



COMBINING FAMILY AND WORK: THE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS OF WOMEN AND MEN

Employment Options of the Future

During the summer and autumn of 1998 the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions carried out a major survey on Employment Options of the Future across the 15 EU Member States and Norway. Who wants to work? When? and Why? were the major questions examined in the survey, which sought the views of people currently in paid employment or who intend to enter the labour market within the next five years. This leaflet summarises the main findings of the survey concerning the current participation in paid work and future preferences of men and women who are living together as a couple.

Key findings

- Over two-thirds of the workforce in the European Union and Norway are married or living with a partner. This means that decisions about labour market participation and working hours affect not only the individual but also his or her partner;
- The total combined weekly working hours in paid work of both partners amount to 62 hours. Couples with financial difficulties spend significantly less time (53 hours) in paid work than couples who consider themselves well off (66 hours);
- The presence of children in a household has relatively little influence on the number of hours spent in paid work, although in one out of four such families the man works full-time while the woman works part-time;
- In a large proportion of households (43%) there is only one wage earner – in most cases, this is the man;
- Almost one third (31%) of couples say they would prefer the model whereby the man works full-time and the woman works part-time, even though this model is at present practised by only 20% of couples;
- A significant number of couples (16%) claim that they would like to see both partners in part-time employment: however, at present only 2% practise this model;
- In contrast to the present situation, men and women say they would prefer a more equal participation by both partners in paid work: the majority of men and women feel that not only the man but also the woman should be employed.



How do families choose between the various demands on their time in relation to the different spheres of work and life in modern Europe? And, more specifically, how do men and women who live together negotiate what amount of time is spent on each area of life and by whom?

While it is generally recognised that one-person and single parent households are becoming increasingly common in Europe, the strand of the Employment Options of the Future Survey under study here concentrates on the way in which paid work is shared among both partners of a couple. This is an issue which is relevant for most of the working population, given the fact that more than two-thirds of the workforce in the EU and Norway are either married or living with a partner.

Women at work: present and future scenarios

Approximately half of all women aged between 16 and 64 years in the 15 EU Member States and Norway are currently employed. Female employment rates vary widely from one country to another, ranging from less than 30% in Spain to over 70% in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Two thirds of working women are married or live with a partner; one third is single.

In terms of the type of work chosen, just over half (58%) of the married or cohabiting women work on a full-time basis, while 41% work part-time¹. By contrast, full-time work is much more widespread among single women (71%).

Nearly all the partners of working women who are married or cohabiting are in employment, mainly on a full-time basis. Only a small proportion of the partners (13%) are not in paid work, either because they are unemployed, still studying or already retired. Furthermore, very few women (3%) in full-time employment are living with a person who works part-time.

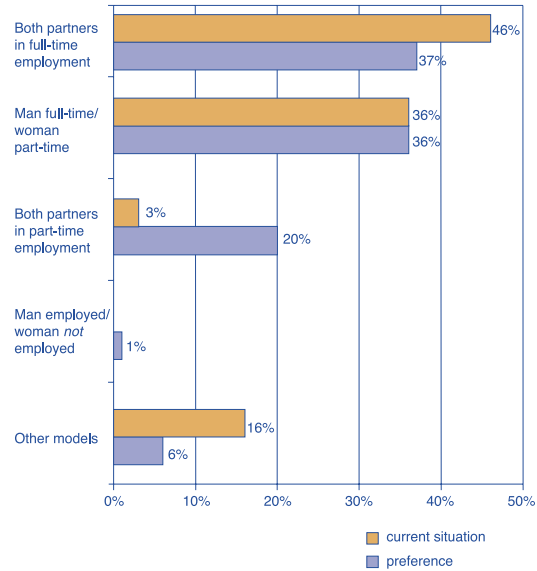
The vast majority of employed women (see Figure 1) who are married or living together with a partner fit into one of two categories:

- *Both partners work full-time*: this accounts for almost half (46%) of the cases;
- *The woman works part-time and her partner full-time*: this accounts for 36% of the cases.

It should be noted that the data presented in Figure 1 refer only to women who are currently employed.

