

FACT SHEET

# WORKING TIME, GENDER EQUALITY, AND RECONCILING WORK AND FAMILY LIFE



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01	Introduction .....	2
02	Working time by gender .....	4
03	The challenge of flexible working time and gender equality.....	8
04	EU and European Social Partner Reconciliation policies.....	10
05	Legislative approaches to reconciliation of work and family life .....	12



# INTRODUCTION

Reconciliation policies have gained importance in many Member States in recent years as a tool for gender equality and in responding to economic and demographic challenges. The ETUC and affiliated unions have for many years campaigned for policies to enable women and men combine good quality work with parenthood and other caring responsibilities as a prerequisite for gender equality. A core issue raised by the ETUC is that women must be able to earn an income that gives them economic independence without being penalised for being mothers and carers, while men must also be given the opportunities to balance their work and family life.

Women spend an average of nearly four hours per day on domestic work, compared to two hours by men. For this reason the social distribution of working time and personal time are critical issues for women with care responsibilities. However, few men take parental leave or work part-time.

The reconciliation of family and professional life is laid down in Article 33 paragraph 2 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In the areas of reconciliation policies, such as the provision of childcare and eldercare, the European Commission and the social partners agree that more action is needed at EU and national level, which should be supported by the Council. The recession has led to public sector cuts across

Europe, which is impacting on the provision of services for childcare and elder care. The lower levels of investment in the public care provision put extra pressures on women to provide the care within the home. This could lead to further gender inequalities and a greater burden of care falling on the shoulders of women in the home, while making it difficult for women to combine paid work and care.

# WORKING TIME BY GENDER

There are significant variations in the paid working hours of women and men, with women working shorter hours overall than men and predominating in part-time work. It is clear that shorter working hours are directly associated with family and caring responsibilities, which in turn impact on women's incomes across the lifecycle. Occupational segregation and the association of part-time work with lower-skilled and lower hourly pay exists as a barrier to equality and women's advancement in the labour market.

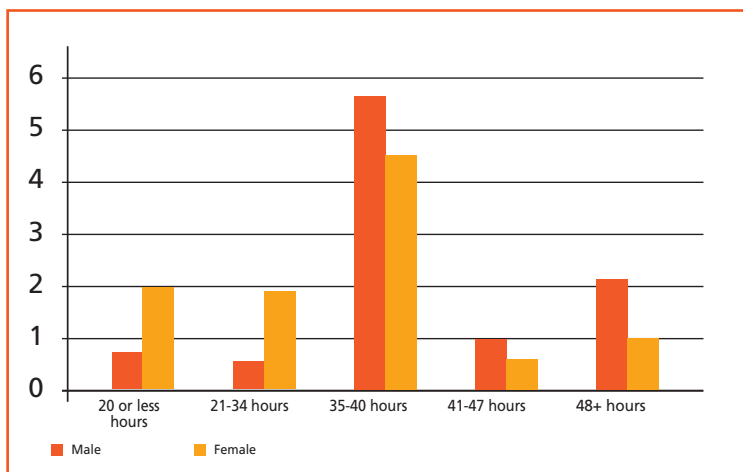
## Part-time work in Europe

On average 31% of all women in employment in the EU work part-time, compared to only 7.5% of men. In nine of the EU15 countries more than one third of women work part-time, and in six of these countries (Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Belgium, UK, Sweden) the share is larger than 40%. In only four countries (Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, UK) are men more than 10% of part-time workers, which is at a very high level in the Netherlands at 23.6%

*Eurostat, Labour Force Survey 2009*

The 5<sup>th</sup> European Working Time Survey found that the hours worked by women and men vary considerably. Overall men work an average of seven hours a week more than women, while there are significant variations between Member States with regards to levels of part-time work. See Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Working hours - percentage of women and men (European Working Conditions Survey, 2010)**



The 5<sup>th</sup> European Working Conditions Survey found that women generally work shorter working hours than men, including part-time, and that long working hours are largely a male phenomenon. There is a significant impact of long working hours on men's participation in family life, with over 40% of those working more than 48 hours a week stating that their hours impacted negatively on their family or social commitments. In addition, the survey found that men would prefer to work shorter working hours to enable them to participate in family life more. In contrast women are more likely to have organised shorter working hours and part-time work in order to balance work with their care responsibilities.

The 4<sup>th</sup> European Working Conditions Survey (2005) also found that women spend more time carrying out unpaid work, including child-care and care for dependent adults, than men. There are significant variations across the Member States, with the amount of time spent on unpaid work being more equal between women and men in Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. There are very significant gender differences when unpaid work is taken into account as part of overall working hours. While men work longer hours than women in the workplace, women's composite working hours are significantly longer than men's. Female part-time workers work more total (paid + unpaid) hours per week than male full-time workers, while the

total working hours of women working full-time are the highest, at 65 hours per week, compared to 54 hours for men.



# THE CHALLENGE OF FLEXIBLE WORKING TIME AND GENDER EQUALITY

There has been a change of emphasis in most Member States towards more flexible and individualised working hours that enable more tailor-made solutions to be achieved, within a regulatory framework. In some countries collective agreements are comparable or sometimes better than what has been established in national legislation.

From a gender equality point of view, increased choice to have flexibility in working hours can enable workers to reconcile their work with their family and personal life. However, it can also have an adverse effect in that the main form of flexibility among women is part-time work. Part-time work is typically concentrated in lower skilled and low paid sectors of the economy, which provide few opportunities for training and career development.

