

F O U N D A T I O N

# FOCUS

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## Family matters



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions



*This issue of Foundation Focus looks at families in the light of recent policy developments at EU and national level and based on Foundation research findings in this area. The aim of each issue of the series is to explore a subject of social and economic policy importance and contribute to argument and debate on the key issues shaping the future of living and working conditions in Europe.*

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A majority of Europeans rate the family as being very important, giving it a rating of more than 9 on a scale of 1 to 10, and, generally speaking, Europeans rate themselves very satisfied with their family life (7.9 on a scale of 1 to 10). Family life itself, however, has arguably never before been faced with such a myriad of complex challenges.

To start with, the definition of 'family' is constantly evolving. Births outside marriage are on the increase, while the erosion of the extended family is a clear trend. Elaborate combinations of relationships are commonplace and marital instability is increasingly identified as a key challenge for family life. Fertility rates themselves are on the decline, with fewer babies being born in the European Union and first-time mothers invariably older than before. An increasingly ageing European population places different strains on the modern European family.

Moreover, the political drive to increase employment rates, particularly for women, has thrown up a wealth of contentious issues surrounding familial

roles and responsibilities. Indeed, of growing concern to Europe's policymakers and its citizens is the vexed issue of work-life balance, the sharing of housework and domestic tasks as well as the division of care for both children and the older generation. How can women and men best manage their family responsibilities in a dual-income household? Do flexible working arrangements ease the burden? Can better childcare provision actually solve the problems of reconciling work and family life? And if so, what care is actually best for the child?

This issue of *Foundation Focus* looks at families in today's Europe, assesses the various scenarios and proposed solutions and looks at some of the examples of best practice available to us in the relevant areas. As policymakers seek to facilitate family life in the context of these constraints and in the face of increasing economic competition, the question remains as to whether there is a solution that benefits all sides or whether it is the most vulnerable who risk losing out.

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# Caring for children: Counting the cost

When it comes to making decisions about childcare, there are no obvious solutions. Parents are now spoiled for choice. Gone are the times when caring for and educating young children meant Mum and Dad – in most cases, Mum. Today, parents have three main choices: parental care, informal care by family members or friends, and formal care. Both informal and formal care can take many different forms.

**A** review of childcare statistics by Eurostat in 2002 identified 136 types of formal care in the EU15; Greece had the lowest number of types of care (four) while the UK had the highest (14). This disparity is likely to have widened with EU enlargement and the further development of the childcare market.

As the diversity of childcare options has increased, childcare services have been growing rapidly in Europe. Whether this trend will continue in the future is uncertain: creating attractive jobs in the childcare sector requires a high level of sustainable funding, provided by citizens either through higher taxes or through fees. Whether citizens will continue to demand these expensive services will depend to a large extent on their perceived quality.

## DRIVERS OF GROWTH OF CHILDCARE

The drivers of recent growth in the childcare service sector are many: demographic, economic, social and political. But it is not the number of children as such that has contributed to the growth in childcare services: the proportion of the population under the age of five has been declining at a faster rate in Europe than in other parts of the world. However, the strong growth in female employment in the EU, rising from 51% in 1997 to 57% in

2006, has boosted demand for childcare while it has simultaneously delayed family formation. Over the last 20 years, women aged between 30 and 34 years have become the most fertile cohort of Europe's female



population, taking that title from the 25–29 year-olds; the proportion of women aged 35 years or over giving birth has doubled over that period. Employed women in their thirties are more likely to be established in a career, to have a higher income and therefore a higher propensity to use childcare services. A key political factor is the European Union's commitment to

expand the EU labour market by encouraging greater female participation, and to reverse the decline in fertility and birth rates. This commitment is reflected in the numerical targets set by the Barcelona European Council: by 2010, 90% of children between three years of age and the mandatory school age must have childcare services available to them; for children under the age of three, the target is 33%.

Although the rapid growth that has taken place in the childcare market since the 1990s is undisputed, it is difficult to quantify. Childcare models vary considerably between Member States, making quantitative comparisons problematic and inconclusive. Since there is no common definition of childcare workers, it is not possible to obtain consistent statistical data with which to compare Member States' childcare workforces. However, data is available on public-sector spending on childcare: according to the OECD, the highest spenders in the EU are Denmark and Sweden, with more than 2% of GDP invested in early childcare. In comparison, Ireland and the Netherlands spend 0.3% and 0.2 % of GDP, respectively.

## VARIATION IN INVESTMENT IN CHILDCARE WORKFORCE

Just as overall investment in childcare varies greatly between Member States, so too does investment in the childcare workforce. There are marked differences in employment levels with regard to overall volume, as well as staff-child ratios. (This ratio can be as high as one carer for every three children but can drop to one carer for every 13 children in other Member States.) Differences also exist in terms of training, qualifications, occupational classifications, earnings and employee characteristics. Most Member States continue to distinguish between those *educating* young children (teachers) and those *caring* for them (child carers and nursery nurses): the resulting salary differences can be radical. Few countries have adopted a different approach to ensure that childcare workers are qualified in all aspects of early childhood learning and care. In the Nordic countries, these workers are normally qualified to degree level and receive further education and training as well as a better salary compared with most other EU



countries. The Swedish Teachers' Union is fighting to equalise gaps in salary levels, while in some municipalities, staff in school, pre-school and after-school childcare services have the same starting salaries. In the UK, by contrast, salary differences between 'teaching' and 'caring' staff remain stark, with teaching professionals in primary and nursery education earning an average weekly income of €763, as against €306 for nursery nurses.

Childcare models in which highly qualified employees provide care and education for a small number of children are costly, as is demonstrated by the high levels of public expenditure on childcare services in the Nordic countries. Can the current level of high-quality childcare services be maintained in the future? The OECD's review of childcare published in 2005 warned two of the largest EU investors in childcare, Sweden and Finland, to address long-term pressures on financial sustainability. At the same time, a 2004 evaluation by the Swedish National Agency for Education stated that budgetary cuts had constrained resources to the extent that 'good quality no longer can be guaranteed'. A balance between cost and quality would appear hard to achieve.

#### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The future development of the childcare market is therefore uncertain, and continuous growth is not guaranteed. Apart from the declining birth rates, parents may make different choices and opt for informal or parental care if they are not convinced of the quality provided by formal care solutions, or, indeed, if they cannot afford increased costs. On the supply side, the key constraint is the childcare workforce. If childcare work is unrewarding, it will attract fewer and less qualified workers. This fact will undermine parents' trust in formal care and will again influence their choices: this vicious circle is likely to persist despite the numerical targets set by the Barcelona Council.

