



Women at work: Paths to equality

Background paper

[Click for contents](#)

Contents

Introduction	1
Women's and men's work: a world apart	2
Workplace hierarchies and gender	3
Women's employment and childcare provision	6
Gender dimensions of flexicurity	8
References	12

This brief report summarises reflections on the very broad theme of women and employment from a group of researchers in the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions ('Eurofound') with an interest in gender and labour market issues. Its occasion is a request received from the French Presidency of the EU for a contribution from Eurofound to a conference on professional equality for men and women to be held in Lille on 13–14 November 2008. The aim of this paper is to set out some interesting, new findings that will help to stimulate the debate at the Lille conference.

While making use of the rich sources of relevant Eurofound research and data, the authors have tried to go beyond simply restating existing, often well-rehearsed findings. After each section summary, therefore, some statements and questions, which it is hoped will prove stimulating have been included. To begin with, the current situation of European women in the labour market is placed in historical context.

Introduction

A major development in the labour markets of the developed economies in the last generation has been the increased participation of women. In the early 1970s, there were two men for every woman in paid employment. In 2007, the ratio was 55:45. Since the turn of the century, the majority of net new jobs created in Europe have gone to women, so helping to further narrow the gender employment gap (European Commission, 2007).

This mobilisation of women in the workforce is one aspect of what has been referred to by commentators as the 'feminisation' of work. Other aspects include the decline of traditionally male employment enclaves in agriculture and manufacturing, and the growth of service sector employment – traditionally the mainstay of female employment. At the same time, anti-discrimination legislation instituted from the 1960s onwards has eliminated some of the more obviously discriminatory practices hindering female career progression. For instance, in Ireland until 1973, female doctors and other public service professionals were obliged to resign their jobs once they married, under what was called 'the marriage bar'.

The current labour market preoccupation with 'soft skills' – social and communication skills, languages etc. – arising from a tertiarisation and deindustrialisation of the economy should also favour young female entrants in the labour market. Such entrants are more likely to possess such skills and are increasingly likely in any case to have higher levels of education than their male counterparts, given their outperformance of males at both schools and universities.

So the winds of change in the labour market appear to be favourable to women in a statistical sense in the labour markets, both in terms of women's overall participation rates and also in terms of enhanced opportunities in new or emerging categories of service-sector work. To a certain extent, these developments are attributable to policy initiatives – directives on maternity leave, parental leave, and anti-discrimination legislation – implemented since the 1960s. They also arise for structural labour market reasons – the increased demand for labour in a context of demographic stagnation or decline and the necessity of mobilising hitherto underutilised categories of the potential workforce. Hence, rising female labour market participation reflects socially progressive policy choices, as well as the more impersonal forces of growing labour market demand.

However, while the level of women's labour market engagement has changed in quite dramatic ways, in other dimensions changes have been much slower in coming. Segregation, both horizontal (in terms of sector and occupation) and vertical (in terms of various glass ceilings), affects the labour market in ways that often influence women's employment conditions and career development possibilities. A litany of gender 'gaps' still characterises differential statistical labour market outcomes for men and women and most are closing only gradually.

In addition, other spheres of activity have largely preserved a traditional, gendered division of labour. According to the fourth *European Working Conditions Survey*, working women in the EU in 2005 still spend three hours on unpaid work in the home (on domestic work or caring responsibilities) for every one hour spent by men. This discrepancy has changed little in the last generation. Despite the increased participation of women in the paid labour market, there is little if any evidence that working men are taking on a more equal share of domestic, caring and parenting responsibilities. Consequences of this include the higher incidence of female part-time work and long combined work hours (paid and unpaid), especially for working mothers. Meanwhile a culture of long (paid) hours in senior management roles is likely to act as a significant barrier to entry for female professionals, especially those with care responsibilities.

So, in summary, it can be said that over the last generation important changes have been seen, which go some way towards making the workplace more equal in gender terms. But statistical equality clearly has not been achieved according to the most common measures – pay and pension entitlements, participation rates etc. – and the female experience of work remains different from that of men. In the pages that follow, some reflections are set out on how the situation of women in the workplace is evolving and some pointers to possible future developments and improvements.

Women's and men's work: a world apart

According to the results of the fourth *European Working Conditions Survey*, European labour markets are highly segregated. Only 26% of Europeans work in mixed occupations, where the workforce is composed of at least 40% of both sexes. Three quarters of European workers work in sectors that are either predominantly male or predominantly female. In fact, half of all working women are concentrated in two sectors: 34% of women work in education and health and 17% work in the wholesale and retail trade, while half of all working men are in three sectors – manufacturing (22%), wholesale and retail (14%) and construction (13%). This can partly be explained by the fact that women tend to cluster in selected disciplines, such as arts, humanities and social sciences, which may orient them towards more traditionally female occupations.

