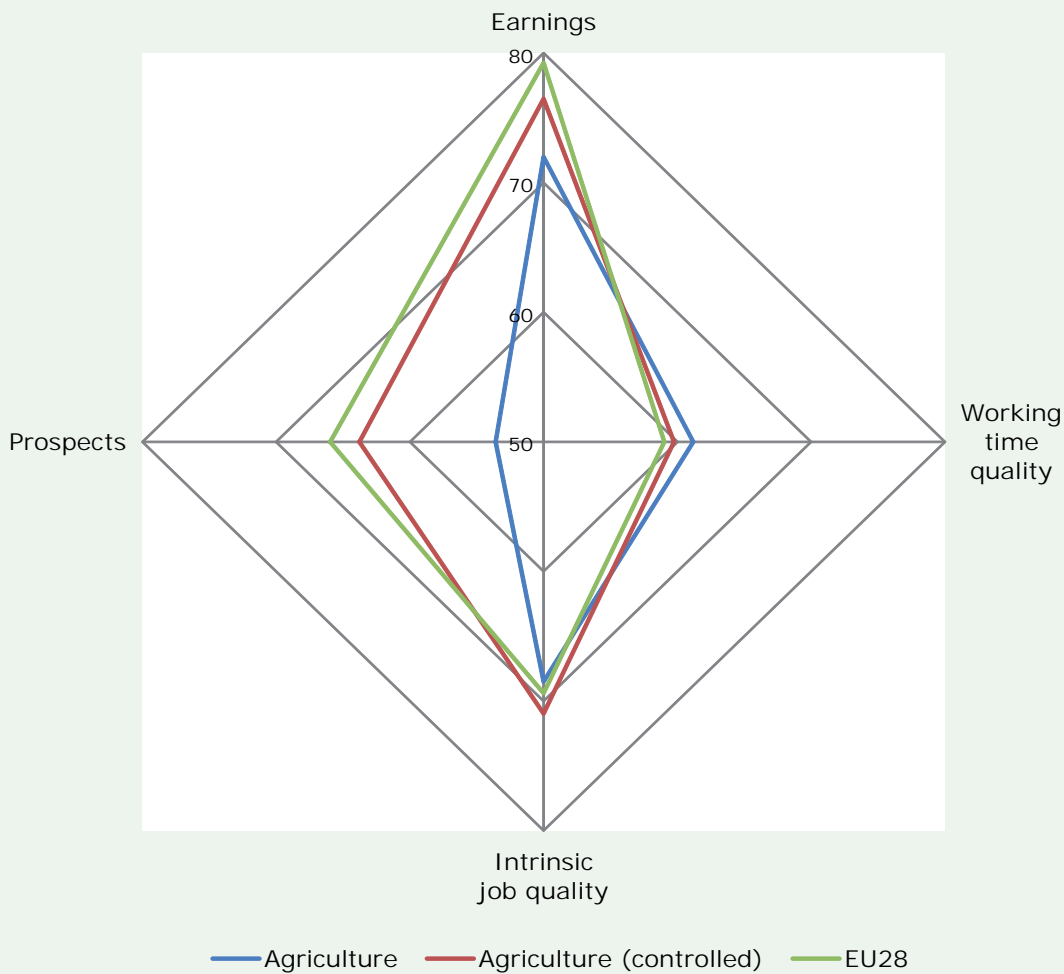
## Job quality

In the report *Trends in job quality in Europe*, the authors constructed four indices of job quality: earnings, prospects, intrinsic job quality and working time quality. The indices are built using job characteristics that are unambiguously associated with workers' well-being.

Figure 18 summarises job quality in the agriculture sector. It shows the average score for the sector on each of the indicators, with and without controlling for the structural characteristics of the sector's workers (age, gender, workplace size, education level and country), and for the EU28. The graph shows that job quality in the agriculture sector does not differ much from the average in the EU28 in relation to working



Figure 18: Job quality in the agriculture sector compared with EU28



Note: Scores on all four indicators range from 0 to 100

time quality and intrinsic job quality. For earnings and prospects, the sector scores worse than the EU28 average. However, when controlling for background characteristics of the workforce (age, gender, educational level, establishment size and country) these differences between the EU28 and the sector decrease considerably or disappear. In the case of the earnings indicator, differences are reduced considerably although agriculture continues to score lower than the EU28 average. After controlling for the structural factors, the difference between agriculture and the EU28 in terms of prospects is no longer statistically significant.

