

Striking a balance: Reconciling work and life in the EU

Introduction

Combining work and life is a fundamental issue, one that policymakers, social partners, businesses and individuals are seeking to resolve. Simultaneously, new challenges and solutions are transforming the interface between work and life: an ageing population, technological change, higher employment rates and fewer weekly working hours. This report examines the interface between work and life for people in the EU, the circumstances in which they seek to reconcile the two, and what is most important for them in achieving work–life balance. The findings are based on a range of data sources – in particular, the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) and the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS).

Policy context

The European Pillar of Social Rights adopted in 2017 has created a momentum for EU policy on work–life balance. In addition, the proposed Directive on Work–Life Balance aims to remove barriers to women’s entry into the labour market, and to ensure a more equal distribution of care between men and women. The proposal complements other EU legislation, such as the Working Time Directive, and initiatives that promote gender equality by facilitating a better work–life balance. And at Member State level, policy is evolving in terms of legislation and initiatives, with reforms to child-related leave and flexible working time being introduced.

Key findings

Life course perspective

Nearly one in five workers (18%) in the EU reports a poor work–life balance; this percentage has remained stable since 2000, as measured by the EWCS. Indicators of conflict between work and life have increased slightly in the past decade, as measured by the EQLS. Women in employment report a better work–life balance than men, linked to their shorter working hours. Differences in reported

work–life balance between people of different age cohorts emerge when a life course perspective is considered: problems combining work and life are most frequently reported by people with young children. This is especially the case for men: during this phase, they also express a strong preference for working fewer hours.

Gender distribution of work

Volume of work is the strongest predictor of work–life balance. While weekly working hours have decreased in recent decades, working 40 hours a week is still the norm for men in the EU; moreover, the working week is longest during the parenting phase of life. Women spend on average 34 hours per week in paid employment (less during the parenting phase) but spend significantly more time in unpaid work (largely consisting of care for children or dependent adults). This gender gap, in terms of time spent on paid and unpaid work, differs substantially between Member States. An equal distribution of work and care, however, is the exception rather than the rule.

Flexible work arrangements

Flexible working arrangements, whether full flexibility over working hours or more limited flexibility, are generally helpful for workers juggling work and private life. Even a little flexibility goes a long way: those who can take an hour off to take care of personal or family matters are much less likely to report a poor work–life balance than those who cannot do so. Nearly two-thirds of employees in the EU, however, have no say over their working schedules. The relationship between telework and work–life balance is ambiguous: where telework substitutes for working time in the workplace, it facilitates the work–life interface. However, when it results in extra work, the opposite is the case.

Role of working conditions

Although the number of hours of work is by far the most important factor in work–life balance, other working conditions play a role. The organisation of working time – regularity and predictability, working atypical hours such as

nights and weekends – is important. For example, high-intensity work and the associated stress can negatively affect home life, while social support at work from management and colleagues can alleviate problems.

Impact of care responsibilities

Most unpaid work involves caring for children or dependent adults. Women assume care responsibilities more often than men (working fewer paid hours or not at all). Formal support services are not available or affordable for everyone: a sizeable share of women not seeking employment because of care responsibilities indicates a lack of available or affordable care services. There are clear indications that the demand for formal long-term care (LTC) is rising and will continue to do so. However, to meet this demand will put pressure on government budgets: hence, further reliance on informal care is likely, with a consequent impact on work–life balance.

Benefits of work–life balance

Achieving a better work–life balance is likely to increase employment rates and lead to a more equal distribution of work and care between men and women. A better work–life balance is also linked to a better mental well-being for workers and more engagement in the job, leading to a more productive workforce – ensuring benefits for workers and employers alike. And those with a better work–life balance tend to be more satisfied with their life and work, and happier overall.

Policy pointers

- Policy interest in work–life balance is warranted because its benefits are wide-ranging. Improving work-life balance mostly happens at the workplace but the involvement of stakeholders at different levels can create a facilitating policy framework.
- People’s specific work–life balance needs to change dramatically across the life course; this should be taken into account when designing appropriate policies.
- Reducing the volume of work has the greatest impact on improving work-life balance. However, the organisation of work is also important: irregular or unpredictable working hours, working at unsocial hours or a high level of work intensity all complicate the interface between work and life.
- Informal support for flexibility goes a long way: an hour or two off from work at crucial moments makes a tremendous difference. This highlights the pivotal role of the workplace and the manager; moreover, evidence shows that formal arrangements go hand in hand with actual flexibility.
- Telework positively affects work–life balance, but also risks increasing the volume of work. Substitutional telework, rather than supplemental, should be encouraged.
- The demand for long-term care will continue to increase. Meeting this demand by further reliance on informal care can have a negative impact on work–life balance and the distribution of care between men and women.

Further information

The report *Striking a balance: Reconciling work and life in the EU* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef18065>

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