However, modern organisations in technical and traditionally male sectors are increasingly mindful of the necessity of attracting and retaining qualified female staff. An example from Eurofound's 'Attractive workplace for all' project is IBM Nederland's 'Women in Blue' network (Van den Heuvel, 2007). Practical initiatives undertaken by the network to increase the proportion of female employees and managers include the following:

- in order to present IBM as an employer well-disposed towards women, the company identifies top female students at two Dutch universities; it offers them coaching and sponsors student activities, such as conferences on the empowerment of women;
- to arouse interest in technical professions, summer activities have been organised for teenage girls; these girls visit workshops and are engaged in various technical activities under the supervision of IBM employees;
- to stimulate the recruitment of women, a recruitment procedure is halted if the list of applicants contains fewer than 20% women;
- participation in working parties that stimulate the participation of women in technical training and technical occupations;
- network meetings – a combination of lectures and discussions – are held three times a year;
- a supportive HR policy is directed towards achieving an optimal work–life balance for everyone;
- flexible working hours;

- the availability of laptop computers and mobile phones to facilitate work outside the office and outside office hours;
- evaluation based on results and not on hours spent at the office.

Policy pointers and questions

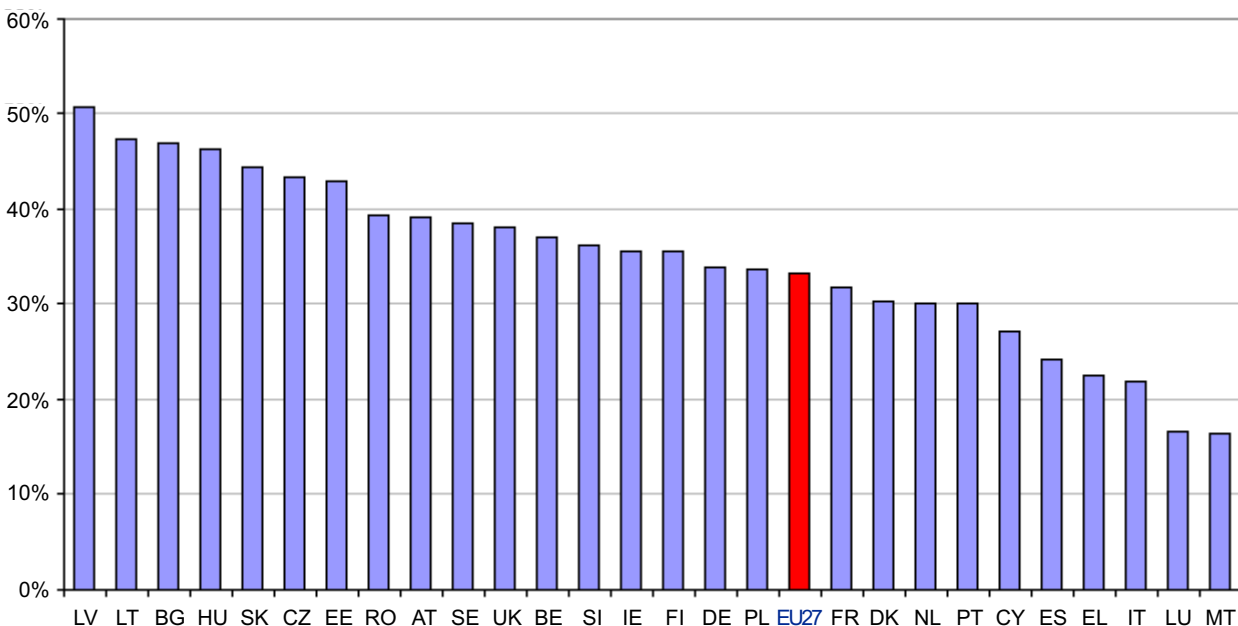
- De-gendering career choices: how effective are schemes encouraging women to consider occupations that are traditionally seen as male (and vice versa)?
- Given the strategic importance of education in a knowledge-based society, the increased demand for childcare, and the rising demand for healthcare because of an ageing population, the social and economic value of work in these traditionally female sectors is assuming greater importance.
- What are the emerging policy tools at national level and how effective are they? These include such tools as special pay increments for low-paid, female-dominated sectors in the national pay agreement in Finland (Jokivouri, 2006); job re-evaluation strategies designed to eliminate discriminatory pay differentials; and mandatory gender equality plans for all companies with ten or more employees, as in Sweden.

Workplace hierarchies and gender

Even though there has been a large increase in the participation of women in the labour market over the last generation, nonetheless there are still comparatively few women working in managerial roles.

The professional progress of working women continues to encounter obstacles in various forms – prejudices, gender stereotypes, issues of leadership style, demands of family life and underinvestment in social capital (Eagly and Carli, 2007). One practical outcome is that, in 2005, only 35% of European managers were women. This average figure conceals large country differences. The biggest proportions of women managers are found in eastern Europe, Latvia being the only European country where the proportion of female managers (51%) exceeds that of men. In southern European countries, by contrast, there are fewer women managers.