2004-5 European Establishment Survey on Working Time and Work–Life Balance (ESWT) survey, conducted in over 21,000 establishments in the public and private sectors, highlighted the importance of the organisational structure of companies, collective agreements and cultural factors in each country as being important to creating the conditions for

reconciliation policies. It pointed to the increasing role of local agreements to facilitate flexible working hours, particularly for women with family and care responsibilities.

The European Working Conditions survey, 2010, found that the working hours currently worked by many women and men are not in line with their working time preferences; for men the preference is to work shorter hours, while a larger share of those who would like to work more hours are women. There is a dichotomy that has to be addressed regarding the male long-hours, female short-hours working time culture.

As a result one of the challenges arising from a policy focus on work-family reconciliation is that women often pay a high price for flexible working hours, particularly because the issue is regularly viewed as a “women’s issue”. The high rate of part-time work amongst women does result in a persistent part-time pay penalty, with evidence showing that the gender pay gap is significantly wider for women part-time workers. The right to work part-time work is routinely developed as an explicit objective to recruit and retain women.

# EU AND EUROPEAN SOCIAL PARTNER RECONCILIATION POLICIES

The European Commission and the social partners have been promoting policies on reconciliation choices between women and men. In this regard:

- » Reconciliation of work and family life is a key objective of the European Commission's new Strategy on Gender Equality 2010-2015, and is key to the objective of getting more women into the labour market and helping to reach the Europe 2020 target employment rate of 75% overall for women and men;
- » The European social partners signed a revised Framework Agreement on Parental Leave in 2009, increasing the duration of parental leave for all workers from three to four months per parent, with one month being non-transferrable between the parents. The agreement also gives parents returning to work after parental leave the opportunity to request a change to their working hours, and gives greater protection against dismissal or unfavourable treatment as a result of taking parental leave.
- » There are currently proposals in place for amending the Directive covering women who have recently given birth or who

are breastfeeding. This aims to extend the rights for pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding and increase the minimum length of maternity leave from 14 to 18 weeks. The objective is that the measures proposed will contribute to better reconciliation of professional, private and family life. At this stage in the legislative procedure for the Directive, the most recent proposal from the European Parliament has been rejected by the Council.

- » EU legislation on part-time working outlaws unjustified discrimination in employment conditions, between part-time and full-time workers, on the basis of Directive 97/81/EC of 15 December 1997, which implemented the framework agreement on part-time work concluded on 6 June 1997 by European social partners (UNICE, CEEP, ETUC).
  
- » Work-life balance is one of the four core objectives of the Framework of Actions on Gender Equality, signed by the European social partners (BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC) in 2005.

# LEGISLATIVE APPROACHES TO RECONCILIATION OF WORK AND FAMILY LIFE

There are different approaches to reconciliation policies across Europe. In some Member States, for example, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands, the focus has been on making childcare provision more available to working parents; while in others extending rights to parental leave, particularly for fathers has been introduced, for example, in Sweden, Greece, Lithuania and Spain.

There are also variations across Member States with regard to legal entitlements to flexible working hours and part-time work; some of which provide entitlements for all employees, while others are specifically targeted to parents and carers. For example:

- » In the **Netherlands**, the 2001 Working Hours Adjustment Act gives every employee a statutory right to adjust working hours; a part-timer may increase working hours and a full-timer may reduce them. Non-compliance by the employer is only allowed for reasons of severe business interest. The Dutch law seeks to create greater diversity in working time patterns, in addition to creating a more equal redistribution of hours between male and female employees.

- » In **Germany**, the 2000 Act on Part-Time Work introduced the right for workers in companies with more than 15 employees to reduce their working time, as long as there were no internal company reasons to prevent such a reduction. The legislation also reflects a concern with job creation by enabling the hours freed up by a voluntary reduction to part-time work to be used to create job opportunities for people who are unemployed.
- » In **Cyprus** the 2002 Law on Part-time Work states that employers must consider employees' requests to transfer from full to part-time status (and vice-versa).

A larger number of countries have introduced provisions for flexible working hours for women who are pregnant, or for carers and parents.

For example:

- » In the **UK** the 2003 Employment Act introduced the right for employees to request reduced or flexible working, changes in the scheduling and location of work. It applies to hours if they were parents of a child under the age of six years, or a disabled

child under 18 years. In 2007 this was extended, under the 2006 Work and Families Act, to employees caring for an adult. Employers must consider the request, but can refuse on the grounds of one or more specified 'business reasons'. There is no right to request a move from part-time to full-time hours, unlike the Dutch, German and Cypriot legislation.

The issue of reconciliation of work, private and family life is of major importance in the context of the demographic and economic challenges facing the EU. A better balance between work and private life not only benefits parents and enhances gender equality, but benefits all workers. Reconciliation policies can help to promote the equal sharing of private and family responsibilities, and enable women to participate more equally in the labour market.

*See Fact Sheet on Fundamental Rights and the Working Time Directive for a further discussion of the ETUC's position on the Working Time Directive. In particular the ETUC is critical of the Commission's most recent proposals to revise the Directive, which do not take sufficient account of the impact of the proposed revisions on work-life balance and gender equality.*

## For further information

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ETUC *Reconciliation of Work, Family and Private Life*  
<http://www.etuc.org/r/1348>





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