



Second European Quality of Life Survey

Family life and work

Executive summary

Introduction

Demographic change and labour market developments are shaping the work and family life of Europeans, with far-reaching consequences for the future. Demographic change has been triggered by changing patterns of family formation, and shifts in the roles of men and women in the home, along with increased life expectancy and geographic mobility. Transformations in the labour market have resulted in increasing economic instability and job uncertainty, together with a rise in labour productivity and flexibility. The second *European Quality of Life Survey* (EQLS), carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) in 2007, offers a wide-ranging view of the diverse social realities in the 27 EU Member States, Norway and the candidate countries of Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey.

This report explores the subject of family life and work across Europe, looking at ways to find a better balance between work demands and family responsibilities. Pressures for increasing flexibility in employment status (fewer long-term and full-time jobs), working hours (non-standard hours, more intense work) and mobility, as well as a rising uncertainty in jobs and professional careers, affect women in particular and contribute to tensions between work and family life. The report analyses these tensions and examines the background of different institutional settings, labour market structures and cultural factors, all of which are important for reconciling work and family life in today's society.

Policy context

EU policies that seek to reconcile work and family life have gradually shifted in their scope – from the equal treatment of women and men at work towards the need for increased employment to stimulate economic growth,

ways to achieve better work–life balance and, more recently, means to facilitate an increase in birth rates. In particular, over the past decade, these policies have been redesigned to accentuate the fact that work–life balance, the gender division of paid and unpaid work, and an increase in birth rates are all equally important policy domains. According to the European Commission, 'reconciliation policies are key responses to long-term economic and demographic challenges, and should therefore be reinforced to stimulate growth'.

Key findings

Family life

The findings show a remarkable diversity in family patterns in Europe across countries and country groups. The household arrangements of Europeans differ most in the early stages of family life (starting a partnership and parenthood) and in the later stages (the 'empty nest' and dissolution phases) and have a clear gender dimension. Living as a couple with children is the predominant living arrangement among people aged 35–49 years and shows the least variation across countries.

Workload in the home is taken up primarily with care responsibilities; time devoted to children occupies much more household time than caring for elderly and disabled relatives. There are considerable age and gender disparities in the amount of time spent on unpaid work and daily involvement in care and domestic activities. People aged 35–49 years, especially women, have the greatest unpaid workload, followed by people aged 25–34 years. Unlike in the case of men, time spent by women on unpaid work and daily involvement does not differ much across countries. The extent of the gender gap is related to perceptions of gender roles, the

subjective evaluation of gender inequality at home being consistent with the objective picture: men confirm that they do less than their fair share of household tasks while women declare that they do more than their fair share.

Work–family balance

Overall, Europeans are more dissatisfied with the amount of time they spend with their family than with the amount of time spent at work, family life being more adapted to employment requirements than work arrangements are to family life. Substantial differences exist between countries in terms of the reasons for unsatisfactory work–family balance. In the Nordic countries, as well as in the Benelux countries and France, failure to achieve a satisfactory work–life balance is due to a shortage of time. In the central and eastern European countries and the candidate countries, work–family balance is above all negatively affected by tiredness due to poor working conditions resulting from long working hours. Balancing work and family seems to be easier in German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon countries: this may be explained by a lower proportion of dual-earner couples and working single mothers in these countries.

Work–family balance also depends on the number of children and their age. The time squeeze gets tighter as the number of children increases, and is tighter for parents of young children. Even if caring for elderly relatives is less widespread than caring for children, for those who do this work on a daily basis it proves to be as demanding as childcare.

Work–family balance and life satisfaction

Despite less binding and more complex family and social interrelations (which raise concerns about weakening family contacts), the family remains the main sphere of sociability and support in Europe. Couples with children who can rely on family support are happier than those with no children, those without a partner or those who cannot count on any financial, moral or health support from their family or friends. Lone parents have the lowest levels of life satisfaction of all.

Europeans who have a job enjoy greater life satisfaction than economically inactive citizens and unemployed people. However, the feeling of an excessive workload due either to professional or family obligations leads to a substantial reduction in life satisfaction. Women who work outside the home and experience work–family conflict tend to be less satisfied with life than women who work solely in the home. Unemployment, nevertheless, has the most negative impact on life satisfaction: even those who report a high level of work–family conflict are far more satisfied with life than unemployed persons.

Policy pointers

- Given that growth in both employment and population levels plays an important role in ensuring sustainable growth, policies that facilitate the transition to adulthood (especially the entry into employment) need to be considered in terms of how they support partnership and parenthood.
- Policies aimed at creating appropriate conditions for combining family life with work should not only result in a better adaptation of work to family demands but should also have a beneficial influence on the work–life balance and life satisfaction of individuals in contemporary societies.
- Improvements in care services for elderly people can support family networks in carrying out their care responsibilities.
- Redistribution of care in terms of gender, formal or informal arrangements, and diversity of care services constitutes a key issue of reconciliation policies. Measures to promote care redistribution between women and men within the family are in particular needed.
- More attention should be given to the growing imbalances between demand for and supply of care for elderly and disabled relatives, especially in the central and eastern European countries.

Further information

The EQLS report *Family life and work* is available online at: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1002.htm>

The EQLS overview report and further secondary analyses of survey data are available on the Eurofound website at: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/qualityoflife/eqls/>

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