



# EMPLOYMENT AND WORKING TIME IN EUROPE

During the summer and autumn of 1998 the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions carried out a major survey on Employment Options of the Future across the 15 EU Member States and Norway. Who wants to work? When? Why? These were the major questions examined in the survey, which sought the views of people currently in paid employment or who intend to enter the labour market within the next five years. This leaflet summarises the main findings of the survey on the subject of actual and preferred working hours.

## Key findings

- Men's and women's preferred working times diverge less from each other than actual working times both within and between the countries.
- Many currently inactive individuals would like to enter the labour market, although with somewhat shorter working hours than those currently in employment.
- In comparison with the past, many workers today would like to vary their working times over the course of their working lives. Thus in the 15 EU Member States and Norway, 12% of full-time workers would like to work part-time for a given period. Figures for the individual countries range from 8% in Spain, Portugal and the United Kingdom to 23% in Norway.
- The idea of career breaks or 'sabbaticals' meets with a good response. Fifty-seven per cent of those interviewed would like to take a sabbatical. Figures for individual countries range from 38% in Spain to 79% in Norway.
- On average, the working time preferences of full-time and part-time workers are converging. The average difference in Europe between the actual working times of full-time and part-time workers is 18.8 hours. The gap shrinks by more than half, to 9.2 hours, when it comes to preferences.
- Some full-time workers and many of those in marginal part-time jobs would like to be employed in jobs offering substantial part-time work.
- Employees working long hours in excess of the standard working time express a particularly strong preference for working shorter hours.
- Many employees express preferences for a new, shorter working time norm. Seventy-one per cent of those surveyed would like to work between 30 and 40 hours per week – and this refers to actual hours (including overtime) and not to agreed hours. The range stretches from 58% in the UK to 88% in Spain.
- The different working time preferences expressed by people with young children and those without children in the household show that preferences change with personal circumstances.



## Introduction

At the heart of this summary is an analysis of actual and preferred working times. In which countries are working times particularly short, particularly long or particularly varied and in which countries do preferred working times differ markedly or less markedly from actual working times? We seek explanations for differences in working times and working time preferences between countries. The differences between preferences and reality give some indication of both the potential and need for change. They show whether, and to what extent, actual working time structures correspond to employees' preferences.

It is important to be aware of the fact that, in investigating working time preferences, we are dealing to some extent with a moving target that is very much influenced by existing or anticipated economic and social conditions. Therefore the observed discrepancy between actual and preferred working times should be interpreted not simply as an individual desire for change but also as a challenge to policymakers, since the reasons for this discrepancy can, in part at least, be influenced by policy.

