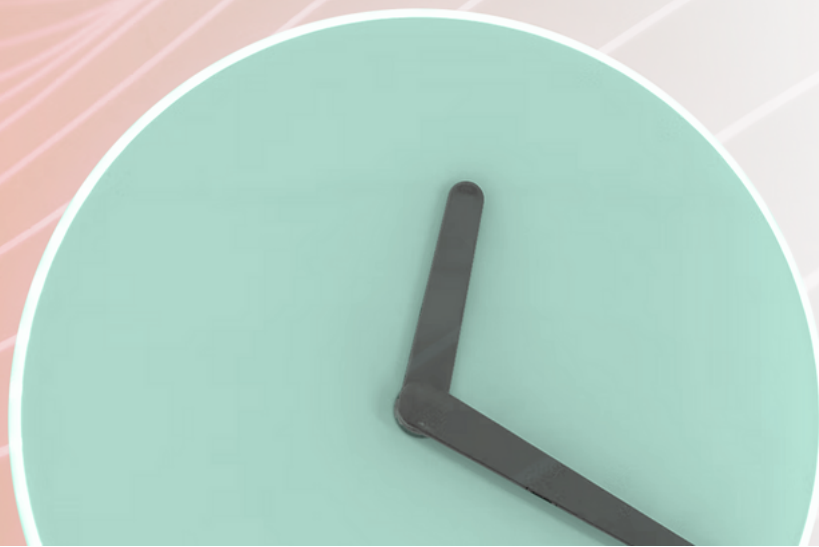


LOCAL AND REGIONAL TIME AGENDA

LIFE BALANCE:

Work, care, rest, and personal time



Life balance: Work, care and personal time

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Harmoniously merging paid work, care responsibilities, personal time and the various other aspects of one's life can be challenging. Conflicts occur, manifesting themselves as difficulties on the job, struggles in finding time for family, lack of personal time and exhaustion. The absence of these conflicts implies a desirable allocation of time – in other words, life balance.

Life balance is closely related to the particular stage a person is at in their life cycle and is therefore a target that changes over time for everyone.

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Some aspects of life are resource-intensive, for example studies during youth, family demands when children are young and care for others later in life. Conflicts arise especially when many demanding aspects of life coincide. Working parents of young children are a prime example of people with a multitude of demands, and of resources being stretched on the job and at home.

Differences between men and women in work-life conflict are related to deep-rooted gender inequalities. Traditional gender norms often portray men as 'breadwinners' and women as 'home-makers'. Although in recent decades gender equality has increased in the EU, the pace of progress has been slow (Eurofound and EIGE, 2021). Persisting disparities in the labour market are reflected in the gender employment gap: in 2019 in the EU, the employment rate of men was 79%, while that of women was 12 percentage points lower, at 67%¹.

Another gender imbalance involves the degree to which people work in jobs that may be done from home (teleworkability), which is higher among women than men in the EU (Sostero et al., 2020).

In addition, deep-seated gender disparities are evident in unpaid work that parents do at home: in 2016, men spent an average of 16 hours a week on childcare while women spent an average of 31 (Eurofound, 2017).

Surveys such as those by Eurofound² collect information about life balance issues. Here, the focus is on parents' work-life balance because such questions are often exclusively asked of workers, and because working parents face the double responsibilities related to their job and their children. However, it is important to note that, as mentioned earlier, life balance issues concern everyone, regardless of employment status.

Work-life conflict among parents

Among working people, conflicts between work and home life can operate in two directions: work commitments may prevent people from dedicating enough time and attention to their home life, and family and housework responsibilities may prevent people from being able to dedicate enough time and focus to work.

The scale of the first type of conflict is illustrated in the first two images of Figure 1. In line with traditional gender norms, in 2015, 22% of working mothers and 19% of working fathers reported that they were at least occasionally too tired after work for household tasks. As for employment preventing a person from dedicating time to family, the picture is more gender-balanced. This is to be expected, considering that the focus here is on workers. Men were slightly more likely (14%) than women (13%) to report that their job prevented them from dedicating time to their families, possibly a reflection of longer working hours.

The other direction of work-life conflict can involve family responsibilities preventing a person from either concentrating on their job or from dedicating time to their job. These types of conflict are reported less often: between 4% and 5% of working mothers reported these issues in 2015, while the rate was 3% among working fathers (last two images of Figure 1).

1. Author's calculations based on Eurostat data from 2019 [LFSI_EMP_A_H], people aged 20-64.

2. For example, European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) and Living, Working and COVID-19 (LWC) survey.

Work-life conflict among parents during the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children required additional care and education from parents because of closures of schools and childcare facilities. The gender imbalance in childcare tasks meant that mothers took on most of this additional work. Meanwhile, working from home was widely recommended or mandated. The gender imbalance in the teleworkability of jobs meant that women were more likely than men to work from home during the pandemic. As a result, working mothers in particular struggled to simultaneously meet the demands related to their jobs and their children. Beyond increases in work-life conflict, there is evidence that these competing demands have caused some women to leave the labour market altogether (Albanesi and Kim, 2020; Petts et al., 2021).