OECD, *Babies and bosses – reconciling work and family life: Volume 4 – Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom*, 2005

National Agency for Education in Sweden, *Need for and supply of pedagogical staff – Assessment by the National Agency for Education*, Stockholm, 2004

Barbara Gerstenberger

# 'Mobile mothers': new jobs in childcare in Austria

A small number of remarkable initiatives have created new forms of childcare in Austria; these are strongly oriented to the perceived needs of parents and children, and are also effective in creating additional employment and income in the childcare sector. One of the initiatives that has redefined the childminding profession is the highly successful 'Mobile mothers' project.

#### NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS: THE HUB OF INNOVATION

Publicly subsidised non-profit organisations are the main initiators of innovative childminding services. The Austrian organisation *Hilfswerk* is, with 7,370 employees, one of the most important providers of social services in Austria, and includes a network of 1,400 childminders who care for around 8,400 children. A local branch of *Hilfswerk* manages the 'Mobile mothers' project, which operates in Lower Austria, along with two other non-profit organisations. The project was initiated in 2002 after the Lower Austrian 'Family study' (NÖ Familienstudie 2002) had shown that there was a very strong demand for additional childcare services, provided in a family-like environment. In the 'Mobile mothers' project, childminders go to family homes and take care of the children, drop them off and pick them up from crèche, school, etc. This offers parents greater flexibility than other childcare approaches, because the assistance provided by the 'Mobile mothers' removes worries about transporting children to and from school. At the same time, the fact that the 'Mobile mothers' care for children in a familiar environment is comforting for both parents and children. The initiative is constantly growing: as of 2006, it provided childcare services to about 220 children each month.

#### SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS OF 'MOBILE MOTHERS'

In line with regulations in Lower Austria, the 'Mobile mothers' are well trained. The training includes modules on



communication skills, working with special-needs children and educational science and psychology; it also addresses the role of the childminder, and helps 'Mobile mothers' to deal with conflict (for example, when parents pressure on childminders to perform the tasks of a 'household help'). Mobile mothers are also obliged to participate regularly in skills updates; up to 20 training sessions are run annually.

#### SUCCESSFUL JOB CREATION

The initiative is financially beneficial for childminders, and is an attractive job option for different target groups. Unemployed teachers, for instance, often see the project as an opportunity for them to re-enter the labour market and increase their experience in working with children. Furthermore, the project allows people who do not have the space to care for children in their own home the possibility of still becoming a childminder. Currently, some 88 'Mobile mothers' are working throughout Lower Austria.

Gertinde Ziniel



# Meeting the Lisbon challenge in Slovenia

Family issues will be high on the list of political priorities for the Slovenian EU Presidency, taking place during the first six months of 2008. In an interview with *Foundation Focus*, Marjeta Cotman, Slovenian Minister of Labour, Family and Social Affairs says 'Flexible forms of employment contribute most to the reconciliation of work and family life.'

***Europe is trying to simultaneously achieve two demanding goals: helping citizens balance their work and family commitments, while still moving towards the full employment target of the Lisbon Agenda. How can Europe best do this?***

'I think that constant attention should be paid to the coordination of the work and family obligations of women and men: we have to promote better information and awareness among all actors. Also, we have to strive to ensure that the successful reconciliation of work and family obligations becomes an integral criterion for assessing the effects of all relevant measures, initiatives and actions – at the EU level as well as at the national level. Reaching the Lisbon goals has to remain the common commitment, now and in the future. Especially important is the harmonious development and operation of all components of the Lisbon strategy, most of all its economic, employment and social components: providing quality employment is the best means of preventing poverty. Preservation of relatively high labour law standards, an efficient social system and the encouragement of social dialogue have to be the means by which we reach the Lisbon goals in the future as well. This is the added value of the European Union and a special characteristic of the European approach.'

When a person is unemployed, we have to ensure their proper protection and inclusion in appropriate active labour market policies, which will provide them with employment as soon as possible. And we have to be aware that investments in knowledge are the responsibility of every individual as well as of every employer. An employer has to be aware that investing in an employee is not

just an expense: above all it is an investment in the competitiveness and existence of the company – especially in medium and long term. Investment in human capital should, from the viewpoint of an employer and society, be a priority and the basis of social responsibility.'



***How can the various socioeconomic and tripartite groups assist in ensuring that Europe reaches these two goals?***

'Social partners play an important role in this field. To ensure that globalisation and changes in Europe are successfully addressed, we have to consider flexibility: the labour market is becoming more and more dynamic, which is why it demands great flexibility from companies as well as from employees. Creating a more flexible labour market means creating a more

responsive regulatory framework that supports employees' ability to foresee changes and confront them.'

***What role can the EU play in this?***

'The EU can help by raising awareness of the importance of comprehensive and future-oriented strategies and encouraging them. The Lisbon Strategy offers a framework for upgrading family policies by encouraging equal opportunities – especially a better coordination of working and family life, which in turn contributes to a better inclusion of women in the labour force. In 2008, during the interim review of the implementation of the renewed Lisbon Strategy, new guidelines for employment will be prepared and there will be an opportunity to improve policies and measures.'

Equally important is the legislative framework – for instance, the regulation of parental leave rights, which was actually one of the first results of the European social dialogue.<sup>1</sup> In my opinion, the coordination of social security systems for migrant workers, which includes family benefits, also belongs in this framework. Slovenia is striving to have provisions on the reconciliation of work and family life included in the Working Time Directive.'

Finally, the support of European Structural Funds is important as well. I believe that with the Structural Funds' assistance we can support the implementation – at national and local level – of new activities intended to support equal opportunities, and a better reconciliation of work and family life. Some of these kinds of pilot projects were already developed in the framework of the EQUAL Community Initiative.'

***What is the current situation in Slovenia?***

'In general, the conditions and movements in the labour market in Slovenia are quite favourable. The employment rate for persons aged between 15 and 64 increased in 2005 and 2006; this trend continued in the first half of 2007, which means we are approaching the target employment rate of 70%. In 2006, the employment rate was 66.6%, which means that it was above the EU25 average for the third year in a row.'