### Actual and preferred working hours

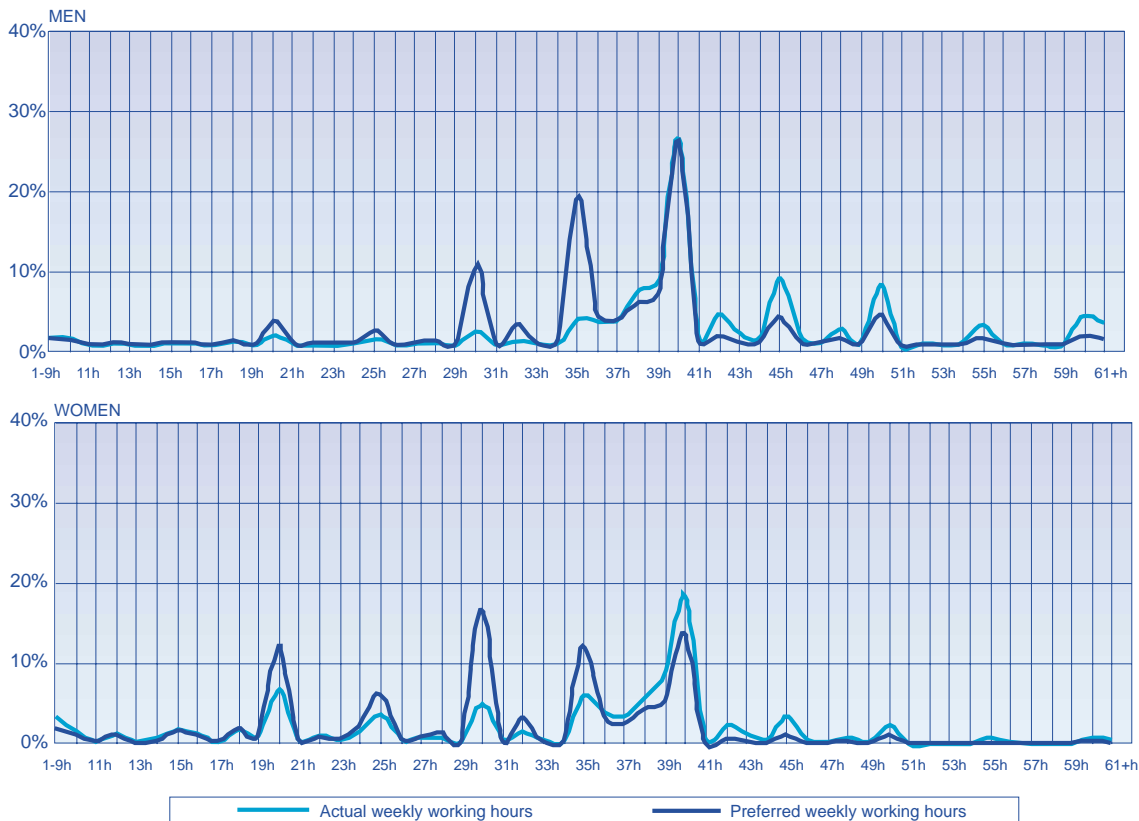
Economically active individuals in Europe work on average 39 hours per week. Many of them would

like to vary their working hours over the course of their working lives and would prefer to work shorter hours. Across Europe as a whole, this would mean a reduction of 4.5 hours in weekly working time to 34.5 hours.

The average working time of dependent employees varies between 33.7 hours in the Netherlands and 41.1 hours in Austria. The average figures conceal the differences between men's and women's working times, since women in each country continue to shoulder the main burden of unpaid domestic and family work and, for this reason, tend to devote less time to paid work than men.

Working time preferences are influenced to a large extent by actual working times. In general, the longer (or shorter) actual working times are, the longer (or shorter) working time preferences tend to be. Thus the tendency is for people to prefer somewhat longer or (more usually) somewhat shorter working times rather than completely different working times. Men's preferences for change are determined above all by their actual working times, while women's preferences are in addition influenced by household-related factors, albeit to a lesser extent than by their actual working times. When there are children in a household, when their partner is economically active and when the household is financially secure, women tend to prefer shorter working hours.

Figure 1 Distribution of the actual and preferred weekly working times of men and women in dependent employment in the 15 EU Member States and Norway





*Table 1* Average actual and preferred working times for men and women in dependent employment at country level

Country	All			Men			Women		
	Actual	Preference	Difference	Actual	Preference	Difference	Actual	Preference	Difference
<b>B</b>	37.5	34.3	-3.2	40.4	36.8	-3.1	33.5	31.1	-2.4
<b>DK</b>	36.4	32.4	-4.0	38.8	34.9	-4.0	33.8	29.7	-4.1
<b>D</b>	37.5	33.7	-3.8	42.1	36.8	-5.3	32.2	30.1	-2.1
<b>EL</b>	39.8	36.6	-3.2	42.4	38.6	-3.8	35.7	33.7	-2.0
<b>E</b>	39.3	36.1	-3.2	41.1	36.9	-4.2	34.9	34.2	-0.7
<b>F</b>	38.0	34.3	-3.7	40.7	35.9	-4.8	34.4	32.1	-2.3
<b>IRL</b>	38.9	34.5	-4.4	42.3	37.4	-4.9	34.4	30.6	-3.8
<b>I</b>	37.4	34.4	-3.0	39.5	36.8	-2.7	34.2	30.5	-3.7
<b>L</b>	38.6	35.1	-3.5	41.4	38.2	-3.2	34.3	30.5	-3.8
<b>NL</b>	33.7	31.5	-2.2	39.3	35.7	-3.5	25.9	25.6	-0.3
<b>A</b>	41.1	36.3	-4.8	45.2	39.6	-5.6	35.7	32.1	-3.6
<b>P</b>	39.7	36.4	-3.3	42.5	38.4	-4.1	36.1	33.6	-2.5
<b>FIN</b>	39.1	34.2	-4.9	41.5	35.9	-5.6	37.3	33.0	-4.3
<b>S</b>	38.1	34.4	-3.7	41.1	36.4	-4.7	34.9	32.4	-2.5
<b>UK</b>	37.3	32.9	-4.4	43.1	37.3	-5.8	31.1	28.2	-2.9
<b>NO</b>	36.7	32.6	-4.1	40.9	35.3	-5.6	32.1	29.7	-2.4
<b>EUR15+NO</b>	<b>37.7</b>	<b>34.0</b>	<b>-3.7</b>	<b>41.4</b>	<b>36.8</b>	<b>-4.6</b>	<b>32.9</b>	<b>30.4</b>	<b>-2.6</b>
Range	7.4	5.1		6.4	4.7		11.4	8.6	

