



Work-life balance

Measures to help reconcile work, private and family life

SUMMARY *Good work-life balance promotes the well-being of workers. It can also contribute to achieving major EU policy goals: stimulating employment (especially among women and older workers); promoting child and youth development; and encouraging gender equality.*

In Europe, more than one worker in five expresses dissatisfaction with their work-life balance. Conflicts between work and other aspects of life can be caused by long hours, difficult schedules or intense periods at work, as well as by the demands of unpaid work in the home, particularly domestic chores and the care of children and the elderly.

Achieving work-life balance can be made easier by family-oriented policies such as social benefits, employment-protected leave for parents and affordable formal arrangements for family care. Flexibility in the organisation of work (part-time work, flexible working time and telework) can also have an enabling effect.

The EU works with Member States (MS) and social partners to establish rules and promote best practices that favour work-life balance. The European Parliament and the Council Presidency have suggested that 2014 be designated the European Year for Reconciling Work and Family Life.

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Context

Workers achieve [work-life balance](#) (WLB) when they reconcile the demands of their paid employment with those related to private and family life. The ideal WLB will be different for different people and may vary over a lifetime.

In 2011, [22% of people in employment](#) expressed dissatisfaction with their work-life balance. At least several times a month, 53% of people left work too tired to do household jobs; 30% had difficulties fulfilling family responsibilities due to working time; and 14% found it difficult to concentrate at work because of family responsibilities.

The conditions designed to help people balance work and family life are established in international conventions, EU directives, laws and regulations of Member States (MS), collective agreements and/or employment contracts. Some of these conditions may involve significant costs for employers and taxpayers. However many analysts believe that measures to improve WLB can contribute to major EU policy goals by:

- Encouraging the participation of women and older people in the work force (necessary to reach the Europe 2020 goal of 75% employment)

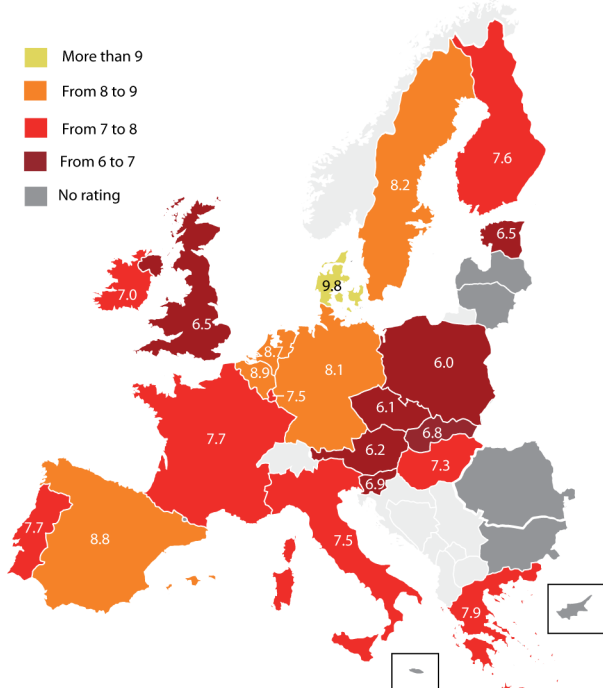


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- Ensuring quality care for children (both provided through formal childcare and directly by parents) as a critical step in the development of children and youth
- Promoting gender equality by increasing female participation in the labour market and male participation in household or family work.

WLB has also been linked to a higher fertility rate that could offset some of the effects of an ageing population on EU social programmes.

Fig. 1 - Work-life balance index



Source: OECD, [Better life index](#), 2011¹. 10 is the highest rating; values for 36 countries range from 2.9 to 9.8.

Sources of conflicts and effects

Sources of work-life conflict arise both from work and from private or family life:

- Long hours ([12% of the workforce](#) in the EU work more than 48 hours per week)
- Flexible or unpredictable working schedules set by employers based on varying customer demand
- Working times (e.g. at night or on weekends) which make it difficult to spend time with family or friends
- 'Unpaid work', e.g. domestic chores and caring for children and elderly relatives

- Unpredictable care requirements as in the case of the sudden illness of a child.