Flexible forms of employment and work and other forms of assistance to parents, such as part-time work, workplace division, working from home, the participation of employees in planning the work schedule, help with childcare etc. contribute most to the reconciliation of work and family life.'



### **What difference has EU membership made to Slovenia?**

‘Since becoming a member of the European Union, the development of the organisation of working time in Slovenia has been positive. A good example in this field is the encouragement of working at home, or teleworking. I believe that not only have European Commission initiatives contributed to this over the past years, but also the agreements made by European social partners.’

### **What do you see as the practical solutions for supporting families so that, in particular, women no longer have to choose between having children and having a career?**

‘Some of the key objectives of the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs in Slovenia are to create conditions and circumstances that allow families the freedom to choose their own form of family life and to enable young couples to create a family and at the same time fulfil their family, work and social responsibilities. In addition, we want to ensure a good quality life for already established families, and to enable them to have another child if desired. Of course, the decision to have a child is an intimate matter for every individual or couple; the state can only create the conditions that make it easier for couples to make that decision. And, as I already mentioned, employers’ willingness to enable their employees to better coordinate family and working life is very important, as is the availability of childcare, which, in Slovenia, is well developed.’

<sup>1</sup> Council Directive 96/34/EC of 3 June 1996 on the framework agreement on parental leave concluded by UNICE, CEEP and the ETUC

# Does greater working time flexibility equal better work–life balance?

Working time flexibility is often presented as a panacea for reconciling work and family life for working parents. But it is not as straightforward a solution as it may first appear: many other related aspects go hand in hand with the work–life balance issue.

If parents, especially mothers, choose to continue working after the birth of their children, they are faced with two main options – part-time or full-time work. Foundation research suggests that both options have pros and cons; however, in both cases, the costs may outweigh the benefits. Working full time implies a heavier workload which does not combine well with family responsibilities; however, it also provides better career opportunities and gives the worker access to more skilled jobs and a higher income. The opposite is true for parents working part time: working part time frees up time, but part-time jobs tend to be of low quality and provide a lower income. However, as suggested by a recent Foundation report, a number of forms of working time flexibility do exist – especially advanced forms of flexibility that allow workers to bank time over a longer period – that can meet the needs of working parents.<sup>2</sup> Not all flexibility, it should be stressed, meets parents’ needs: so-called ‘positive flexibility’ refers to the use of working time flexibility for a worker’s own needs, while ‘negative flexibility’ implies overtime work or unforeseen changes in working time schedules determined by the employer.

### **WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS**

A comparative report from the Foundation’s European Working Conditions Observatory (EWCO), *Combining family and full-time work*, illustrates the extent to which work–life balance has multiple ramifications and policy implications.<sup>3</sup> The fourth *European*

*Working Conditions Survey* also sheds light on this complex issue by looking at work–life balance from a working time perspective.<sup>4</sup>

One restriction of the EWCO report is that the methods used for data collection differ from country to country and do not always specify whether they are looking at positive or negative flexibility. A few national sources do make such a distinction (the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden). These suggest that men tend to enjoy greater positive flexibility than women: they might, for example, start work before 7am, or finish later in the evening. However, men do not necessarily use their increased flexibility to share the burden of household activities. Instead, it is women (with fixed working times) who carry out the bulk of childcare and domestic responsibilities. The lesson to be drawn is that flexibility of working time arrangements does not automatically translate into equal division of household and care duties in families.

Another issue rarely covered in national surveys is that of the predictability of working time. (Predictability of working times means that the working schedule does not change at short notice.) The fourth *European Working Conditions Survey* shows that workers who report frequent changes, given at short notice, to their working schedule are less satisfied with their work–life balance. This is largely due to the fact that the opening hours of shops, schools, etc are generally organised to fit standard

working hours. Working parents tend to prefer predictable working time schedules as these allow them to plan their lives around their children's needs and timetables.

An apparent contradiction revealed by the fourth *European Working Conditions Survey* is that although women work longer hours than men (when including paid work and time spent on care and domestic duties), they are more satisfied with their work-life balance than their male counterparts: 83% of women, as against 77% of men, expressed satisfaction with their work-life balance. Of all respondents to the survey, working fathers express the highest level of dissatisfaction with their ability to combine work and family responsibilities. The difference in levels of satisfaction with work-life balance between men and women may also reflect entrenched gender and family roles in society, according to which, women are expected to care for children and look after the home rather than engaging in careers to the same extent as men.

#### SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS

Cultural expectations may also partially explain another survey finding. Men with more children tend to work longer hours, up until a point. For example, men with two children aged under 16 work more than two hours extra each week, compared with men with no children; only when men have three or more children do they tend to reduce their workload slightly. The opposite is the case for women: women with children work fewer hours in their paid job than do women without children. Therefore, in the case of women, there is a direct negative correlation between the average length of their working week and the number of children they have. In addition, the EWCO



study suggests that increased parental responsibilities have an impact on the professional choices of women, with obvious consequences for their career development. According to many national contributions, flexible working schedules are often associated with managerial and professional occupations where men tend to prevail. Conversely, women feel obliged either to not pursue time-demanding management career paths or to opt for predictable working time

arrangements (often in the public sector) in order to cope with increased family commitments.

One of the conclusions of the Foundation's research is that flexibility of working time should be explored in both its positive and its negative characteristics. So far, most statistical sources seem to capture the negative rather than the positive aspects of flexibility. Another

concern is that, in spite of the prominence of work-life balance issues on the political agenda, surprisingly limited statistical data exist at EU or national level: better data is a prerequisite for exploring the issue of work-life balance further in all its facets. Why is the issue of work-life balance so relevant? One reason is that positive flexibility has the potential to encourage more women into the labour force, and so contribute to solving the problem of Europe's ageing workforce and – in the long term – to raising European economic competitiveness. Good work-life balance is also a driver for family formation and ultimately enhances satisfaction with both work and family life. Such considerations underline the importance of work-life balance; if its implications are stressed, it may become less of a fashionable 'buzzword' and more of an opportunity.