In all countries, there is on average a preference for shorter individual working hours than currently worked. Individuals with longer working times would prefer a greater reduction in the hours they work than those with shorter working times. Across Europe as a whole, dependent employees would like to reduce their working time by 3.7 hours per week. Around half of dependent employees would like to reduce their working hours, while only 12% would like to work longer hours. Thirty-nine per cent of dependent employees would like to retain their actual working times.

Working time preferences are more uniform than actual working times in all countries. Working times that are particularly long or particularly short are the least popular. On the other hand, preferences in the middle of the range are more widely dispersed. It is possible to speak of a convergence of working time preferences towards working times of between 30 and 40 hours. Seventy-seven per cent of men in dependent employment and 62% of women in dependent employment would prefer working times within this range.

In all countries, the differences between men's and women's working times persist at the level of preferences, albeit at a considerably lower level.

Although men want to reduce their working times by about twice as many hours as women, men's preferred working times are still around 7 hours longer than women's. Among men in dependent employment, preferences are strongly concentrated around the 40-, 35- and 30-hour range; among women in dependent employment, preferences are clustered around the 20-, 30-, 35- and 40-hour range. Thus the majority of men want shorter full-time jobs. As the concentration of working time preferences around the 40-hour mark shows, a large part of these preferences for reduction could be realised by reducing overtime. Women, on the other hand, prefer both short full-time and substantial part-time jobs. Very few women express a preference for marginal part-time jobs. Women's working time preferences and their actual working times vary more than those of men, both within and between countries.

In all countries, fewer men or women express a preference for full-time employment (35 hours or more), while there is a higher preference for substantial part-time employment (20 to 34 hours). If these working time preferences were realised, the share of full-time workers across Europe would fall from 91% to 76% among men and from 60% to 45% among women, while the share of substantial

*Table 2* Average actual and preferred working times by sector ( all economically active individuals and those expressing a desire to seek employment)

	Manufacturing industry	Private services	Public services
Actual working hours	41.5	39.2	35.9
Preferred working hours	36.4	34.4	32.7
Difference	-5.1	-4.8	-3.2
Difference between countries on basis of actual working hours	7.5	9.8	7.2
Difference between countries on basis of preferred working hours	4.6	6.2	5.0

part-time work would rise from 6% to 21% among men and from 25% to 46% among women. The convergence of the working time preferences of men and women in dependent employment both within and across countries is one of the most important findings of this investigation.

### Factors determining working hours

Analysis by sector shows that in all countries except Portugal (because of the low part-time rate) working times in the services sector are shorter than in manufacturing, although employees in the private sector tend to work longer hours than their counterparts in public services. The differences between the sectors are considerably smaller when it comes to preferences (Table 2).

#### Educational levels

As educational levels rise, so the length of actual working time also rises across Europe as a whole. This is not surprising. Employees with high educational or skill levels want to use the qualifications they have acquired and the demands on highly-skilled workers are rising, while many low-skilled workers have to content themselves at best with part-time employment. Nevertheless, there are differences between the countries in this respect. In Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy, low-skilled workers work longer hours. The reasons are to be found in the low earnings of such workers and in the low female participation rates. In all the other countries, working time rises as educational levels increase.