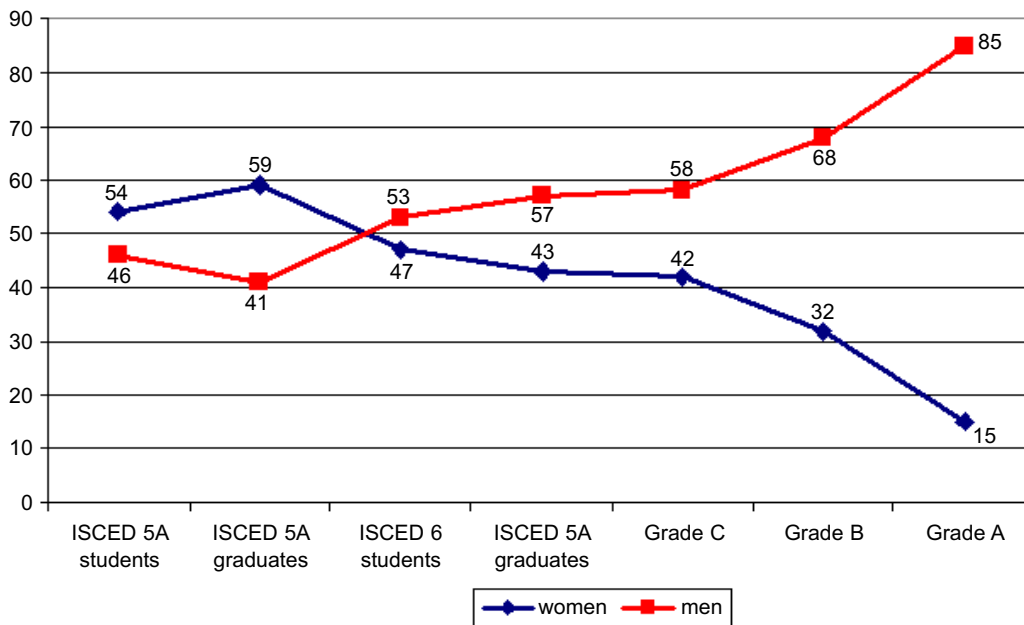
Figure 1: *Proportion of female managers by country, EU27*



Source: *Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005*

Women managers are much more likely to work in female-dominated sectors such as health and education; moreover, most of their subordinates are women. In the EU27, only 9% of men have a woman as their boss compared to 41% of women. Most of those employees who have a female boss are service and sales workers, technicians or associate professionals; over 30% of workers in these occupations are supervised by women. However, among legislators, senior officials and managers, only 19% have a female boss. This implies that highly skilled workers in these occupations, who may themselves occupy managerial positions, are rarely supervised by a woman. The ranks of female managers thin out rapidly as one ascends the professional ladder.

Figure 2: Proportions of women and men in a typical academic career, EU25 (2004)



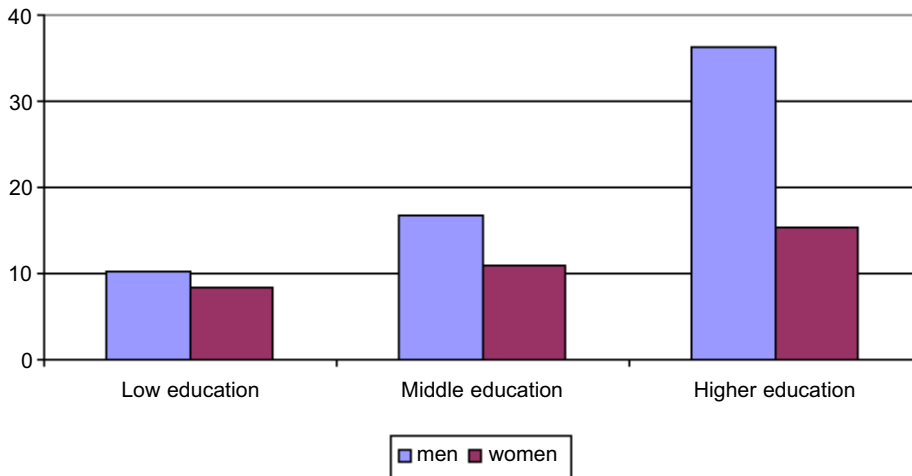
Source: European Commission database on women in and men in decision-making

Even in liberal professions, one can observe the statistical difference between men and women. As the data collected in the European Commission’s database on women in and men in decision-making shows, women fare worse than men at higher levels of the academic ladder. Fewer women enter doctoral programmes, even fewer graduate from these programmes and very few make it to the post of full-time tenured professor (15% of women as compared to 85% of men).