Sara Riso



<sup>2</sup> Riedmann, A.; Bielenski, H.; Szczurowska, T.; Wagner, A., *Working Time and Work-life Balance in European Companies*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2006

<sup>3</sup> Parnanen, A.; Sutela, H.; Mahler, S., *Combining family and full-time work*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2005

<sup>4</sup> Parent-Thirion, A. et al, *Fourth European Working Conditions Survey*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007



# Keeping childcare local: Kinderwerking Fabota in Belgium

Kinderwerking Fabota is an out-of-school care organisation, for both pre-school and school-age children, based in the north-west of the city of Leuven in Belgium. The organisation forms part of a neighbourhood association called *buurtwerk 't Lampeke*, which brings together four other neighbourhood organisations (a day-care centre, a youth centre, a theatre company, and a community centre). Originally, Kinderwerking Fabota (or 'Fabota') was a youth organisation, created in the early 1980s and subsidised to fund its youth activities, as well as its activities geared towards the underprivileged members of the local population. In 2004, the association applied for official accreditation, which it was granted in November 2004.

## SERVICES OF THE INITIATIVE

Fabota's services are targeted at children in the district aged between two and a half and 12 years, and their families. Activities are free of charge for children from the district, as it is a disadvantaged area with a high proportion of poor families or families from an immigrant background. Families are asked only to contribute towards the cost of outings. For a swimming outing, for example, they contribute €0.50; for meals they contribute €1.00 and for day trips they pay €1.50.

Fabota staff can accommodate and supervise around 80 children during the school term. The venue is accessible every weekday of the year: on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays it is open from 15.00 to 18.00, on Wednesdays from 12.00 to 18.00 and during school holidays from 08.00 to 18.00. Children have access to an internal space consisting of several rooms in which they can form groups for supervised activities and homework. They also have access to outside areas, including a large porch, a big playground with a sandpit and a play area open to all children, not only those cared for in Fabota.

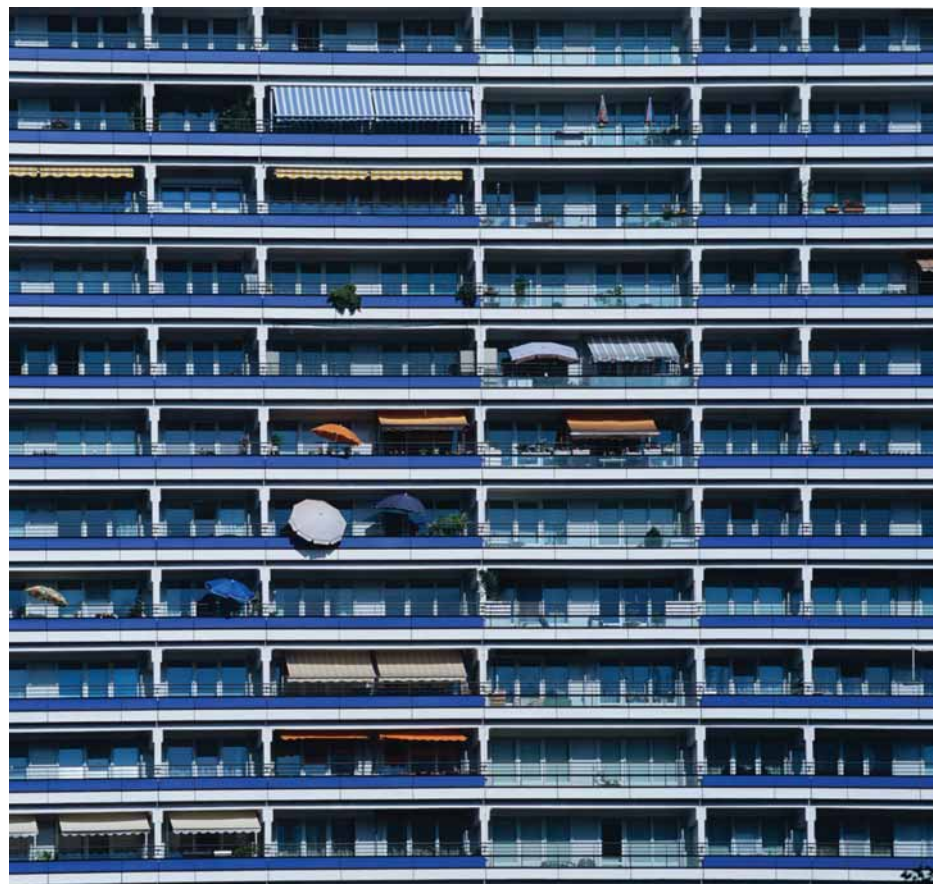
## RECOGNISING CHILDREN'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

The care offered by Fabota focuses on two main areas: schoolwork and play. For the first, care involves educational support, similar to a homework club, after school; for the second, Fabota offers games,

entertainment and free play space and time. The basic principles of the service are that, although the Fabota staff cares for a large number of children, it is recognised that each child is unique, with their own personality and with their own personal, family and cultural history. The specific

needs of children, such as physical and learning disabilities, are taken into account while still caring for children as part of the group and integrating them with specific supervision from the staff.

Gertinde Ziniel







# Work–life balance: a life-course perspective

Policies to achieve the enigmatic objective of work–life balance have been debated across the European Union for many years. Various proposals have been tabled for easing the strain on workers trying to balance the demands of family and other responsibilities with the increasingly pressurised work environment. Flexible working arrangements, differing leave opportunities and a wide range of childcare and other facilities have been presented as partial solutions to the problem.

**B**ut the current debate surrounding work–life balance debate has a number of shortcomings. First, the debate has traditionally focused on the balance between childcare and paid work. However, people’s personal lives have other aspects, which must also be taken into account over the life course – for instance, time for lifelong learning, care for elderly relatives, leisure time and volunteering or civic participation. In addition, different responsibilities may result in a ‘sandwich’ situation, where people find themselves simultaneously caring for young children and elderly relatives. Furthermore, the so called ‘rush hour’ phase of life in the middle of the life course is also influenced by such decisions as changing job, engaging in lifelong learning, and buying or building a house.

Secondly, work–life balance is usually approached from a short- or medium-term perspective, looking – for instance – at the effects of parental leave on work–life balance when children are small. However, the long-term effects of work–life balance policies over the life course on such issues as income, pensions, career and attachment to the labour market are usually ignored.

Thirdly, the policy approach within the traditional work–life balance debate is mainly geared towards measures and policies dealing with particular life phases. There is little or no development of measures addressing the redistribution of

time and income (for one individual, or between different individuals) over the entire life course. Almost no attempt is being made to integrate the allocation of time and income into a holistic policy design.

There is therefore, a growing body of opinion which argues that the current debate is stunted in the longer term perspective. It is argued, rather, that to tackle the work–life balance conundrum effectively, we must look at it from a ‘life course’ perspective.