When it comes to preferences, the converse is true: the more highly skilled favour shorter working times than the less highly skilled (Table 3). This is probably because they are the group best able to afford a significant reduction in working time because of their higher earnings. Furthermore, the accelerating pace of economic activity has led to a particularly sharp rise in their workload and, consequently, to an increase in the value of free time. Dissatisfaction with (longer) working times obviously increases as the average standard of education rises. It can reasonably be assumed that this is connected with the working conditions and new performance requirements in knowledge-intensive industries and services and with the related higher incomes.

#### Children in the household

Individual working times differ according to whether or not employees have children in the household. The effects of the presence of children on the working times of men and women are completely different. When there are children in the household, men in Europe work on average around two hours longer than men in households without children. Indeed, the poorer the provision of childcare facilities, the longer they work. In countries with inadequate childcare provision, the gender division of labour is clearly determined by structural conditions. Women bear the full responsibility for childcare and are not able to work at all outside the home, or at best only part-time. Men, on the other hand, shoulder the entire responsibility for earning the family income. Since any earnings the women had before the children arrived are usually spent or reduced and with increased expenditure because of the children, men have to increase their working times in order to earn a salary sufficient to support the whole family.

In the 15 EU Member States and Norway, women with children work on average 3.5 hours per week less than women without children. The differences between the working times of women with and those without children are particularly pronounced in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, Luxembourg, Austria and Ireland, since it is difficult in these countries to combine paid work with raising a family. On the other hand, women with children in Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway work even longer hours than women without children. In these countries, mothers and indeed all parents enjoy conditions that facilitate combining paid work and childcare responsibilities. The slight difference between the working times of women with and without children in Italy and Spain is probably attributable to the fact the women with children are more likely to withdraw from the labour market altogether, with a resultant decline in employment rates.

#### Working time in the household

In order to be able to analyse working time at household level, the working times of both partners in two-adult households with at least one person in paid employment were added (working time of partners not in paid employment = 0 hours). Respondents' declared working time preferences at household level (Table 4) show only a slight reduction at European level from an average of 62 to 61 hours.

Table 3 Average actual and preferred working hours by standard of general education (dependent employees)

	Primary or Secondary I	Secondary II	Tertiary
Actual working hours	37.3	37.5	38.7
Preferred working hours	34.5	33.8	33.6
Difference	-2.8	-3.7	-5.1
Difference between countries on basis of actual working hours	(9.2)	9.1	7.8
Difference between countries on basis of preferred working hours	(7.5)	6.1	3.8

*Table 4* Working hours of couples with at least one of the partners in paid employment

	Average actual weekly hours	Average preferred weekly hours	Difference
<b>B</b>	65.4	62.0	-3.4
<b>DK</b>	68.5	61.8	-6.7
<b>D</b>	60.8	59.6	-0.8
<b>EL</b>	65.1	67.3	2.2
<b>E</b>	54.4	66.0	11.6
<b>F</b>	62.4	62.2	-0.2
<b>IRL</b>	61.8	58.3	-3.5
<b>I</b>	58.0	58.9	0.9
<b>L</b>	58.0	55.8	-2.2
<b>NL</b>	58.3	55.9	-2.4
<b>A</b>	66.6	62.1	-4.5
<b>P</b>	69.1	70.8	1.7
<b>FIN</b>	67.7	66.3	-1.4
<b>S</b>	69.3	65.9	-3.4
<b>UK</b>	66.4	58.8	-7.6
<b>NO</b>	66.4	63.4	-3.0
<b>EUR15 + NO</b>	62.0	61.0	-1.0
<b>Range*</b>	14.9	15.0	-

Average weekly working hours of both partners together (not employed = 0 h)  
 \*Difference between the highest and the lowest number of hours

In the 15 EU Member States and Norway, the preference is for a less unequal distribution of working time between the partners. It is true that, even if households' working time preferences were realised, working time would still be unequally distributed between the partners; however, the average working time difference in Europe would fall by almost half from its actual level of 25.4 hours to 13.1 hours. This shows that, in all countries, there is a desire for a more equal distribution in men's and women's labour market participation.