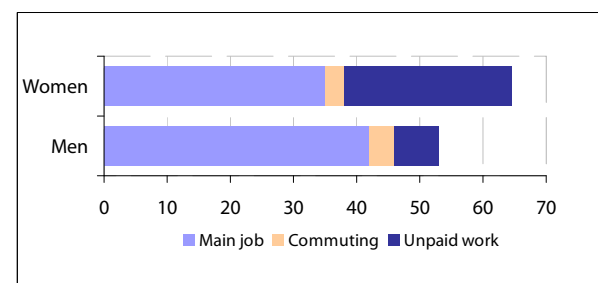
The possible **effects** of work-life conflicts include:

- Poor health because of stress, fatigue, anxiety, emotional exhaustion and lack of physical exercise
- Lower work performance and productivity because of inattentiveness and absenteeism
- Poor care for children and the elderly due to limited caregiver time and energy.

Workers faced with current or potential conflicts may decide to have fewer children, to postpone having children, or not to have children at all. They may decide to leave the workforce or to reduce their work hours or their level of responsibility. These choices could represent an economic loss to employers and society in terms of their education and work experience, especially in the case of highly skilled workers.

Since women assume [more](#) family care responsibilities than men, work-life conflicts also perpetuate gender inequalities. During the early years of a child's life, [women in particular](#) seek to reduce the amount of time devoted to paid work. However periods out of work or in part-time work may [reduce](#) a woman's long-term job security, possibilities for advancement and training, present and future earnings and pension benefits.

Fig. 2 - Working time of full-time workers aged 15 or more, EU 27



Data source: Eurostat, EWCS, 2005

On the other hand, men work longer hours once children arrive; they [express more frequently](#) than women dissatisfaction at not having enough time for their families.

Analysts frequently identify family-related policies and work organisation measures as ways to help with workers' WLB.

Family-related policies

Social benefits and fiscal measures

MS may offer [financial transfers](#) which provide support to families and thereby reduce work-life conflicts. Birth benefits, family allowances or child allowances may take a variety of forms, including cash benefits; they may be universal, capped or means-tested. These benefits can pay for part of the cost of formal childcare and hence make it easier for a parent to work. Tax measures can be designed to avoid disincentives for parents considering a return to the workforce. However in response to budget deficits and the economic crisis, [some MS](#) have recently eliminated or reduced allowances, tax breaks and credits for families or children.

Leave policies

Leave that is taken immediately before or after birth/adoption or during an extended period afterwards can help mothers and fathers care for children without losing their jobs. [Directive 2010/18/EU](#) on parental leave sets out the right of parents to a minimum period of leave. Within this framework, however, MS have implemented [a variety](#) of leave types, sharing schemes, durations, levels of financial support and financing mechanisms (through tax revenues, social insurance, health insurance or employer contributions).

Leave policy is not without problems however. A more generous leave policy implies higher costs. Some MS are concerned about low take up of leave by fathers which perpetuates gender inequalities; these MS may offer bonuses or incentives to encourage fathers to take leave. Workers may also need help in successfully rejoining the workforce at the end of a long period away from paid employment.

Formal care for children and the elderly

Raising children requires additional time and effort for domestic chores and childcare. This extra burden is not assumed equally by men and women: figures vary according to age and MS, but in the EU as a whole women spend [three and a half times](#) as much time as men on domestic work (12.9 hours and 3.6 hours per week respectively) and almost twice as much time on caring activities (10.7 and 5.5 hours).

Formal childcare services may help to reduce the conflict between work and unpaid care. However the services need to be affordable: for women in lower paid posts, particularly women with two or more children, the high cost of formal childcare may offset much of the financial gain from employment and reduce the incentive to work.

Parents rely heavily on public childcare services. (Childcare services are provided directly by just over [2% of employers](#)). Public expenditure on childcare has dramatically increased since 1998 in all OECD countries. However there is [wide variation in support levels](#) for formal childcare for children under three years of age. Also in almost every OECD member other than the Nordic countries, there is a shortfall of places in public childcare and working parents must often rely on informal arrangements.