Therefore the combination ‘*the man is employed and the woman is not*’ contains no figures for the current situation, showing only future preferences. We will take into account the views of women not currently in paid work in a later section when the situation of couples is examined.

Figure 1 Situation of employed women who are married or living with a partner²



There are a variety of reasons which impel women towards employment: both personal, such as the need to earn money, and societal, such as availability of childcare facilities, advantages of the social security system and prevailing cultural values. However, although the majority of currently employed women would be quite happy for both partners to continue to be in paid work, in general they show a distinct preference for reduced working hours both for themselves and for their partners. The most striking discrepancies between the current situation and declared preferences are to be found in the following models:

Both partners work full-time: although currently practised by 46% of working women and their partners, only 37% of the former say they would prefer this arrangement;

Both partners work part-time: while only 3% of working women with a partner are practising this way of working at present, 20% would be keen to do it. Significantly, a relatively high proportion of men (17%) would also opt for this type of work within the family.

As far as the combination ‘*man works full-time, the woman part-time*’ is concerned, the current

¹ Figures have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number, therefore percentages do not always add up to 100. It should be noted that only those respondents who answered the corresponding questions completely were taken into account in the figures.

² The other models are: man working part-time/woman full-time, man not employed/woman employed, both partners not employed.



incidence is fully in line with women’s preferences – at least on an aggregated level. At present practised by 36% of working women who are married or living together with a partner, a similar proportion say that they prefer this arrangement.

Very few of these women (2%) would opt to be out of paid employment completely. Similarly, relatively few (5%) said they would like to see their partner in this situation — in contrast to the current situation where 13% of partners are not in employment.

The survey findings reveal that the majority of employed women who are married or cohabiting have a partner who is also in paid work. In general, they are happy with the model of the dual wage earner family. Compared to the present situation, however, working women show less of an interest in full-time work and a greater interest in part-time work – both for themselves and for their partners.

Men at work: present and future scenarios

The current employment rates of men are generally higher than those of women. In the 15 EU Member States and Norway, 71% of all men aged between 16 and 64 years are currently in paid work. Male employment rates show less of a variation from one country to another than do female employment rates. In common with the trend of working women mentioned above, two-thirds (70%) of employed men are married or living together with a partner, whereas 30% are single.

The vast majority of men in employment work full-time; the proportion working part-time amounts to only 9%. Interestingly, part-time work is more widespread among single men (17%) than among men who are married or live together with a partner (5%) – usually because the former are often students who are carrying out a part-time job alongside their studies.

As far as the current division of paid work among partners is concerned, there are three predominant categories (see Figure 2):

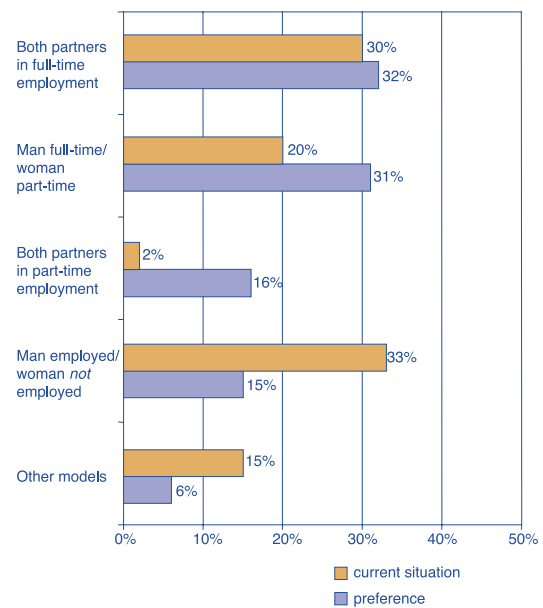
- *Both partners work full-time:* this applies to 38% of the employed men who are married or cohabiting;
- *The man is in employment (either full-time or part-time) whereas the woman is not:* this applies to a similar 38% of these men;
- *The man works full-time and his partner part-time:* this corresponds to the situation of 20% of employed men.

This division of paid work among both partners, however, is not at all in line with men’s preferences:

- While at present 38% of the employed men who are married or cohabiting have a partner who does not participate in paid work at all, only 18% say that they prefer this model. This implies that most men would like their wives or partners to participate actively in paid employment;
- Although only 2% of employed men work part-time and have a partner who also works part-time, 17% declare a preference for this model. This is quite similar to the proportion of women (20%) who would be interested in this work arrangement within the couple.