Another factor influencing gender hierarchies at the top level is organisation size. In micro-enterprises, with fewer than 10 employees, the proportions of men and women in management are more or less equal. However, in bigger establishments, the proportion of female managers drops to approximately 30%. In addition, the proportion of managers who are women is greater than the proportion of employees who have a female boss; this relates to the fact that men in supervisory positions tend to have more subordinates than women in supervisory positions: male managers have on average 21 subordinates, while women have 13.

The proportion of employees in managerial positions increases in line with levels of education for men and for women. However, returns to education are more visible for men than for women: 36% of highly educated men (those at graduate level or above) work as managers, as against only 15% of highly educated women. The lever of higher education is clearly more useful to men than to women in helping attain managerial positions.

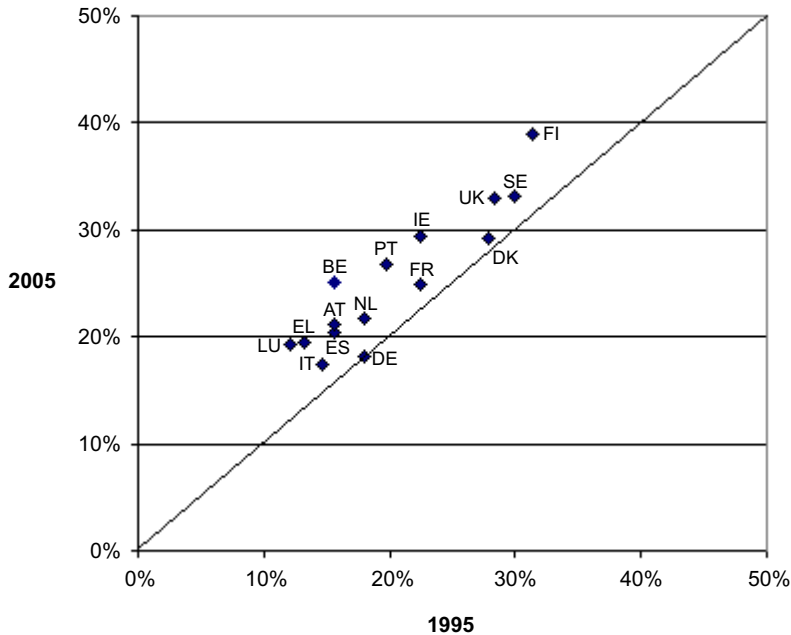
Figure 3: Proportion of male and female managers, by level of education (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005

The proportion of employees working under the supervision of a female boss has increased in all EU15 countries in the past 10 years, except Germany. However, only in the Nordic countries, Ireland and the UK were the proportions significantly higher than the EU27 average of 24% in 2005.

Figure 4: Proportion of employees with a female boss, EU15, 1995 and 2005



Source: European Working Conditions Survey, 1995 and 2005

For many of the new Member States (NMS) the trend is upwards as well (data from the European Working Conditions Survey is available only from 2001 to 2005). Only in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Latvia and Slovakia were there fewer employees with a female boss in 2005 than to 2001. In most of the NMS, the proportion of employees with a female boss was higher than the EU27 average in 2005; this was the case in Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

To summarise, the proportions of women managers are still low in many European countries, even if women are slowly catching up with their male colleagues. Where women are managers they are most often supervising other women. The findings indicate that women in Europe have difficulty in reaching the very highest positions that carry more responsibilities. Although women have comparatively high levels of education, this doesn't seem to be the key to their accessing high-level managerial or leadership roles.

Policy pointers and questions

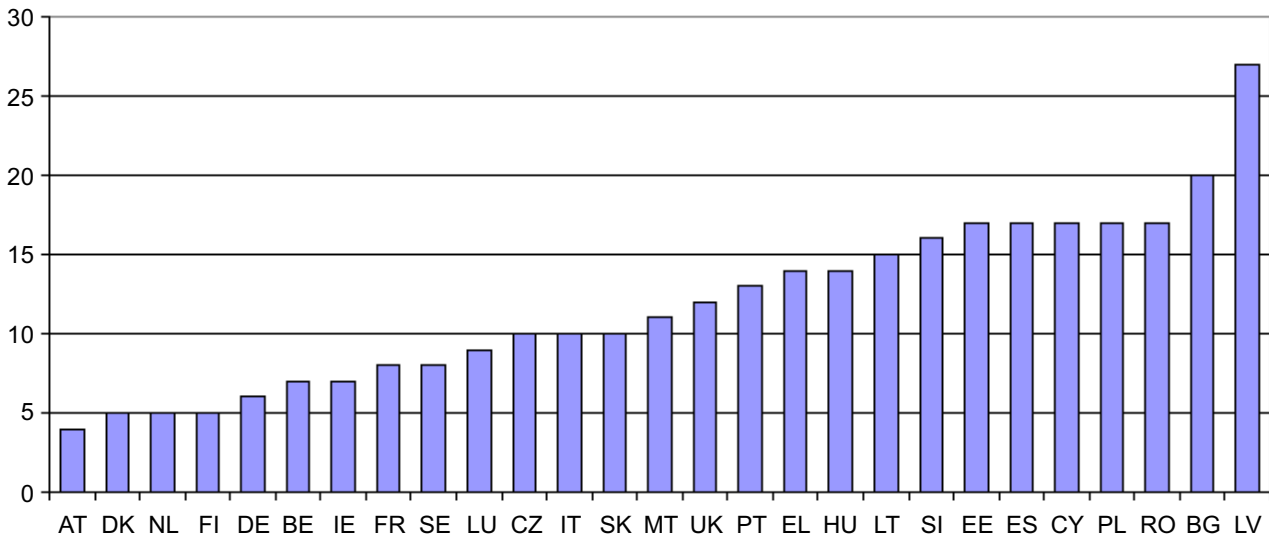
- Given the current statistical trends, gender equality in terms of workplace hierarchies will take another two generations. How can more rapid change be facilitated? One possible approach may be gender quotas, as in the Norwegian model. In this model, since 1988 a minimum of 40% of both men and women has been compulsory in publicly appointed committees, boards, and councils and, since 2008, on all shareholder-owned companies' boards of directors.
- How might a meritocratic form of career advancement that is fair to men and women prevail? Should it be based on management by results rather than promotion by year-counting? And is a 'quota' approach compatible with meritocratic career advancement?