## *So what exactly is that?*

A life-course approach can be applied to the issue of work–life balance from two distinct perspectives: that of the employee, and that of the company. For the employee, such an approach focuses on the distribution of time and income over the period of their working life, particularly between the ages of 18 and 65 years. For the company, a life-course approach takes a management perspective: it focuses on the relationship between wages and productivity (performance related to total wage costs) over the different phases of an employee’s working life.

## **MAKING LIFE-COURSE POLICIES EXPLICIT**

Most EU Member States have an *implicit* life-course policy in place, one based on institutional structures and policies in education, training, labour market, social security systems and family and spousal relationships. Such structures and policies result in a particular distribution of time and income over the life course.

However, explicit life course policies would facilitate a better work–life balance for a number of reasons.

- Such policies would be more likely to take life-course effects into account (as regards the distribution and re-distribution of income and time).
- They would help to integrate the increasing number of explicit life-course objectives in important policy domains. For instance, employment policy uses the model of a man or woman working over the life course with minimum interruptions; active labour market



policies increasingly stress the importance of lifelong learning, while social security systems are exploring greater individualisation of pension provision and enhanced income risk at later stages in the life course.

- They allow a better management of more varied life-course patterns and provide the possibility for more choice and flexibility. By implementing various forms of flexicurity over the life course, they also provide scope for innovative approaches to modernising the European social model, and so combine the management of risk for individuals, with good economic performance.
- They fill the policy vacuum that has developed because of the erosion of the standard model of the male breadwinner and the female homemaker.

#### LIFE-COURSE POLICIES AT EU AND NATIONAL LEVEL

In this context, life-course policies and analysis have become more important in EU policymaking: examples include policy initiatives on active ageing from 2002, on addressing demographic change, from 2005, on the European employment strategy, from 2005, and the discussion on the future of social policy in the enlarged Union, from 2004. In addition, in 2005 the OECD initiated research into life course, life risks and social policy.

At the national level, Belgium, the Netherlands and Sweden have developed the

most explicit and integrated life-course policies. In addition, Germany takes a strong life course perspective – for instance, in its Federal Ministry’s seventh family report from 2006.

Indeed, a number of socioeconomic policy approaches are key to ensuring a positive work–life balance for an employee over their life course. These include various working time options, different forms of employment contracts, income provisions, health and safety regulations, company-level initiatives to improve working conditions and integrated strategies that combine several of those elements. However, employees’ work–life balance is also influenced by education and vocational-training policies, housing policy and pensions policy.

When describing and analysing these such initiatives from a life-course perspective, it is important to distinguish the level of regulation – whether at the individual, company, regional or national level, the type of regulation, be it regulated through legislation, collective bargaining or voluntary agreement, the coverage of companies or individual employees and the form of implementation. It is also important to distinguish between implicit and explicit life course policies. The following analysis focuses on working time options and in particular long-term working time accounts.

#### POLICY CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

An important part of the political debate on work–life balance centres on the freedom

granted to employees to use certain working time options. Assuming that employees have some freedom in terms of leave arrangements, how is this freedom to be reconciled with a company’s goals of optimising the relationship between productivity and wages for an employees over the life course of that employee? When employees are granted a high level of control over their own working time, companies tend to experience some significant impacts:

- companies’ ability to deliver ‘just in time’ may be impaired;
- staffing plans impose greater overhead;

- smaller companies, in particular, find they are overstretched in meeting employees’ requests for flexibility.

In order to arrive at a win–win situation for both company and employee, some limitations on the rights of employees may need to be considered. These may include those listed below:

- the requirement upon employees to give a longer notice period when requesting changes in the work schedule, with exceptions being granted only in emergency situations;
- permitting only a certain proportion of the workforce to avail of alternative working schedules in a given time period, perhaps between 5% and 10%;
- the use of a ‘sliding scale’ of entitlement to use of alternative work schedules, with employees with care responsibilities having greater entitlement than those seeking more leisure time, for instance;
- entitlement to seek a reduction in working time only at certain periods – every three years, for example;
- entitlement to alternative working time schedules only being available in companies over a certain minimum size;
- a limited availability of entitlement to certain groups of employees.

As a complementary measure to the above restrictions, pilot projects could also be implemented, permitting small companies to explore the feasibility of – for instance – joint working pools. In addition, establishing an arbitration process at company level could assist in successfully managing the use of alternative working time schedules.

Another issue to consider when seeking a win–win solution is the negotiation of trade-offs between employees, companies and the state. Such trade-offs may include granting greater time ‘sovereignty’ to employees in return for their engaging in greater functional flexibility of task and jobs. A second possibility is to grant employees more paid leave over the life course, in return for which they would work longer and retire later; the additional pension rights gained by prolonging working life could be used to finance paid leave in the ‘rush hour’ of life.<sup>5</sup> The third possible trade-off, principally for women, is a combination of greater time sovereignty with uninterrupted participation in the labour force over the life course; currently,



this model is in operation in the Netherlands.

### ACCESS TO LIFE-COURSE POLICIES

The danger exists that work–life balance policies, with a life-course perspective, will only be applied to selected segments of the workforce or to specific types of household, for a number of reasons:

- only middle- and upper-middle class households, with only a few children, are likely to be able to financially afford to avail of options provided by a life-course policy;
- companies will make any life-course options they may have available only to the core workforce and to professionals;
- less-skilled workers may lack the negotiating strength to make use of existing life course options provided by a company.

The greater prevalence of work–life balance measures at higher professional levels may lead to a reduction in the supply of already scarce skilled workers, as they avail of such schemes. (This was one of the reasons for the abolition, several years ago, of long-term leave schemes in Denmark.) It may also be an additional driver of societal segregation between the lower-paid, peripheral workforce and the better-paid core workforce, which can improve its quality of life by improving its work–life balance over the life course. Such outcomes could, in part, be counteracted by the state targeting benefits at low-income groups, as is practiced in Flanders, in Belgium.

In addition, the development of explicit life-course policies is based on a long and inclusive societal discourse. Such a discourse needs reliable data and comprehensive scientific analysis; these in turn must be based on adequate life-history data of individuals and companies, and on the use of analytical instruments of a life-course approach. In this context, policy instruments must be ‘life-course proofed’. In addition, the long-term effects of specific instruments over the life course should be examined – for instance, effects upon lifelong income and upon participation in the labour force.