If working time preferences were realised, the patterns of labour market behaviour in two-adult households would change in the following ways:

Attachment to the **male breadwinner model** is weak; it is currently practised by an average of 35% of households in Europe, but is preferred by 15%. Contrary to a widely held view, this preference is not dependent on whether or not there are young children in the household. Even in countries that currently have high shares of sole breadwinners (Spain, Greece, Italy), there tends to be a preference for the modernised family breadwinner model or, particularly in Spain, for two full-time jobs.

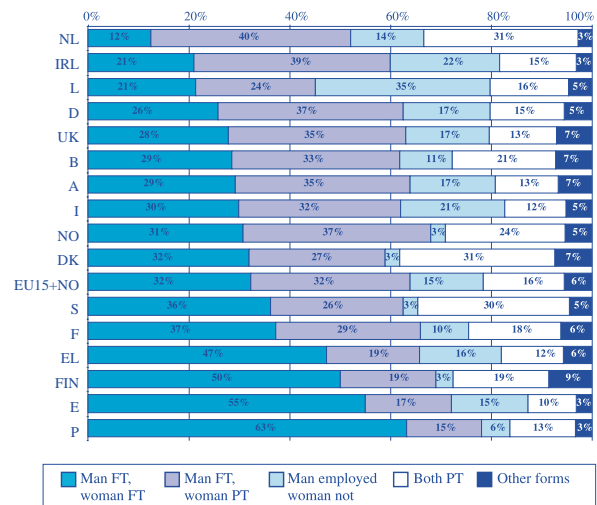
The **combination of two full-time jobs** is preferred to exactly the same extent as it is currently practised in the 15 EU Member States and Norway. It is more frequently preferred than currently practised in countries where the male breadwinner model is presently dominant, but less frequently preferred than currently practised in countries with a high share of couples with two full-time jobs (Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Belgium). Clearly, therefore, when both partners are already in full-time

employment, the preference is for a reduction in working time. The fact that, in countries with a high share of households in which both partners work full-time, a reduction in working time is sought in the first instance primarily for the women shows that, even in these countries, the gender division of labour is still a fact of life.

A new 'standard' mode of the distribution of paid work could emerge in the future out of the **combination of two part-time jobs**. Many respondents, particularly in countries with currently a high share of couples with two full-time jobs, expressed a preference for a combination of two part-time jobs. This preference for a combination of two part-time jobs is also expressed by a more or less equal share of couples with and without children. Portugal is an exception, since an absolute majority of respondents (63%) expressed a preference for the two full-time jobs combination.

The **male full-time/female part-time combination** – often described as the 'modernised family breadwinner model' – is already a reality for one in four households. In the Netherlands, it is the most widespread pattern of labour market behaviour in two-person households. Thirty-two per cent of people in the 15 EU Member States and Norway prefer this model, which constitutes an historical transitional form from the single male breadwinner model to more egalitarian forms of the household distribution of market work. At the same time, the data show that this mode of distribution also seems to be a transitional mode between the couple with two full-time jobs and the couple with two part-time jobs, since it is preferred more frequently, not only in countries where the traditional division of labour still predominates, but also in those where the combination of two full-time jobs prevails.

*Figure 2* Preferred modes of distribution of paid work between partners in two-adult households (couples with at least one of the partners in paid employment)



FT = full-time PT = part-time

Analysis of actual working times and – even more so – employment and working time preferences at household level shows that the currently prevalent distinction between full-time and part-time work is under question. There is growing interest in a reformed or variable full-time norm located in the range of what actually constitutes ‘short’ full-time and ‘long’ part-time employment – i.e. around 30 hours.

### Actual and preferred volume of work

In order to make the volume of work, which is normally given in hours worked per country, comparable across countries, we divide it by the number of people of working age. The figure produced by this calculation expresses the number of hours of paid work per person of working age.