## Health and sustainability of work

Working conditions can have both a positive and negative impact on the health of workers and on the sustainability of their jobs.

Figure 19 shows that agriculture does not compare very favourably with the EU28, given the higher incidences of poor self-reported health, health at risk because of work, work affecting health negatively and a slightly lower percentage of workers expecting to be able to do their job at the age of 60.

Taking into account the particularities of the sector concerning gender, age, education, workplace size and distribution across European countries, significant differences remain for some indicators. Agriculture still has a higher proportion of workers reporting poor health, health risks because of work, work affecting health negatively and presenteeism. Nevertheless, the differences between the sector and the EU28 in relation to workers being able to do their job at 60 are no longer statistically significant.

Figure 19: Health and sustainability of work

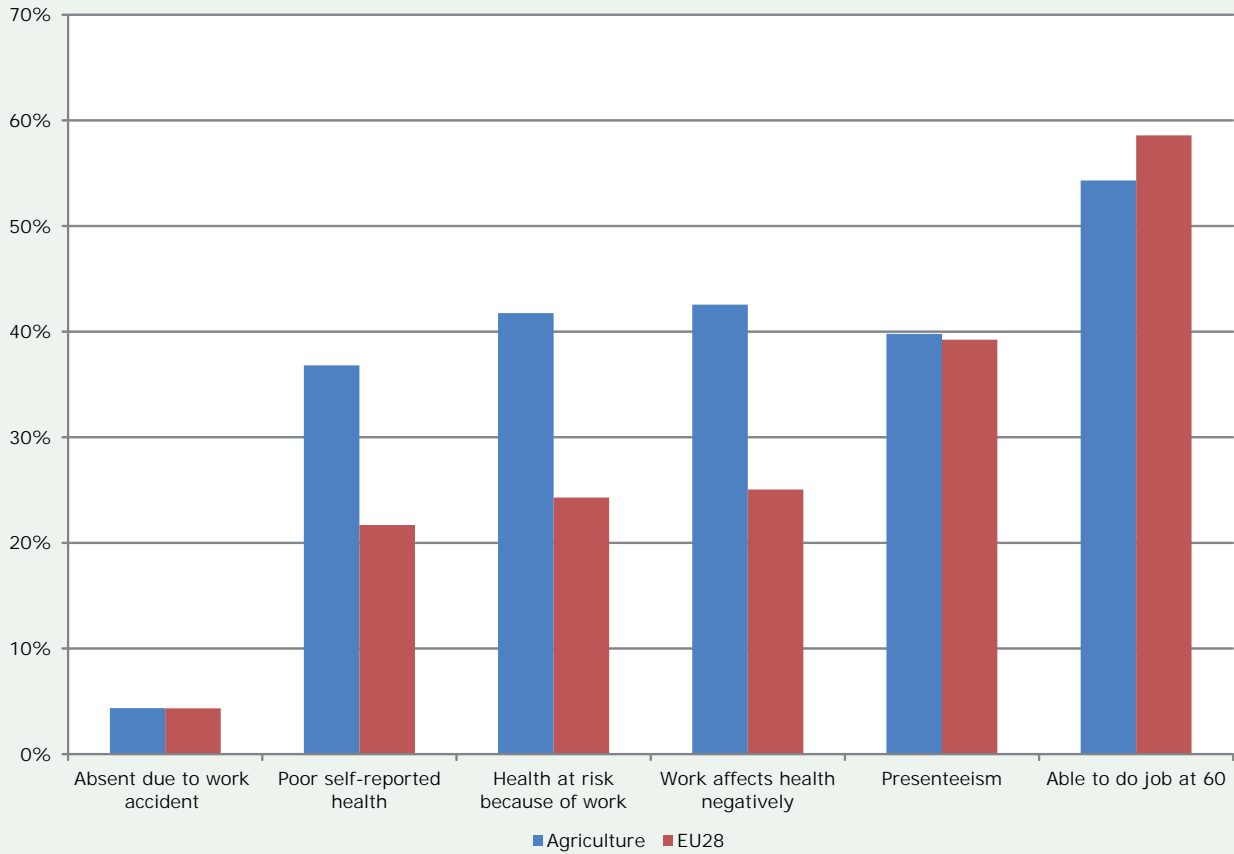
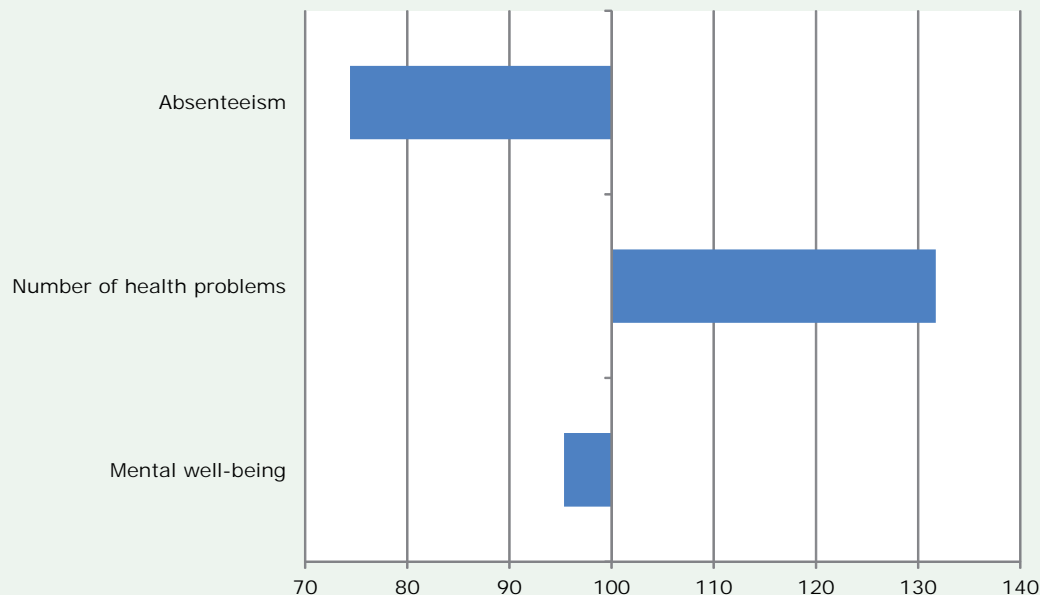