There is a need for infrastructural investment into adequate, long-term panel data for both individuals and companies, or to invest in good life-history data (as in the Netherlands).<sup>6</sup> An interesting avenue in this respect is to combine collected administrative data with specifically collected data, as in Sweden.

Life-course policies also depend on policies and analysis taking a longer-term perspective than is usual. However, many companies are under pressure to become ever more short-term in their outlook, for a number of reasons: more rapid change in product and service markets; greater customisation of products and services; the expectations of the capital market being based on the short term i.e. quarterly reporting of results; the need to manage numerical flexibility; and increased global competition. Companies must weigh the pros and cons of short-term and long-term strategies; in particular, they must consider a life-course approach for employees as part of a long-term human-resource strategy for the core workforce.

For employees, planning their future working life from a life-course perspective is also a considerable challenge. Such planning requires that they consider how to combine a range of possible life courses with a family or a relationship (the development of which over time is as unpredictable as a professional life course). For individuals, the institutional context of their professional life greatly influences their personal life course. In addition, there is a general unwillingness to invest in one’s professional career after the initial education is completed; moreover, particularly younger age groups have an increasingly short-term perspective. In practical terms, the question is how can employees be empowered to better cope with planning their work biography? One approach would be to integrate career planning into the training of employees. In addition, trade unions could give more support to their members in career planning, as is done in the Netherlands by Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV).

Another challenge is the increasing pressure for extending working life, which has in many countries become shorter. Possible measures include an earlier effective start to employment, which would require less



‘frontloading’ of education during the early phases of the life course, more emphasis on lifelong learning during later phases of working life and more effective transitions from education into employment. Also required are measures that help citizens avoid spells of unemployment in their working life, through effective transitional labour markets.

A complementary approach, at the other end of the working life, is creating the conditions for later and more flexible retirement. It may be that expectations are already changing to make this possible: although European employees give 57 years as their average preferred retirement age, their *expected* retirement age is 64 years.

Whatever the approach, it would seem that as pressures grow to increase women’s participation rates, to provide better and more childcare facilities, to care for the increasingly ageing population, to respond to calls for working longer and to support the core function of the family, the ‘life-course’ perspective appears an increasingly attractive and intelligent alternative.

**Hubert Krieger**

<sup>5</sup> This idea, however, proved unpopular in a Eurobarometer study from 2002–2003. When surveyed, 53% of respondents wanted to receive a higher pension in return for working longer, 49% wanted to receive the same pension and *reduce* their working hours in the years prior to retirement, while only 30% wanted to use the additional money to finance paid leave in the ‘rush hour’ of life.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of such data include the German Socioeconomic Panel Study (SOEP) and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) in the UK, for individuals, and the German Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (IAB) Establishment Panel, for companies.



# Families come first: Factors influencing the quality of family life in Europe

When the Foundation’s first European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) asked people to rate their satisfaction with family life on a scale of 1 to 10, people who were part of a couple, with children or without, reported the greatest satisfaction. Single parents – particularly in the 10 new Member States that joined in 2004 – reported the least.

Moreover, when people were asked about what matters most for their quality of life,<sup>7</sup> the majority rank family and social relations – along with income and health – as indispensable ingredients of a good life. In the same way, satisfaction with family life, social life or health, usually have the strongest impact on people’s rating of their general satisfaction. It is no surprise therefore, that quality of life for Europe’s citizens is increasingly a key focus of social policies.

## FAMILIES ARE CHANGING

In recent decades, European families have changed substantially in their structure and composition. The number of households has risen because of the ageing of the population, the falling size of families, marriage breakdown, and changing patterns of transitions to adulthood. These trends differ markedly between the EU15 and the NMS10, partly because of differing demographics and differing patterns of household formation. Differences are also apparent between northern and southern European countries. In northern Europe, marriage appears to be less popular than in southern or eastern European countries; however, northern European countries give greater attention to measures supporting fertility growth, such as childcare services, parental leave for both men and women and more flexible working time arrangements. In southern Europe, people tend to leave their

parental home later, and to form different kinds of households when they do so.

Family life is, of course, hugely influenced by the size of the family and the number of children. Only 35% of households in the EU25 comprise a couple with children, and 30% comprise only a couple. Data from the EQLS 2003 indicates that single parents form 8% of all households; one-person households, which make up 25% of the total, are more common in the EU15 than in the NMS10; to a lesser degree, this is also true of childless couples (Figure 1). In general, children tend to leave households in the EU15 at an earlier age, so the loss of a partner through family breakdown or death translates more readily, in these countries, into a family becoming a one-person household.

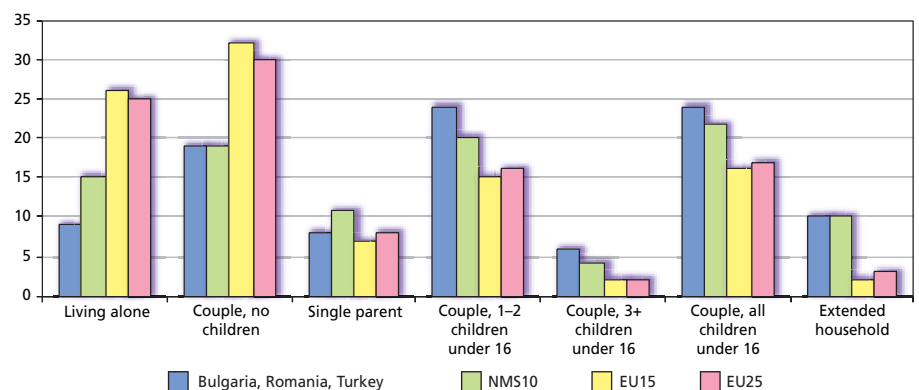
## RELATIONSHIPS AND FERTILITY

Marital instability is increasingly identified as a key challenge for family life: EQLS data indicates that 9% of all Europeans aged 18 years and over find themselves living alone after the breakdown of a partnership, while 10% are single because of the death of their spouse. Women tend to remain single for longer than men after the end of a partnership. Again, there are notable country differences, with the EU15 (especially the northern and central Member States) having the highest proportions of single-person and single-parent households following marital breakdown. Alongside falling fertility and family breakdown, other major developments impacting the quality of family life include the erosion of the extended family, the rise of different forms of legal partnership and – in particular – the entry of women into the workforce. These developments are leading to new patterns of family life: a growth in double-income households, growing numbers of single parents and new combinations of marital status.

