



# Working time and work–life balance in a life course perspective

## Executive summary

### Introduction

Since the 1980s, most industrial societies have experienced a marked trend towards the diversification, decentralisation and individualisation of working time patterns, driven both by companies' needs for greater adaptability in order to meet market constraints, and by large changes in the gender division of labour. At the same time, and linked to the increased participation of women in the labour force, various forms of working time arrangements have become more widespread, in particular part-time work. However, it is largely women who have taken advantage of the increased diversity and flexibility of working time.

Drawing on data from Eurofound's fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), based on interviews with more than 38,000 respondents in 34 countries, this report documents the prevailing working time patterns of employees, the self-employed and lone parents across five country clusters. It also analyses the relationship between paid employment and domestic activities, work–life balance and working time preferences across the life course.

### Policy context

One of the main objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy is that at least 75% of the population aged 20–64 should be in employment by 2020, necessitating in many Member States a significant increase in female labour supply. To achieve this goal, the EU Member States, particularly those with low female employment rates, will have to implement policy measures that favour better work–life balance across the life course. Aspects of work–life balance, in turn, interact with key issues at stake in the current review of the EU Working Time Directive, in particular long working hours, but also unsocial working hours and the organisation of compensatory rest periods.

In other words, understanding the complex interactions between working time organisation and working conditions appears to be crucial to the EU Employment Strategy. Furthermore, analysing working conditions in Europe in the context of life course, gender and cross-country perspectives is useful for identifying the potential barriers and difficulties EU Member States are confronted with. It will also pinpoint the policy reforms needed to achieve Europe's employment objectives.

### Key findings

#### Working time

Average weekly working time varies considerably across countries, with a gap of nearly 20 hours between Turkey and the Netherlands.

Overall, the length of a country's weekly working time is negatively correlated with female employment rates. With the exception of a few countries, the higher the labour force participation of women, the shorter the average weekly working time.

The weekly working time of the self-employed (44.8 hours) is on average longer than for employed workers (38 hours), perhaps because the former are not subject to the normal working time legislation.

The gender gap in weekly working time remains significant, with men in the EU27 working on average 40.2 hours and women 35.4 hours per week.

The distribution of working time is greater among women than men. Women's working time is strongly influenced by their life stage. In all life stages, employed women work fewer paid hours than employed men.

In all country clusters, women's working time decreases during parenthood, while at the same time the gender gap in working time increases significantly.

The variation in women's working time across the life course is larger in both the northern European and the liberal market-oriented countries (Estonia, Ireland, UK) used in this analysis, as is the gender gap in working time. However, the northern countries maintain a high share of women in work even during parenthood.

### **Work–life balance and working time preferences**

Around 80% of EWCS respondents report that their working time fits well or very well with their family or other social commitments outside work. Male employees are slightly less satisfied with their work–life balance than their female counterparts.

Compared to the northern European cluster, women in almost all other country clusters report great difficulties in combining work and family life. Family-friendly working time organisation can facilitate reconciliation of work and private life. However, during the parenting phase, employees report greater difficulties with work–life balance, even when working time and other characteristics are controlled for.

Almost 40% of employees indicate that they would like to change their current working time. There is a preference among men and women for a convergence of working time: shorter full-time hours for both.

Working time preferences vary significantly across the life course. In particular, mothers of pre-school children are more inclined to want a reduction of working time than their male counterparts.

### **Time spent doing unpaid work**

In each life phase, employed women still spend on average more hours on non-paid domestic or care activities than employed men. The smallest gender gap is found in the northern cluster and the largest in the continental and southern cluster.

While the gender gap is lowest at the two ends of the life cycle, it increases dramatically during the parenting phase, with employed women spending twice as many hours on care and household activities compared with employed men.

When entering the parenting phase, employed women reduce their paid work by four hours a week but increase their unpaid work by 25 hours, while men's unpaid work increases by 12 hours.

The northern country cluster exhibits the lowest gender gap in time allocation, even when controlling for compositional and structural effects. This result can be ascribed to the active mainstreaming policies that promote gender equality, and to measures intended to help parents achieve a balance between paid work and family life. These measures include the provision of high-quality public childcare and elderly care facilities, and the option of flexible and reversible working time over the life course.

## **Policy pointers**

The Europe 2020 strategy is critically dependent on the further labour market integration of women in Europe. An increase of female labour supply both at the extensive (participation) and intensive (working hours) margins is crucial.

In most countries, the parenting phase remains a critical period for integrating women into the labour market. Increasing female labour force participation requires policy measures favouring a better balance between work, family and other social commitments, particularly in countries with low female employment.

Working men and women living in the northern country cluster appear to be at a significant advantage, which is undoubtedly due to an institutional design that promotes a more equal time allocation across gender. It is essential in policy design to consider time allocation as a whole (looking at paid and unpaid work), and its distribution across the life course.

Policy measures intended to reduce the gender gap in both paid work and unpaid domestic activities (both housework and care) are needed. Family-friendly, flexible and reversible working time options across the life course are also important.

Predictable working time and working time autonomy are associated with positive work–life balance outcomes whereas employer-induced working time flexibility and atypical working hours are associated with adverse outcomes.

Around 15% of male employees and 7% of female employees in the EU27 work 48 hours or more per week. Due to the negative effects of long working hours, policy and legal measures should be taken to ensure that working time limits are strictly enforced.

### **Further information**

The report, *Working time and work–life balance in a life course perspective*, is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1273.htm>

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