Figure 20 again shows a rather unfavourable picture of the agriculture sector, with mental well-being being slightly lower and the number of health problems reported much higher than in the EU28 as a whole. However, absenteeism is much lower than the EU28 average. These differences remain when controlling for structural background characteristics (age, gender, workplace size, education level and country).

It is important to keep in mind that the impact of work on health is a very gradual process that can take a long time and cannot be fully captured in a cross-sectional survey. The results in this section are likely to underestimate the often negative health effects that physically and psychologically strenuous working conditions can have.

Figure 20: Indices of health symptoms, mental well-being and absenteeism (EU28 = 100)



## References

Eurofound (2012), *Trends in job quality in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Eurostat (2013), EU Labour Force Survey database, available at [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search\\_database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database)

Karasek, R. A., Jr (1979), 'Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: Implications for job redesign', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 24, pp. 285–308.

## European Working Conditions Survey

Eurofound developed its European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) in 1990 in order to provide high-quality information on living and working conditions in Europe. Five waves of the survey have been carried out to date, enabling long-term trends to be observed and analysed.

The EWCS interviews both employees and self-employed people on key issues related to their work and employment. Fieldwork for the fifth EWCS took place from January to June 2010, with almost 44,000 workers interviewed in their homes in 34 countries – EU28, Norway, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. The 5th EWCS was implemented by Gallup Europe, who worked within a strong quality assurance framework to ensure the highest possible standards in all data collection and editing processes.

The questionnaire covered issues such as precarious employment, leadership styles and worker participation as well as the general job context, working time, work organisation, pay, work-related health risks, cognitive and psychosocial factors, work-life balance and access to training. A number of questions were included to capture the impact of the economic downturn on working conditions.

For more information on the EWCS, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/index.htm>

## Sectoral analysis

The report *Working conditions and job quality: Comparing sectors in Europe* and the series of 33 sectoral information sheets aim to capture the diversity prevalent across sectors in Europe in terms of working conditions and job quality. The report pinpoints trends across sectors in areas such as working time and work-life balance, work organisation, skills and training, employee representation and the psychosocial and physical environment. It identifies sectors that score particularly well or particularly poorly in terms of job quality and sheds light on differences between sectors in terms of health and well-being.

For more information, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/2010/sectorprofiles.htm>

### Further information

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