Women's employment and childcare provision

In March 2002, the European Council, meeting in Barcelona, took the initiative of inviting Member States to 'remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive [...] to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age'. These 'Barcelona objectives' form an integral part of the EU's strategy for growth and jobs and are intended to increase the rate of employment of young parents, especially women, and thus help achieve greater gender equality (European Commission, 2008a).

There is a direct link between childcare provision and access for parents to paid employment. Across the EU, more than six million women aged between 25 and 49 years say they are forced into not working, or can only work part time, because of their family responsibilities. For more than a quarter of them, lack of childcare facilities – or their cost – is the main problem. Access to good quality, affordable childcare operating at hours that suit parents and children is thus a key element in facilitating women's access to the labour market.

Figure 5: Difficulties in fulfilling family responsibilities, by country

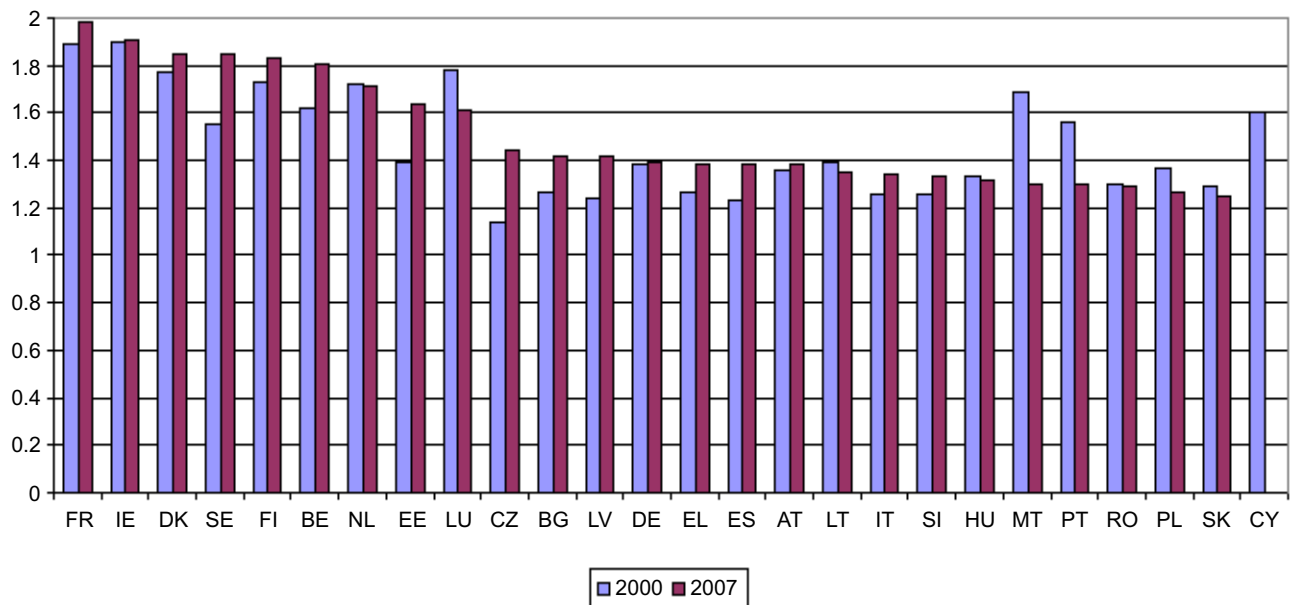


Source: *European Quality of Life Survey, 2003.*

Note: Respondents were asked to say how often 'It has been difficult for me to fulfil my family responsibilities because of the amount of time I spend on my job' (Question Q13b). Percentages are those in employment answering 'several times a week'.