Despite these developments, the family remains the cornerstone for raising children and caring for older people. And, for a majority of citizens, the family is an essential support for coping with the challenges of daily life, particularly in such practical matters as help in the house or financial assistance. However, when moral or emotional support is needed, it appears that people are somewhat more likely to turn to friends and others.

Results from the EQLS indicate that in the NMS10, the extended family appears to play an important role in buffering economic risks and in integrating people socially. However, such family solidarity may not be available to all family members: older people and those who are unemployed may in particular fail to benefit. The evidence suggests that policymakers should not assume that family support and solidarity

FIGURE 1: Types of household, by country groups (%)





# Family life in statistics

In May 2005, the Foundation launched EurLIFE, its interactive online database on quality-of-life issues; the data was derived from best available existing data sources, such as Eurostat and the Foundation's first European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS).

The database covers 12 quality-of-life domains, each of which has between 15 and 20 indicators. EurLIFE allows users to access data in tabular or graphical format, typically covering a 10-year period.

The database was relaunched in August 2007 to allow the inclusion of more indicators, new data and other countries. It now covers the 27 EU Member States and the candidate countries Turkey and Croatia. In 2008, it will be updated again to include data from the second EQLS, currently being carried out by the Foundation.

are universally available; rather, policy should focus on creating conditions for a good family life. Clearly, supporting families in having children is a fundamental issue for couples and, increasingly, for Member State governments. When asked in surveys how governments could better support family life, respondents clearly favoured such measures as reducing unemployment and promoting flexible working hours. However, citizens in the EU15 are more likely to identify measures promoting labour market participation as appropriate ways to promote family life, while citizens in the NMS10 stress the importance of family policy measures such as child allowances and parental leave.

## BALANCING CAREER AND WORK

Promoting an appropriate balance between professional and family life is undoubtedly a key tool in enabling Europeans to have their ideal number of children and to avoid having to choose between career and family life. The issue of balancing work and family life is now a major theme of contemporary social policy in Europe. Results from the Foundation's *European Working Conditions Surveys*, as well as the EQLS, suggest that people who manage to establish an appropriate balance are more satisfied in general with their lives. Two factors appear to have a particular impact on families' attempts to balance work and family life: the number of children under 16 in the household and the number of hours that people are in paid employment. In addition, it appears that in all countries, and especially in the NMS10, vulnerable groups such as lone-parent households find it extremely difficult to balance time commitments.

When it comes to who actually does the balancing of work and family responsibilities, consistent and strong gender differences emerge: women – especially those with children – report much lower levels of satisfaction with the division of household tasks than do men. Similarly, women in all Member States are more likely to report that it is they who care for dependent adults or older relatives.

In fact, what is striking is the common thread in relation to providing informal care throughout Europe: in the 2002 Candidate Countries Eurobarometer Survey, one in four respondents in the NMS10 and one in five in the EU15 reported that they had 'extra family responsibilities because they look after someone who has a long-term illness, who is handicapped, or is elderly'. In general, people favour caring for elderly relatives at home, over placing them in residential care facilities, by a ratio of as much as 7:1. However, when Europeans are asked to think about the future for care provision for dependent adults, more citizens in the NMS10 than in the EU15 thought that it would be 'a good thing to strengthen family responsibility for looking after elderly parents'. Much attention has been paid in recent years at EU level to childcare work by families, but the policy focus must extend to reflect the reality of family care for adult dependents, and must pay more attention to intergenerational issues and the role of the family from a life cycle perspective.

Robert Anderson

<sup>7</sup> Quality of life is a concept that combines not only people's living conditions and their standard of living, but also how they feel about their lives and the society in which they live.

FIGURE 2: Sources of support, by country groups (%)

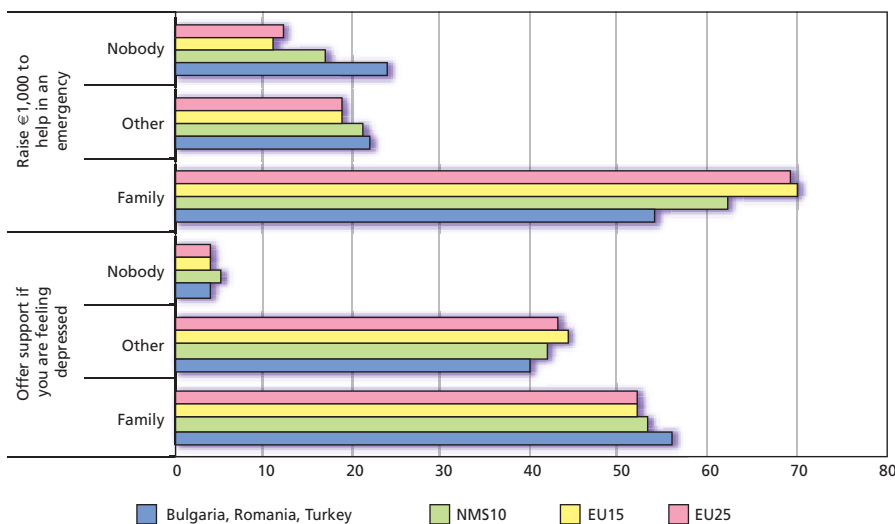
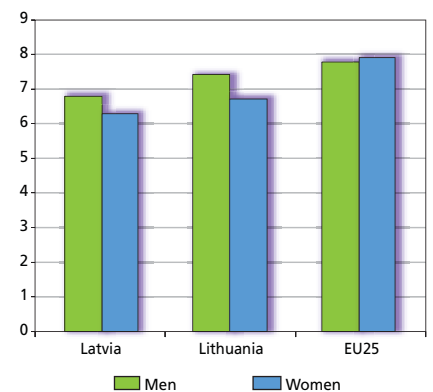


