

Employment, Family and Community activities: A new balance for women and men

Summary of the UK national report

S. Yeandle, T. Gore, H. Pickford, B. Stiehl, CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions is an autonomous body of the European Union, created to assist the formulation of future policy on social and work-related matters. Further information can be found at the Foundation's website at <http://www.eurofound.ie/>

This report is available in electronic format only and has not been submitted to the standard Foundation editorial procedures.



EUROPEAN FOUNDATION
for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Introduction

The report explores the impact of the changing balance of activities for men and women in the three spheres of employment, community and family life by focusing on employment in the household services sector. It mirrors seven other studies carried out in EU member states and includes: a review of statistical evidence on household services (childcare, eldercare, cleaning, catering and home maintenance); an exploration of relevant national level policy developments; an investigation of household services development in Leeds and Sheffield; and research into the situation, experiences and attitudes of workers in a variety of household services using face-to-face interviews.

The growth of work in household services (HS) is affected by the roles played by the state, voluntary and private sectors in delivering care and services; by regulations governing employment; by changes in demand for household services; and by the development of new services. In Great Britain in 1998 over 3.2 million people held jobs in the sector (as defined in the study), representing a 10% increase between 1992 and 1998. Problems in precisely counting employment in the sector are discussed in the report. Women make up three-quarters of the HS workforce, with jobs sharply sex-segregated. Many jobs in the sector are part-time jobs and this trend is increasing.

Childcare

Employment in childcare includes the work of nannies and au pairs, registered childminders, nursery nurses, playleaders, playworkers and childcare assistants. Variety within the occupation makes it impossible precisely to assess the number of childcare workers. A minimum estimate of 400,000 childcare workers was reached, and there was a more than 30% increase in the number of childcare workers between 1998 and 1992. This growth is set to continue with the implementation of the National Childcare Strategy through the development of increased provision at local level.

Childcare is a very strongly sex-segregated occupation, and recent expansion of childcare jobs has made only a small impact on this. It is among the ten lowest paid occupations, and few childcare staff are entitled to paid holidays or sick leave. 50% of staff are thought to work without training, and turnover is high. Childcare workers who are parents themselves report problems trying to balance the demands of a poorly rewarded job with their own family responsibilities. The low wage levels create disincentives to take up training and limit career opportunities. On the positive side, some additional protection should follow from the Employment Relations Act 1999, and during 1999 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was developing a framework for childcare qualifications and training.

Eldercare

An increased demand for household services in support of the elderly population arises from an ageing population and greater numbers of single person households among the elderly. Furthermore, UK public policy has shifted towards a new 'mixed economy' of care provision, involving the local authority, voluntary and private sectors. During the 1990s this led to a marked increase in numbers of care assistants and attendants, from just under 300,000 in 1992 to just over 500,000 in 1998, only partly offset by reduced numbers of assistant nurses. Eldercare work is also strongly feminised, although the number of men within it grew during the 1990s.

Many eldercare workers work part-time, and the overwhelming majority are white. Most home care provision for the elderly involves self-employed persons working through agencies. The introduction of the Employment Relations Act, and the implementation of the Working Time Directive will bring some changes to their working conditions. Some agencies work with a code of conduct, quality vet their staff, and offer training, sometimes in collaboration with relevant trade unions. The Department of Health established a 'Fair Access to Care Task Force' to deal with benchmarking, performance assessment and eligibility criteria in 1999, and some other steps are being taken to improve the qualification levels of this workforce. At present, agencies are unable to meet demand for home care services and report staff recruitment difficulties, especially in metropolitan areas.

Food and catering services

Changes in demand for food and catering services are affected by a range of factors, including: levels of affluence; pressures on time; a growing range of food products and services; and changes in lifestyle, some of which are driven by changes in household composition - more single person households, more dual-earner families and more lone parent families. This area of service provision is undergoing marked expansion and change. Key developments include: the growth of the ready meals market; more take-away restaurants and food shops; growth in the prepared sandwich market; more eating out; and more contract catering. Workers in the food and catering sub-sector are among the lowest paid in Britain. About three quarters of them work part-time, often with unsocial hours. Most work in the sector takes place in private sector firms operating in a highly competitive market. This last factor makes for some difficulties in obtaining information about this sub-sector.

Domestic Cleaning

The demand for domestic cleaning arises from: the view that the work is unpleasant and tedious; time pressure, particularly in dual earner families and in households where the only adult is in employment; and frailty and infirmity among people living alone. The fastest growing demand for domestic help is from the 35-44 age group, where attitudes to purchasing domestic help are very positive. About 12% of people over 65 already pay for 'domestic help', and demand frequently outstrips supply. There are estimated to be about 150,000 people working in the domestic help industry, many of whom work part-time. Pay rates for cleaners are very low, and the work can be unpleasant, with health hazards. Many workers in domestic cleaning should benefit from the implementation of the Working Time Directive, particularly regarding paid holidays.

Locality analysis

Research in Leeds and Sheffield identified significant recent change in the provision of household services, with expansion in almost all sub-sectors. Some local conditions had influenced developments, but most of the factors driving change operated at the national level. Childcare had experienced particularly impressive growth. Here local demand pressures had met changed mechanisms for supply (driven by new national policies on childcare and maternal employment), and new jobs had resulted. Out-of school clubs were an interesting example of innovation, and a network of such clubs which had become a successful private enterprise, headed by a female entrepreneur, was identified. In the area of domestic cleaning/laundry services, innovation took the form of both small business development,

offering tailored services to meet complex household requirements, and franchise operations where a strong emphasis was placed on standards of service. New eldercare services were also growing up, frequently in public/private/voluntary sector partnerships, with mixed funding, and with an emphasis on tailoring provision to meet clients' highly variable needs.

Worker level analysis

The worker interviews were conducted on an exploratory basis, and cannot be used as a basis for statistical generalisations. Striking in this data were the interviewees' strong confidence in the job outlook for the sector, and their belief in the importance of the service they were providing, particularly in work with children and the elderly/ disabled. Low pay and poor recognition of the social value of their work also came through as important issues. Many interviewees claimed to have chosen their jobs to fit in with their own family responsibilities, and a few had seized market opportunities to set up small businesses in the sector. It was these workers who had difficulty in controlling their working day and who appeared to be under pressure, particularly in managing staff and regulating the volume of work.

The following are the key conclusions from the research:

- There is a recognisable household services employment sector.
- There is significant demand for household services.
- The household services sector contains a number of sharply sex-segregated occupations.
- Quality issues are critically important within the household services sector, and concern terms and conditions of employment; training, qualifications and career development; content, reliability and quality of the services provided..
- Within the household services sector, partnerships are in place involving government, local authorities, private enterprise, and the voluntary sector (including co-operatives).
- Government recognises the importance of the sector and wants to develop flexible service delivery.
- There are still gaps in household services provision.
- Changes in the voluntary sector may need attention.
- There is scope to develop more small businesses and more stimuli to entrepreneurship may be needed, particularly in the private purchase sectors.
- Household services are the essential underpinnings of family friendly employment policies