In terms of EU policy, an underlying driver of childcare services is a political commitment to reverse the decline in fertility and birth rates to levels closer to those needed for population replacement. It is estimated that a continuation of the current low birthrate trends could reduce the EU's annual economic growth rate from its current rate of between 2% and 2.5% to 1.25% by 2040. Those Member States with the highest birth rates are those that have done most to facilitate work-life balance for parents and that have a high rate of female employment (European Commission, 2008b).

Figure 6: Average fertility rate (children per woman), by country



Source: *Eurostat, Population and social conditions, Statistics in focus, 81/2008*

Note: For some countries, data are not available – BE 2006, IE 2007, CY 2006/2007, PL 2007.

Childcare is a central component of those policies concerned with reconciling work and family life and improving the quality of family life by enabling parents to work and achieve a higher standard of living for their children. Good childcare provision for children of all ages can help parents manage the complex demands of work and parenthood.

By widening the context of childcare, it is possible to consider a broader range of employment issues that impact on the demands for childcare services, such as parental leave, care services for other dependants, flexible work patterns, job sharing, part-time work, and the balanced sharing of domestic tasks and family responsibilities between men and women. Childcare provision cannot be developed in isolation and should be explored in the context of other systems that interact with the care of children and the family unit. This will ensure that childcare policy developments support the protection of women's rights and help stimulate active participation in the labour market.

Policy pointers and questions

- Is childcare provision a social good per se or is it principally an instrument of employment policy (to boost female labour market participation) and/or family policy (to facilitate higher birth rates)?
- In some countries, the state takes a very active role in childcare provision (such as in Denmark and Sweden); in others (such as Ireland and the UK), the market provides. Are there differences in quality of care and quality of employment and in outcomes, in terms of overall labour market participation of parents?
- Can employment in childcare grow in terms of volume and quality in order to meet demand? Will the required human and financial resources be available?
- Policies to encourage men to take up a greater share of parenting responsibilities, such as mandatory sharing of parental leave in some Scandinavian countries, have had mixed success so far. Is this a question of policy design? Are there ways for policy to address and remedy the continuing unequal gender division of household work?

Gender dimensions of flexicurity

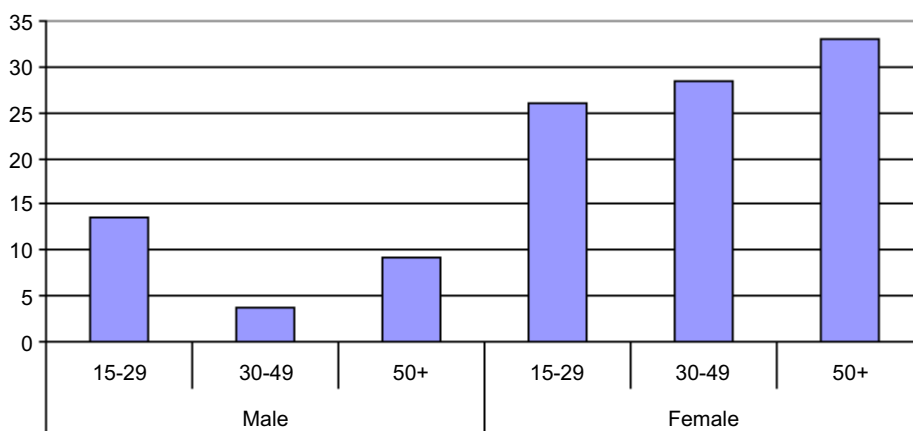
More flexibility combined with more security – can an equilibrium be found between these two concepts for both men and women? One of the key challenges of European social and employment policy is to attract more men and women to the workplace, to offer them the possibility of remaining active in the labour market over their life course and to do this in a way that meets companies' needs for an adaptive and committed workforce.

Flexicurity – a broad policy approach to meeting the above objectives – is an umbrella term that covers many different elements of work–life, so it would be unwise to pretend to deal with all gender-related aspects of the concept in a few pages. However, some interesting findings from recent Eurofound research may cast a fresh light on, for example, the desirability of flexible working time arrangements and the gender dimensions of non-standard work.

Non-standard work

Part-time work accounts for an increasing proportion of EU employment (18% in 2007) and is highly gendered: four out of five part-time workers in Europe are women. It is more prevalent in the public sector (in education and health), as well as in hotels and restaurants – traditionally female-dominated sectors.

Figure 7: Part-time work, by age and gender (%)



Source: *fourth European Working Conditions Survey*

The fourth *European Working Conditions Survey* shows that there is a difference between men and women in terms of taking up part-time employment. For men, part-time employment usually takes place at the beginning or end of the career, either as entry in the labour market or as a way to prepare for retirement. For women, however, part-time work is used more widely throughout the career and, moreover, tends to increase as the career progresses, as shown in Figure 7. More men than women work part-time involuntarily – because suitable full-time work is unavailable. For working mothers, the choice of part-time work is more likely to relate to the lack of availability of convenient child care or afterschool care.