In general, the majority (81%) of employed men would prefer their wives or partners to be in paid work and in this instance would like them to work part-time (45%) rather than full-time (35%). Only a small minority of employed men have a preference for women not to be in paid work at all. For themselves, married or cohabiting men mostly prefer full-time work (76%). However, a relatively significant proportion of men (22%) would prefer to work part-time.

Figure 2 Situation of employed men who are married or living with a partner



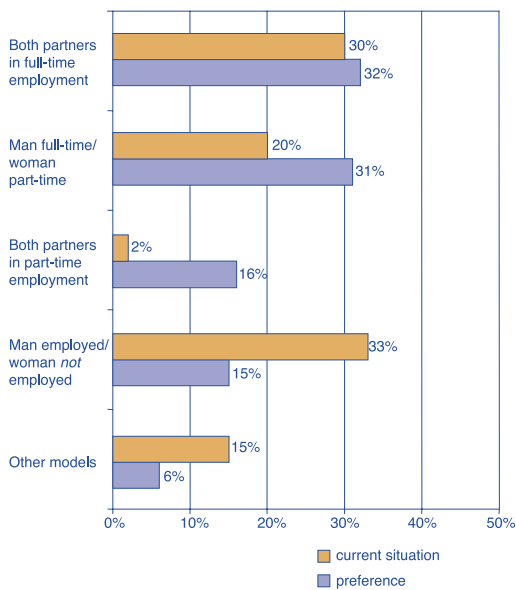
Work patterns and preferences of couples

In the previous two sections we looked at the individual views of employed women and men who are married or living with a partner. On an aggregated level the responses of women and men are to a large extent in line with each other – not only in terms of the present employment status and working time but also in terms of their corresponding preferences. By combining the responses of men and women we can get a picture of the present work patterns of couples and their preferences for the future.

From the survey results, we can identify the following four types of employment models for couples which are numerically and politically important (see Figure 3):

- *Both partners work full-time*: currently practised by 30% of couples in the EU and Norway, just slightly more (32%) say that they would favour this model in the future. However, interestingly, couples opting for this are not necessarily the same ones who currently practise it;
- *The man works full-time and the woman part-time*: at present practised by 20% of couples, a greater number (31%) express a wish to work this way in the future;
- *Both partners work part-time*: although a very small number of couples (2%) are currently engaged in this combination of work, a significantly larger figure (16%) say that they would prefer this pattern;
- *The man is in employment whereas the woman is not*: currently practised by one out of three couples, only 15% say they would favour this arrangement in the future.

Figure 3 Work patterns of men and women living as couples



Base: All couples

In general, the survey data reveals that the vast majority of couples in the EU and Norway would prefer both partners to be in paid work. In contrast to the present situation, there is a clear expression of interest in more part-time work – mainly for women, but also for men.

Levels of satisfaction

The figures above only give information about the different work models practised or preferred by couples: they do not tell us to what extent couples are happy with their chosen arrangements or to what extent they would prefer other types of shared working time and labour market participation.

More detailed analysis shows that the present situation often – but not always - matches couples’ preferences when both partners are in paid employment.

When *both partners work full-time*, more than half of the couples (55% men and 55% women) are happy with this arrangement. The other 45% would prefer other arrangements: one out of five would prefer the man to work full-time while the woman works part-time, and one out of seven would opt for both partners to work part-time.

A similar pattern can be seen if the *man works full-time and the woman part-time*. Again over half of the respondents (62% women and 55% men) say they are happy with this arrangement. As regards the future preferences of this group, only 12% of women and 11% of men say they would like both partners to work full-time, and an even smaller number (2% women and 9% men) say they would like the man to work full-time while the woman remains out of the labour market. A relatively significant number - one in six couples – would opt for the model where both partners work part-time: the attractiveness of this model seems to increase if one of the partners already works part-time.

Couples with *both partners working part-time* seem very satisfied with this arrangement. Two-thirds of the respondents in this group are in the lucky position of working in the manner that they prefer. At present while only 2% of all couples have this type of working time arrangement, 16% say that they would choose it above other models.