In the 15 EU Member States and Norway, the average volume of paid work per person of working age is 23.7 hours per week (Table 5). There are, however, considerable differences between the countries. In Spain, the volume of work is only 17.7 hours per week, while in Sweden it is 30.2 hours, that is 70% greater. It is noticeable that the southern European countries, with the exception of Portugal, have the lowest volume of paid work, while the Nordic countries lead the table by a considerable margin. The decisive factor influencing the actual volume of work in a country is the level of female labour market participation.

### Increase in rate of employment

Whereas the volume of work would evolve very differently in the various countries if preferences were considered, the employment rate would have to be increased in all of them. In the the 15 EU Member States and Norway, the employment rate would have to rise by 11%, from 63% today to 74%.

This would bring the European employment rate to the US level, which in 1997 was also 74% (OECD, *Employment Outlook 2000*). The employment rate among women would have to rise more sharply than that among men, with rises of 13 and 8 percentage points respectively being required. The difference becomes even clearer when measured in terms of the rate of change rather than absolute percentage points. The 24.1% increase required in the female employment rate is more than twice as high as that required in the male employment rate. Women in Greece, Italy and Spain prefer an employment rate that is 20% higher than it is at present. Measured in terms of the rate of change, the differences become even greater. In Spain, for example, the desired increase in the employment rate among women is no less than 103%, while in Denmark it is only 4%.

The survey shows that there is a preference in the 15 EU Member States and Norway for an increase in employment rates. Thus the EU’s strategy of bringing employment rates in Europe up to the US

Table 5 Volume of paid work per person of working age

	Actual	Preference	Difference
<b>B</b>	23.9 h	24.0 h	0.4%
<b>DK</b>	29.5 h	26.9 h	-8.8%
<b>D</b>	26.0 h	26.4 h	1.5%
<b>EL</b>	21.6 h	24.9 h	10.2%
<b>E</b>	17.7 h	23.4 h	32.2%
<b>F</b>	23.6 h	24.9 h	5.5%
<b>IRL</b>	28.1 h	28.2 h	0.4%
<b>I</b>	18.6 h	22.2 h	19.4%
<b>L</b>	28.1 h	26.6 h	-5.3%
<b>NL</b>	24.4 h	24.1 h	-1.2%
<b>A</b>	29.7 h	28.1 h	-5.4%
<b>P</b>	27.1 h	27.5 h	1.5%
<b>FIN</b>	26.9 h	26.5 h	-1.5%
<b>S</b>	30.2 h	29.6 h	-2.0%
<b>UK</b>	26.4 h	25.1 h	-4.9%
<b>NO</b>	30.0 h	28.6 h	-4.7%
<b>EU15 + NO</b>	23.7 h	25.0 h	5.5%

level is consistent with people’s preferences. However, since most employees also want shorter working hours, the preference in Europe is for a combination of high labour market participation rates and short individual working times rather than the American combination of high employment rates and long working times.

### Redistribution of working time

Furthermore, by recording the employment and working time preferences of those not currently in employment, the survey shows that working time policy cannot focus solely on the redistribution of working time among those already in employment. Working time also has to be redistributed from the employed to the non-employed, which in turn requires the creation of additional jobs. The creation of jobs for women, particularly in those countries where female employment rates are very low, requires measures that go far beyond the traditional instruments of working time policy but can potentially help solve present and future labour market shortages.

The working time preferences expressed by the employed and non-employed persons interviewed cannot be achieved in all the 15 EU Member States and Norway with the same mix of macroeconomic measures, since the effects of these preferences on the volume of work and employment rate are very different. When working time is redistributed, the volume of work always changes as well, which is why we should guard against a mechanistic approach to the redistribution process.

Nevertheless, the differences between the countries are striking and serve as a starting point for determining the main focal points of an employment policy designed to aid the realisation of employee preferences. The following differences can be noted:



- In France, Greece, Italy and Spain, a large increase in both the volume of work and the employment rate is sought. In these countries, therefore, it is not sufficient simply to redistribute the existing volume of work: it must also be considerably increased through economic growth if employees' preferences are to be realised.
- In Germany, Finland and Ireland, a sharp increase in the employment rate is sought without any increase in the volume of work. Consequently, there has to be a major redistribution of working time from the employed to those not yet in employment.
- In Austria, Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway and the United Kingdom (countries with a declining volume of work) and Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden (countries with a stagnating volume of work), the primary objective must be to redistribute working time among those already in work.