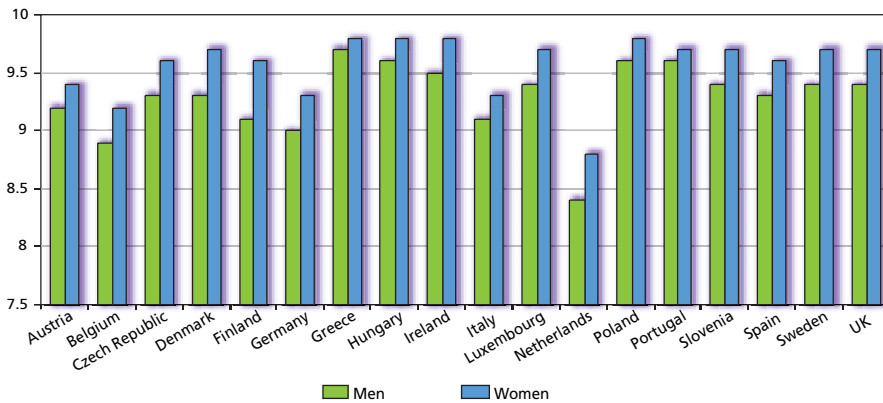
FIGURE 1: Level of satisfaction with family life: Latvia, Lithuania and EU25



Note: Values given are mean values on a scale from 1 ('very dissatisfied') to 10 ('very satisfied')

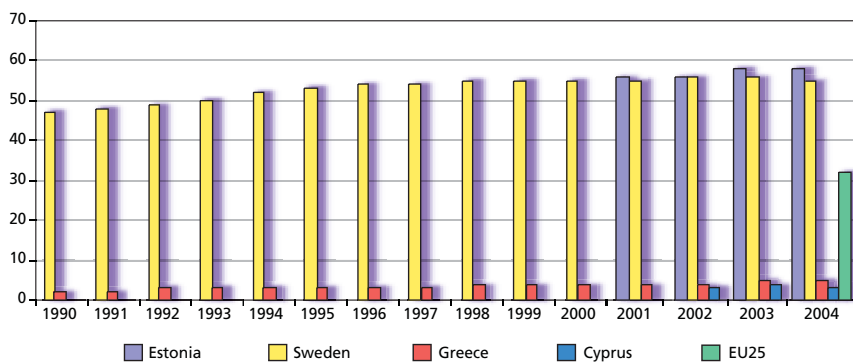
Source: EQLS, 2003

**FIGURE 2: Importance of family life, by country**



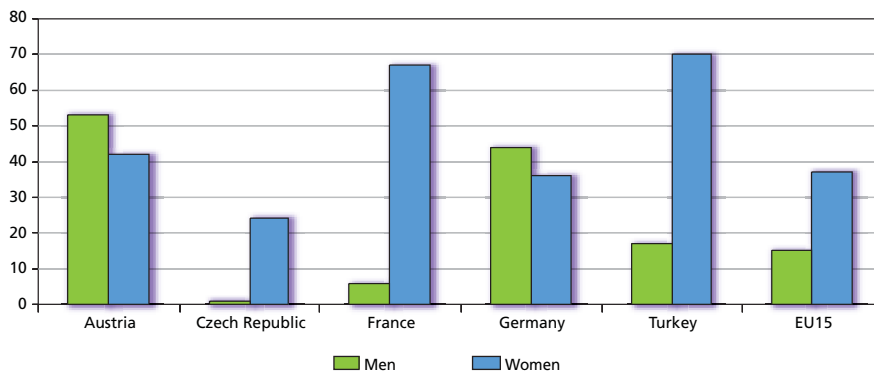
Note: Values are mean values on a scale running from 1 ('Family is extremely unimportant') to 10 ('Family is extremely important')  
Source: European Social Survey, 2002

**FIGURE 3: Percentage of births outside marriage, by selected countries**



Note: Figures indicate births outside marriage as a percentage of total live births  
Source: Eurostat, 2002 and 2007

**FIGURE 4: Perceived sharing of family responsibilities, by gender (%)**



Note: Figures are for people aged 18 and over who think they do more than a fair share of the housework.  
Source: EQLS, 2003

EurLIFE is structured around 12 domains: health, employment, income deprivation, education, family, social participation, housing, environment, transport, safety, leisure, and life satisfaction.

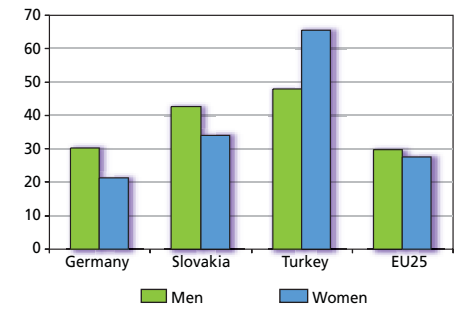
**HIGH LEVEL OF SATISFACTION WITH FAMILY LIFE**

Generally, Europeans seem very satisfied with their family life: respondents give a satisfaction rating of around 7.9 on a scale

of between 1 and 10 (with only small differences between men and women). In Latvia and Lithuania, however, satisfaction with family life is low and women are less satisfied than men (see Figure 1).

People generally consider family life as very important, giving an average score greater than 9 on a 1–10 point scale. Women tend to consider family life more important than do men (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 5: Difficulty in giving time to family responsibilities because of work, by selected countries (%)**



Note: EB: Percentage of employed people who often or always find that their job prevents them giving time to their partner/family, measured on a four item scale. EQLS: Share of people for whom it has been difficult to fulfil their family responsibilities because of the amount of time spent on the job 'several times a week' or 'several times a month'.  
Source: Eurobarometer, 2001 and 2002; EQLS 2003

**RISE IN NUMBER OF BIRTHS OUTSIDE MARRIAGE**

At the same time as divorce rates have been rising, so too has the percentage of children born outside marriage. Of the EU15 in 2003, the highest percentage of births outside marriage was in Sweden, at 55% (up from 47% in 1990). The lowest was in Greece, at 5% (but up from 2% in 1990). The highest for the EU25 in 2004 was Estonia, at 58%, while the lowest was Cyprus, at 3%.

**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN HOUSEWORK**

The biggest gender difference apparent in EurLIFE is in men's and women's perception of the share of housework they carry. In all countries except Austria and Germany, a higher proportion of women than men feel they do more than a fair share of housework. Only in Austria and Germany is the opposite the case (see Figure 4).

**WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

The issue of work-life balance is of growing concern to policymakers and citizens. Information on the ability of European workers to meet their family responsibilities can be found under the 'Employment' domain in EurLIFE. The data indicate that almost 30% of men in the EU25 find that their job prevents them from giving time to their family, compared with 28% of women (see Figure 5).

The EurLIFE database is available on the Foundation's website, at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/qualityoflife/eurlife/index.php>

Henrik Litske



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