



8th European Regional Meeting

FACTS ON *quality of working life*



International
Labour
Organization

Quality of working life = decent work

Wages, working time and work organization, maternity protection and the work-life balance are some of the many interlinked dimensions of the quality of working life and of decent work. Across Europe and Central Asia, tensions between paid work and family and domestic responsibilities have intensified as a result of ageing, growing women's labour force participation rates, changing family structures and changes in the organization of production and work. With the financial crisis gaining force, those challenge will likely increase. While policy makers and the social partners are increasingly aware of the need to address these tensions, coherent and effective work-family reconciliation measures are still lacking in many countries, although working time arrangements can be an important component of such measures. The ILO argues that maintaining work-life balance not only contributes to the well-being of working women and men and of their families, but also boosts productivity, reduces poverty and enhances gender equality.

The gender dimension

In some European economies, the entry of women into the labour market in recent decades has been massive. Former transition countries have inherited high economic activity rates of women from planned economies. However these rates declined significantly during the transition process to reach a level below EU-15's. Mothers are less likely than fathers to be employed, and their employment rate is inversely correlated with the number of children. Career breaks and working time reductions are more frequent among working mothers than among their male peers or childless working women, with often adverse effects on their wages, career prospects and pensions. What's more, the division of unpaid care work between women and men has remained unchanged. As a result, working mothers devote much more time to care and other family chores than working fathers. This double shift for women has heavy consequences on their well-being, employment options and rewards to work. But men are also affected: regular long hours of work have negative consequences on their health and their ability to contribute fully to the upbringing of their children. Reconciling work and family requires the sharing of care responsibilities between women and men and between the households and the State.

FACTS

- **Reduction in average weekly working hours in most European countries**
- **Longest average weekly hours in EU-15: Greece**
- **Hours of work comparable data are extremely limited or non-existent outside EU-27**
- **Employment rate of women with young children is on average 12.7 percentage points lower than that of women without children**
- **Employment rate of men with children is 9.5 percentage points higher than for men without children**
- **Labour market losses associated with single parenting overwhelmingly concern women**
- **Working women have to carry a multiple burden conciliating motherhood with paid work and the daily chores of unpaid work at home**
- **"Daddy leaves" are rarely used by concerned fathers, mainly for fear of employer reprisals, despite their increased length since 1989**

The role of the ILO

The ILO has identified five dimensions of decent work in the area of working time and work-life balance. Decent working time arrangements should promote health and safety and gender equality, be family-friendly, advance enterprise productivity and competitiveness, and facilitate worker's choice and influence over working hours. The ILO has promoted a number of policy reforms, including: measures leading to an increase in child-care services, reforms of entitlements to care leave, reduced working hours, long-term care insurance, promotion of a family-friendly culture and workplace and development of international legal standards.

The challenges

Although work-family reconciliation has moved up the policy agenda in many European countries, there remains a lack of coherent policy and practical action. Different work-family models, combining in different ways leave entitlements, reduced working time, flexible working time arrangements (e.g., flexi-time and "time banking" schemes), taxation policies, social security benefit and allowances and active labour market policies, have been put in place across Europe with different outcomes. In respect of working time and work organization, there has been a marked trend away from the standard working week towards greater flexibility in the organization of working time. For working time flexibility to benefit both enterprises and workers, it is essential that both workers' needs and business' requirements be taken into account. For example, part-time work needs to be combined with equal treatment guarantees to help ensure that part-timers are not marginalized and to be reversible to ensure that they have the option to return to full-time work.

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February 2009



WORK-FAMILY MODELS – WHAT WORKS?

Relevant quality of working life concepts varies according to country, region, organisation and employee group. Various approaches to work-family issues have been adopted by European countries. Among those, we can distinguish:

Nordic model: Nordic countries, and to some extent France, rely heavily on the public sector to help young parents reconcile family and work.

Advantages: Extensive national legislation on maternity/paternity/parental leave, the right to part-time work and publicly funded child-care arrangements.

Anglo-Saxon model: Countries with small public sector rely on the flexibility of their labour markets and on firms to provide family-friendly workplaces. Women can leave the labour market temporarily to bring up children, but are often penalized in their careers and income when and if re-entering the labour market.

Advantages: Flexibility of labour markets, family-friendly policies of enterprises.

Corporatist model: Countries such as the Netherlands, and to some extent Germany, rely on the social partners to negotiate work-family reconciliation policies.

Advantages: Strong social partnerships.

Familialist model: Germany, Poland and southern European countries, among others, have traditionally relied heavily on families to resolve the challenge of work-family reconciliation.

Advantages: State-regulated arrangements for leave and part-time work.

The former planned economies: These States have undergone the most drastic changes in work-family reconciliation policies since 1990, with cut benefits and subsidies for many public and enterprise-based child-care facilities. Recent reforms – protective legislation for women – have in practice increased the challenges of work-family reconciliation. Hence, care work is shifting back from the State to the family.

Advantages: Lengthy maternity/parental leave but with heavy consequences on skilled women's careers.

Key resources

- The ILO Country Reviews of Employment Policy
- EU Working Time Directive (Council Directive 93/104/EC)
- Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156)
- Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183)
- Report of the Director-General to the 8th European Regional Meeting "Delivering decent work in Europe and Central Asia" (Volume I, Part 1, ISBN 978-92-2-121867-8; Volume I, Part 2, ISBN 978-92-2-121869-2)
- "Policy responses to the economic crisis: A decent work approach in Europe and Central Asia" (ISBN 978-92-2-122080-0)
- <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/condtrav/family/index.htm>