Turning to the group of couples where *the man is employed and the woman is not*, less than half (40% women and 33% men) say that this is the arrangement they would prefer. Other arrangements favoured by this group are *the man working full-time and the woman part-time* (29% women and 20% men); *both partners working full-time* (19% men and 17% women); and *both partners working part-time* (12% men and 7% women).

Very few respondents (less than 20%) are happy if *the man is not employed* or if *the woman currently has more working hours than the man*. In general men and women agree that it would be more desirable for the man to be in paid work and for him to have at least the same amount of weekly working hours as his wife or partner.



Table Combined working hours in the household

	Present situation	Preference
All couples	62 h	61 h
<i>Financial situation</i>		
● well-off	66 h	61 h
● just managing	59 h	61 h
● have difficulties	53 h	64 h
<i>Children in the household</i>		
● Youngest child < 6 years	59 h	61 h
● Youngest child ≥ 6 years	63 h	61 h
● No children in the household	63 h	61 h

Base: Couples with at least one of the partners in paid work

Gender differences

At present there are still significant gender-specific differences as far as the sharing of employment and working time among men and women living as a couple is concerned. Married or cohabiting men are not only more often in paid work than their partners, generally they also have longer working hours. These gender-specific differences are also present when the couples' preferences are examined, but to a lesser degree. Compared to the current situation, a higher participation rate for women in the labour market is considered desirable. There is an increased interest in part-time arrangements for women but also a significant interest in part-time work for men. Overall, the survey reveals that most couples would prefer a more equal sharing of labour market participation and working time. Moreover, the preferences of men and women match to a remarkably high degree.

Combined working hours within the household

In the EU and Norway there are approximately 66 million couples where at least one of the partners is in paid work. In more than half of these couples (57%) there are two wage earners. In the remaining 43% there is only one employed person - usually the man, although in 8% of cases the woman is the only wage earner (because the man is either studying, unemployed or retired).

The survey reveals that the difference between the current joint weekly working hours of couples (62 hours) and their preferred working hours (61 hours) is very small. This does not mean that all employed couples are happy with their present situation: when considerations of finances and family size are taken into account, there are in fact significant differences between the present situation and the preferences which are not reflected in the aggregated figures.

Only one third of the couples is more or less happy with their present joint working arrangements. While about one quarter of the couples would like to increase their working hours by more than five hours per week, 41% would like to decrease them by more than five hours per week.

As Table 1 above shows, there is a close relationship between the weekly working hours of both partners and their financial situation. Nearly half of the couples (46%) consider themselves 'well-off': this group includes a large number of couples where both partners hold a full-time job and they work the greatest number of combined hours (66 hours). Around the same number (47%) say they are 'just managing': this group works 7 hours less than the first group (59 hours). It is not surprising to find that in the group with financial difficulties (7% of the total number of couples), there is often only one wage earner per couple: this group is keen to increase their weekly joint working hours by on average 11 hours.

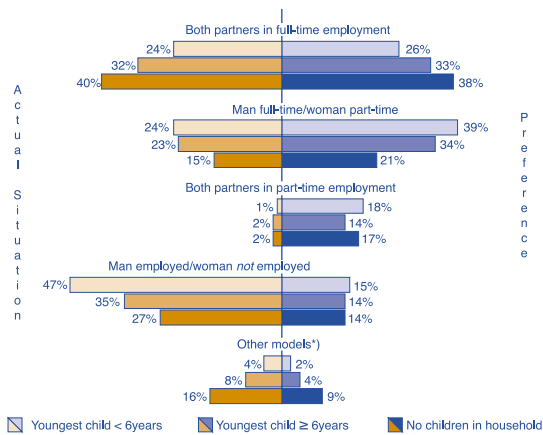
The role of children in the household

The majority of couples married or living together (70%) have children of their own who are still living at home: of these, 24% have children under 6 years of age, another 45% have children aged 6 years or more, and the remaining 30% either do not yet have children or their children have already left home.