The prolonged strain that the pandemic placed on working parents' work-life balance is evident in the first two images of Figure 2. Of particular concern is the gender disparity and the dramatic increase in the share of working mothers showing signs of exhaustion: 38% report being too tired after work for household tasks. Reflecting the increased demand on parents to provide care and education for their children, over a quarter of working parents report their job preventing them from giving the time that they wanted to their families.

Particularly during initial pandemic lockdowns, when vast numbers of schools and childcare facilities were closed and working from home (where possible) was widely mandated, conflicts where family life had a negative impact on work became widespread (see last two images of Figure 2). Concentrating on work became particularly difficult, reflecting the juggling of working from home with childcare duties. By both measures, the situation was especially challenging for working mothers.

Policies for better life balance

People themselves, as well as policymakers, social partners and businesses, are seeking improvements in life balance – in the interest of everyone, including workers, employers, carers and care recipients. Life balance issues are high on the agenda in many EU initiatives.

The European Pillar of Social Rights includes the Work-life Balance Initiative, addressing the challenges faced by working parents and carers, and including minimum standards for parental, paternity and carer's leave, and flexible working arrangements. A new directive on work-life balance for parents and carers is due to be implemented in 2022. In addition, the recently announced European Care Strategy seeks to improve the life balance of carers.

Telework may serve as an example of a current trend with likely consequences for work-life balance. On the one hand, telework has the potential to improve work-life balance by reducing commuting and providing workers with more freedom and flexibility to organise their time. On the other hand, telework can blur the boundaries between work and private life, leading to longer working hours and working during free time (Eurofound, 2021b). These concerns contributed to the European Parliament's recent resolution on the right to disconnect from work. Telework during the pandemic – often compulsory and rapidly implemented – correlates with a poor work-life balance for mothers in particular. The problems are likely explained in part by the additional burden brought on by the closures of schools and childcare facilities. For many people, the benefits of telework appear to outweigh its downsides – at least in non-pandemic times. As an indication of this, many Europeans wish to continue to work from home after the pandemic: 49% of women and 43% of men state that they wish to do so at least several times a week (Eurofound, 2021a).

Ultimately, the success of European initiatives that aim to enhance life balance rests on the deployment of well-informed policies at national, regional and local levels.

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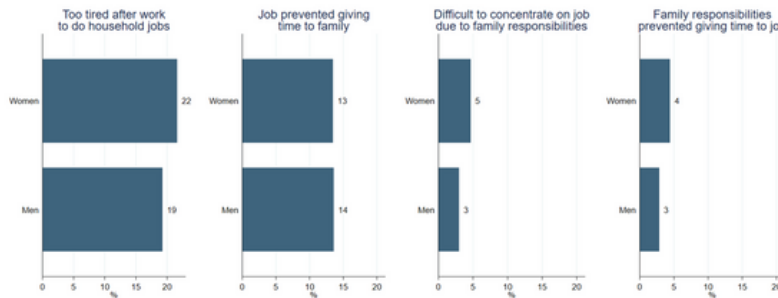
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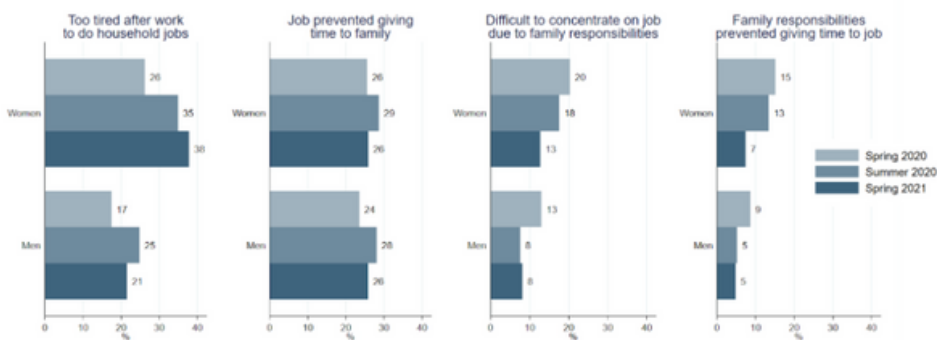
Figure 1 Work-life balance of working parents (EU, 2015)



Note Survey question: Since you started your main paid job, how often have you ...felt too tired after work to do some of the household jobs which need to be done? ...found that your job prevented you from giving the time you wanted to your family? ...found it difficult to concentrate on your job because of your family responsibilities? ...found that your family responsibilities prevented you from giving the time you should to your job? Bars represent the sum of answers: always and most of the time.

Source: Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) (EU27) 2015.

Figure 2 Work-life balance of working parents (EU, 2020/2021)



Note Survey question: How often in the last 2 weeks have you...felt too tired after work to do some of the household jobs which need to be done? ...found that your job prevented you from giving the time you wanted to your family? ...found it difficult to concentrate on your job because of your family responsibilities? ...found that your family responsibilities prevented you from giving the time you should to your job? Bars represent the sum of answers: always and most of the time.

Source: Eurofound's Living, Working and COVID-19 e-survey (EU27) rounds 1, 2 and 3 (2020/2021).

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