Another form of non-standard employment is temporary employment, again more prevalent among female workers than male. The questions here are somewhat different: is temporary employment a step towards a permanent job and as such a stepping stone into the labour market, or can temporary work become a permanent form of lower labour-market status?

Although the theoretical paradigm of work may have changed towards greater flexibility, career mobility etc., in practical terms many traditional work entitlements are predicated on the standard of full-time, permanent work (these include the building up of first- and second-pillar pension rights, paid holidays, various forms of leave, as well as access to a wider set of social provisions including healthcare). Part-time and temporary workers, the majority of them women, do not have access to the same level of work-related benefits and this ‘entitlements gap’ is an important contributing factor to gender pay gaps as well as to higher levels of poverty among older women.

Findings from the European survey on working time and work-life balance (Anxo et al, 2007) and the European Working Conditions surveys also suggest other negative impacts of non-standard work. In the first survey, both employers and worker representatives concurred that the prospects for career development for part-time workers are poorer than for their full-time counterparts. Similarly, the fourth *European Working Conditions Survey* reveals lower levels of access to training for both temporary agency workers and part-time workers.

Flexible working time

Working time flexibility is generally considered positive and as one area in which the flexicurity agenda clearly can pay dividends for both employees and employers. Where flexible working has been implemented, it does appear to have a beneficial impact on work–life balance. The minority of workers who have flexibility or control over their working hours (one third of workers, according to the fourth *European Working Conditions Survey*) are also those with the highest level of satisfaction with their work–life balance.

And, according to the first European survey on working time and work–life balance (2004–2005), the main impacts of introducing flexible working time were largely positive according to both employee and management representatives. Higher job satisfaction was cited by 73% of employee representatives and by 61% of personnel managers, while a better adaptation working hours to the workload was cited by 67% of employee representatives and 54% of personnel managers. Reduction of paid overtime and lower absenteeism were also cited by around 30% of respondents.

However, findings from the fourth *European Working Conditions Survey* illustrate that some variants of working time flexibility are viewed quite differently by employees. From a work–life balance perspective, variability or ‘imposed’ flexibility that undermines regularity or predictability of working schedules is considered significantly unfavourable by workers. In a context of pressures to diversify working schedules, for example from companies wishing to extend or vary operating levels and times, it is interesting to observe that the old-fashioned working week (of around 35 to 40 hours in total, operating on regular weekday, daytime schedules with little or no work at non-standard hours) is still regarded as one of the most positive in work–life balance terms.

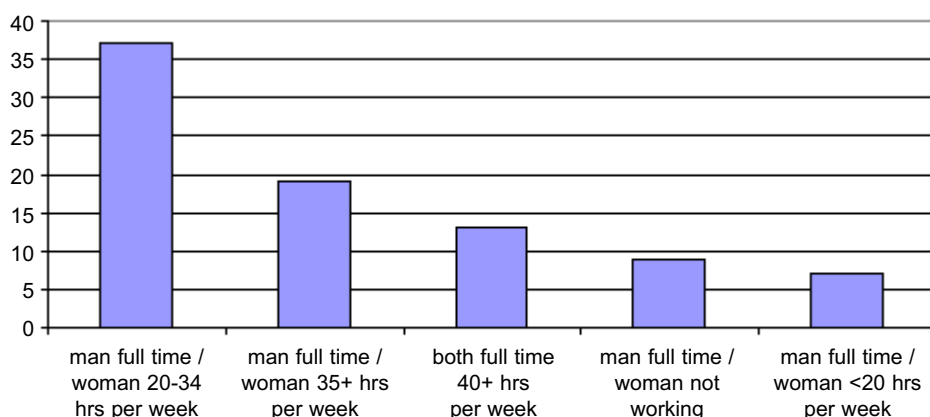
Regularity may be as important a consideration for workers – especially working mothers – as flexibility when it comes to ensuring that their working hours fit well with their non-work commitments. Given that many societal time arrangements (opening hours for schools, shops, public institutions etc.) are organised to be broadly consistent with standard daytime working hours, such a preference is not altogether surprising.

Life course and career trajectories of men and women

Career trajectories for men and women remain different despite the large-scale mobilisation of women in the labour market over the last generation. Men’s life course has tended to be simpler, being broadly arranged around three distinct phases – education, employment and retirement. Women’s, by comparison, has tended to include various discontinuities in the employment phase with partial or full withdrawal from the labour market in favour of care responsibilities. There are also differences in the expressed preferences of men and women in relation to the volume of working hours.

Based on data from the ‘Employment options of the future’ survey, some conclusions can be drawn regarding household working time preferences.