Surprisingly, the presence of children in the household has very little influence on the combined levels of working hours of the couple in paid employment, whether it be the current or preferred number of hours (see Table 1). Couples with children under 6 years report the lowest number of hours spent in paid work and they would like to increase this slightly (from 59 to 61 hours). This can be explained by the fact that many women in this

group are not employed at all but would like to be part of the labour force – at least on a part-time basis. In the other groups of couples – those with older children or with no children in the household – the current weekly working hours of both partners together are marginally longer (63 hours): these couples would like to slightly reduce this number (to 61 hours).

Figure 4 Labour market participation and children in the household



Base: Couples with at least one of the partners in paid work

Although there are surprisingly small differences between couples with children and those without as far as the number of combined weekly working hours is concerned, the way in which the work is distributed between the couple is certainly influenced by the existence of children and especially the age of the youngest child (see Figure 4).

- The younger the children in the household, the less likely it is that *both partners work full-time*. In households with children under 6 years of age, a mere 24% of the parents both work full-time. The equivalent percentage for those households without children is as high as 40%;
- The highest share of households (47%) in which *the man is employed and the woman is not*, can be found in those with children under 6 years. If there are no children at home, this figure drops to 27%;
- Women working part-time is clearly related to the presence of children: where there are children in the household, one out of four couples follow the model *man works full-time and the woman part-time*. By contrast, where there are no children in the household, this figure drops to 15%.

Interestingly, the existence of children has little influence on whether couples, both men and women, wish to participate in the labour market. Most couples would prefer to have both partners

participating in paid employment (at least on a part-time basis), and this is the case regardless of whether there are children in the household or of the age of the youngest child (see Figure 4).

However, if there are children at home and especially where the children are very young, there is an increased interest in working time arrangements which include part-time work. Although only 20% of couples currently practise the model '*man in full-time employment, woman in part-time*', 31% declare an interest in adopting this type of work. However, the relatively high interest in '*both partners working part-time*' seems to be independent of the existence of children.

Conclusions

This paper focuses on the labour market participation and working hours of men and women living as couples. The survey reveals that individual decisions on whether to engage in employment and on the number of weekly working hours are both influenced by and have an impact on the partner. It goes without saying, therefore, that labour market policies and social policies related to other spheres of life can be closely interlinked.

It is clear that the present distribution of employment among both partners in a couple does not match their expressed preferences. Men and women seek a more equal sharing of labour market participation and working hours, regardless of whether or not there are children in the household and of the age of the children. The presence of children and their age, however, does influence the preferred working hours: where there are young children in the household, many couples prefer one partner – usually the woman – to work part-time.

These findings prove that actions designed to help combine employment and family responsibilities, as well as equalising the current participation in paid work among both partners, are likely to be welcomed by a large part of the existing workforce. There are two major challenges for labour market and family policies:

The first challenge is to help women with young children to participate in paid work. In practical terms, this could mean providing high quality and affordable childcare that also meets the demands of the changing labour market (for example, irregular working hours).

The second challenge is the need for appropriate working conditions which would assist women and men to better combine family and work. The promotion of quality part-time work – for both men and women – still remains a central issue in this



field. However, part-time work will only be an efficient means to reconcile family and work and to promote equal opportunities if the following conditions are met:

- It is offered to and practised at all qualification levels (and not only in low-qualified jobs);
- It is offered to, promoted on behalf of, and practised by both men and women,
- The career prospects of the individual are not hampered in the long run;

- A reasonable standard of social protection is provided;
- The opportunity to return to full-time employment when so desired is available.

There are many successful examples which show that it is possible to organise for and to promote this type of quality part-time employment – and which prove that not only the individuals and their families, but also the employers, benefit from this arrangement.

About the Employment Options of the Future survey

This survey, carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions over the summer and autumn of 1998, involved 30 557 telephone-assisted interviews with people aged between 16 and 64 years across the 15 EU Member States and Norway. The survey provides information on both the current situations and future preferences of those interviewed concerning employment. At the time of the interviews, 43% (7 749 out of 17 908) of the non-employed expressed the wish not to

work in five years. This group was not included in further analysis. Unless otherwise mentioned, all the figures in this leaflet are from the Employment Options survey.

Definitions used in the text:

part-time = less than 35 hours a week (unless otherwise mentioned)

full time = 35 hours a week or more

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