Work organisation measures

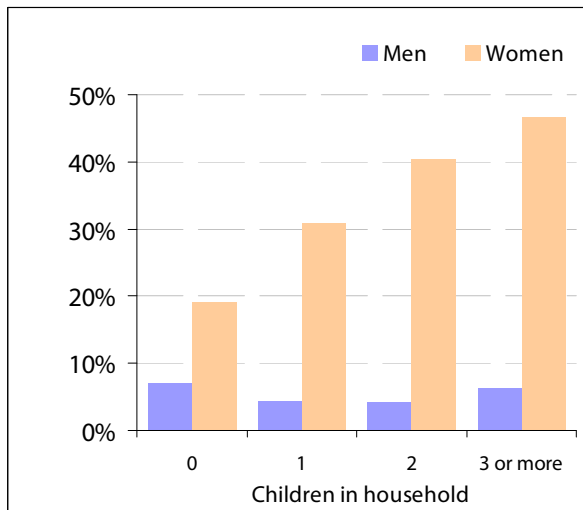
Flexibility in working time

A flexible or unpredictable work schedule that is driven solely by business concerns such as rapid responsiveness to customer needs can be difficult for employees. However flexibility requested by the employee can help with WLB.

Reducing the number of hours spent in paid employment is one form of flexibility. Women frequently switch to part-time work during their child-raising years. The [female employment rate](#) goes down more for

mothers of younger children (who need more care) than for mothers of older children. The employment rate is also lower for mothers of several children.

Fig. 3 - Percentage of part-time employment, 25 to 49 year olds, EU 27



Data source: Eurostat, LFS 2011

Making the switch to part-time work easier can improve WLB while still encouraging women to work. In the UK, as in [some other MS](#), working parents have the 'right to request' flexible working hours, including reduced hours; but employers are not obliged to grant the request if they can justify refusal on [business grounds](#).

In addition to part-time work, other kinds of flexibility in working may be offered in contracts with 'family friendly' employers, written into collective agreements or guaranteed by statute. Men or women may be able to change the start or end time of the working day. It may be possible to bank hours or days over a pre-determined period of time. [More than 60%](#) of employees in the EU have the possibility of taking full days off for family reasons without any special permission.

Even quite informal flexibility can be helpful. Nearly [two thirds of workers](#) (65%) say that it is not difficult to take time off at short notice for private reasons. This ability is [strongly associated](#) with workers' perception that they have a good WLB.

Work-time flexibility is also important for older workers who may need to care for parents or spouses or wish to develop new interests or activities. Reduced hours or increased autonomy in scheduling are [factors](#) that help to keep people at work up to or beyond the legal retirement age.

Flexibility in place of work

Working from an alternate location (often telework from home using an internet connection to the workplace) is considered another way for some to improve their WLB. Although figures [vary substantially](#) across occupations, employment sectors and MS, a 2005 [working-conditions survey](#) indicated that slightly more than 8% of EU 27 workers sometimes work from home using a personal computer. (In a later survey, home was the main place of work of only [3.7%](#) of respondents).

For employers and workers, telework has both [advantages and disadvantages](#). For employees a flexible location can free up time that would otherwise be spent commuting to the office. It also allows caregivers who work from home to be near and available to children or to the elderly to whom they provide care. However workers who spend a large part of their working time out of the office may suffer from isolation. They may be less highly regarded than colleagues who are physically present, and this could have effects on their job security, advancement, earnings and pension income. Teleworkers often spend extra hours working in the evening or at weekends, which may offset some of the benefits in terms of WLB.

Employers offering telework may need to pay related computer and network costs (particularly expensive if security is a concern). Reduced opportunities for informal contacts among staff may have negative effects on productivity or innovation. The benefits for employers come from flexible use of workers regardless of place of residence, reduced absenteeism

and, in tight market conditions, the recruitment of qualified staff.

Role of the EU

Currently the EU has various legislative acts, based on agreements between the social partners, which touch on work-life balance issues. [Directive 2003/88/EC](#) on **working time** limits the average working week to 48 hours, although it allows for derogations, notably for managers, as well as opt-outs. [Directive 97/81/EC](#) on **part-time work** prohibits discrimination against part-time workers and facilitates changing from full-time to part-time and vice versa. [Directive 2010/18/UE](#) on **parental leave** specifies a minimum of four months of parental leave per parent on the birth or adoption of a child; one month is non-transferable to encourage fathers to take this leave. It also gives workers the right to request changes to working schedules when returning from parental leave, and to take time off for important and urgent family reasons. The European social partners also agreed in 2002 on a [Framework](#) on telework to be directly implemented by their member bodies.

As early as 2001, the **European Commission** [considered](#) WLB as a key indicator of job quality. Its [Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth](#) called on MS to promote new forms of work-life balance as part of an effort to raise employment levels to meet

the headline goal of a 75% employment rate by 2020.