Figure 8: Preferred household working time arrangements



Source: *Employment options of the future survey*, cited in Bielski et al (2003)

Note: Percentages were for cohabiting both-sex couples aged between 15 and 64 years.

There has been a decline in support for traditional male breadwinner arrangements and an increasing preference for dual-earner arrangements. The arrangement that gains most support is that of a man employed full-time and a woman working substantial part-time hours (between 20 and 34 hours per week). Preferences are at least in this respect consistent with changing trends.

Individual working time preferences by gender

- Men would prefer to work five fewer hours per week, and women three fewer hours per week than respective average figures for employees of either sex.
- Most men and women prefer to avoid the extremes of ‘marginal’ part-time hours (under 20 hours) or overworking (45+ hours).
- Male preferences vary little according to parenthood or household characteristics; female preferences are strongly influenced by motherhood.

Source: *Employment Options of the Future survey*

Where preferences diverge from the actual experience of work is in the volume of hours that individuals would like to work. In general, most workers would like to work fewer hours. An obvious gender difference is that the working time preferences of women are much more influenced by parental responsibilities than those of men.

Changing individual preferences and the changing dynamics of a competitive labour market are two of many factors contributing to changes in the working life course (Naegele, 2003). Both workers and employers seek different working time arrangements over the life course. It is important to ensure that transitions over the life course are smoothed and that in particular entitlements are adapted to more fragmented career trajectories. This is especially important for women who tend to have more diversified career and life paths.

In order for the more positive promises of flexicurity to materialise, the challenge will be to ensure that both atypical work forms and more destandardised life courses can be supported by the relevant necessary institutions acting in coordinated fashion. Social security systems have to be adapted to include frameworks for flexible working time options, including work interruptions and changes in status (Anxo et al, 2007a). Companies also need to adopt strategies for time management for workers (Anxo et al, 2006). Training, and smoothing transitions – both in terms of working time and pay – are crucial if more flexible life-course models are to be accepted and successful. All of these issues are particularly relevant for working women.

Policy pointers and questions

- Flexicurity has the potential to be especially important for women, if it is considered to have the ability to manage life transitions without unwarranted employment penalties (of earnings, career progression, pension entitlements etc).
- The debate around flexicurity may once again open up the policy approaches to (re)valorise non-standard forms work, first triggered by the EU directives in the late 1990s on part-time work and fixed-term work. To the extent that these employment forms affect a higher proportion of women, this may have positive impacts on gender equality.
- Women have an extended post-retirement life expectancy; how can the impact on pensions be mitigated, given that old-age poverty is already higher amongst women and that over their life-course women’s earnings and accrued entitlements fall well short of those of men?

References

Anxo, D., et al, Eurofound, *Working time options over the life course: New work patterns and company strategies*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2006, available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef05160.htm>

Anxo, D. et al, Eurofound, *Part-time work in European companies*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007a, available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2006/102/en/1/ef06102en.pdf>

Anxo, D., et al, Eurofound, *Working time options over the life course: Changing social security structures*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007b, available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef05101.htm>

Bielenski, H. et al, Eurofound, *Working time preferences in sixteen European countries*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2003, available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0207.htm>

Eagly, A. H. and Carli, L. L. 'Women and the labyrinth of leadership'. *Harvard Business Review*, September, 2007, pp. 62–71.

European Commission, *Employment in Europe 2007*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2007.

European Commission, Rapid press release (3/10/08), IP/08/1449, 'Parents face shortage of childcare services, says EU report', 2008a.

European Commission, Women and men in decision-making – online database http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/women_men_stats/measures_in4_en.htm, 2008b, [accessed 28 October 2008].

Eurostat, *Population and social conditions: Statistics in focus*, 81/2008, 2007.

Jokivouri, P., Eurofound, Equality pay increment agreed in national wage agreement (online), Dublin, Eurofound, 2006, available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2006/04/articles/FI0604019I.htm>

Naegele, G., Eurofound, *A new organisation of time over working life*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2003, available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0336.htm>

Parent-Thirion, A. et al, Eurofound, *Fourth European Working Conditions Survey*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2006, available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0698.htm>

Van den Heuvel, S., Eurofound, *IBM, the Netherlands: Increasing the labour market participation of underrepresented groups – women*, 'Attractive workplace for all' company cases database (online), Dublin, Eurofound, 2007, available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/qualityofwork/betterjobs/cases/nl02ibm.htm>

Eurofound survey sources

European Working Conditions surveys – 1995 (second survey) and 2005 (fourth survey)

European Quality of Life surveys – 2003 (first survey) and 2007 (second survey)

European survey on working time and work–life balance – 2004–2005 (first survey)

Employment options of the future survey – 1998

Greet Vermeylen, Gerlinde Ziniel, John Hurley, Kasia Jurczak and Maija Lyly-Yrjänäinen