In 2011, the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs **Council** [invited](#) MS to promote better WLB for men and woman as advocated in the renewed [European Pact for Gender Equality for 2011-2020](#). It called in particular for improved supply of care services for children and the elderly, flexible working arrangements and various forms of leave for men and women.

The **European Parliament** has taken a continuing interest in WLB particularly in relation to gender issues. More than 12 resolutions mentioning the issue have been passed since 2010, most recently a resolution [2012/2116\(INI\)](#) on eliminating gender stereotypes in the EU. Earlier in 2013, [Written Declaration 0032/-2012](#) supported the designation of 2014 as the European Year for Reconciling Work and Family Life, an idea that was [echoed](#) by the Council Trio Presidency (Ireland, Lithuania, Greece) for 2013-2014.

Stakeholders

A 2009 [survey](#) of **business** members of the European Business Test Panel found that almost 75% of respondents thought that being perceived as 'family friendly' was very or somewhat important; more than half mentioned staff

retention as the most important reason. A [survey](#) the same year of more than 5 000 executives from six European countries

Best in class

As part of its 2011 [Better Life Index](#), the OECD singled out Denmark as being its best member state for work-life balance. Only 2% of employees work over 50 hours per week (less than the 9% OECD average and fewer than in any country other than the Netherlands and Sweden). Danish men and women both spend about 16 hours a day on leisure and personal care (including eating and sleeping), the highest level in the OECD, while Denmark's employment rate for women with young children was the third highest of 24 countries.

Denmark has generous family services and cash benefits (3.9% of GDP, second highest in the OECD). Childcare enrolment for children less than two years old (66%) is the highest among member countries. Almost 70% of firms offer flexible working time arrangements (only Finland has more).

Over 40% of Danes say it is never difficult to fulfil family responsibilities because of time on the job (the EU average is 30%), and 68% say they never find it difficult to concentrate at work because of family concerns (for the EU, 48%). Perhaps not surprisingly, only 5.8% of Danish women, and 7% of men, say that their working hours do not fit in well with family or social needs (18.5% for the EU).

Source: OECD, Eurofound².

confirmed the importance of 'family friendly' policies to business, albeit with differences (more important in the UK and Sweden than in Germany, and less so in Poland and France). Respondents indicated that, apart from meeting legal requirements, these policies were implemented to increase job satisfaction and productivity, meet the wishes of staff, lower absenteeism and retain qualified staff. The business case is strongest in high-skilled industries where employee replacement costs are high.

Leave arrangements and flexible working hours can, however, pose problems for small businesses with fewer employees to cover for absences. Other objections to implementing WLB policies include the perception that workers' needs are already sufficiently met by statutory requirements, a lack of tangible benefits for the business, low state support and high costs.

UEAPME, representing small and medium-sized enterprises, [underlines](#) the importance of finding a balance between the needs of the company and the individual. For them, public authorities have primary responsibility for formal childcare and fostering changes in gender stereotypes that affect men's taking of leave.

The **European Trade Union Confederation** (ETUC) [supports](#) the ability of workers to influence working time patterns for a healthier working life. It [recognises](#) that adaptable working hours contribute to increasing the employment rate of older workers.

Further reading

[The influence of working time arrangements on work-life integration or 'balance': a review of the international evidence](#)/ C. Fagan et al., ILO, 2012.

[Work-family balance: future trends and challenges](#)/ J. Fagnani in *The future of families to 2030*, OECD, 2011.

[Working time and work-life balance in a life course perspective](#)/ Eurofound, 2012.

[Flexible working time arrangements and gender equality](#)/ J. Plantenga, C. Remery, European Commission, 2010.

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Endnotes

¹ The WLB component of the OECD's Better life index is based on five indicators. The primary indicators are (1) the proportion of employees (excluding self-employed) usually working more than 50 hours per week on their main job and (2) the number of hours for leisure/personal care (which includes sleeping). The secondary indicators are (1) time spent commuting, (2) the percentage of people reporting they spend "just the right amount of time" in various types of activities and (3) the employment rate of mothers of school-age children. The lowest value among OECD countries is 2.9 for Mexico. See [Work and life balance](#) in *How's life? : Measuring well-being* / OECD, 2011

² The sources for the statistics in this section are the OECD [Better life index](#) (2011), the OECD [Social expenditure database](#) (2009), the OECD [Family database](#) (2009), the Eurofound [European company survey](#) (2009), the Eurofound [European quality of life survey](#) (2012) and the Eurofound [Working conditions survey](#) (2010).