Possible conflicts between different employment policy strategies should also be noted. This applies in particular to Austria, Denmark, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom and Norway. The preferences in those countries for working time reduction would considerably reduce the total volume of work in the economy. This would lead in turn to a decline in growth that could be avoided only through an increase in the size of the economically active population (e.g. through migration).

Figure 3 Preferred change in the volume of work and the employment rate

Volume of work <sup>o</sup>			
	<i>decreases</i>	<i>stagnates</i>	<i>grows</i>
Employment rate: slight increase*	Austria Denmark Luxembourg United Kingdom Norway	Belgium Netherlands Portugal Sweden	
Employment rate: large increase*		Germany Finland Ireland	France Greece Italy Spain

<sup>o</sup> Volume of work: decrease of more than 5%; Stagnation +/-5%; increase more than +5%

\* Employment rate: low increase < +9%, large increase > +9%

### Conclusions and policy implications

The survey results demonstrate that some of the important objectives of EU employment policy, such as increasing employment rates and parity of treatment for men and women, correspond to workers' employment preferences. The convergence of employment and working time preferences in the 15 EU Member States and Norway and the similarity of the challenges facing national

governments also show that an employment policy at European level is both sensible and feasible.

It is evident that income and distribution policies are required if working time preferences are to be realised. Only when the minimum level of income is guaranteed can choices between higher earnings and shorter working times be made in favour of reduced working time. Greater income inequality encourages long working hours, while more egalitarian patterns of income distribution create an environment favourable to general working time reductions.

The working time preferences suggest that the question of a new working time norm is being raised in the 15 EU Member States and Norway. Although the differences between the countries are considerable in some cases, the majority of those currently active in the labour market would prefer working times below the actual full-time norm in the respective countries (between 35 and 40 hours per week). Seventy-one per cent of those surveyed would prefer a reduced full-time norm of between 30 and 40 hours per week. The figures for the individual countries range from 58% in the United Kingdom to 88% in Spain. If currently unrealised employment preferences are also taken into account, then the dynamic of change is even greater.

The differences between actual working times and working time preferences that clearly emerge from the survey suggest there is a potential for change, and possibly also for dissatisfaction, that can be interpreted as an incentive to policymakers to act. Against the background of a consistent trend in declared preferences towards shorter working times and a concentration of preferences in the short full-time/long part-time range, the diversity of individual working time preferences raises the question of whether working times should be more strongly standardised at a lower level and whether individual preferences for working times that deviate from the norm should be protected.

Overtime, and in particular the high share of regular overtime, provides policymakers with considerable scope for change. It is no accident that the question of reducing overtime in order to combat unemployment is a significant element in the debate on working time policy in most countries. Policy initiatives in this direction would be welcomed given the widespread preference for overtime to be compensated with time off in lieu. In all the countries except Greece, Italy and Spain, more than 80% of those working overtime are able or would like to be able to take time off in lieu of overtime worked.

The following are the main elements of a new working time standard:

1. Protection against excessively long working hours (upper limit on working time);

2. General reduction in weekly working time (lowering of full-time norm);
3. Opportunities to choose working times below the full-time norm (linked to social protection);
4. Promotion of substantial part-time work: lower limit on working time.

The survey results clearly show that working times and the distribution of working time at household level constitute an important adjustment variable in

individual working time decisions, since these decisions are generally taken in the context of the household as a whole. This is a factor that is currently underestimated by policymakers. Short individual working times and a general working time reduction are more likely to be realised if the female employment rate is high and working time is more equally distributed between the partners in a household. Consequently, positive action policies aiming towards a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women are of direct relevance to working time policy.

This paper was prepared for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions by Harald Bielski, Infratest Sozialforschung Munich, Professor Dr Gerhard Bosch and Dr Alexandra Wagner, Institut Arbeit und Technik, Gelsenkirchen.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about the Foundation survey on Employment Options of the Future and about Foundation publications generally is available on the Foundation website at [www.eurofound.ie](http://www.eurofound.ie). For further details on this topic you may contact:

**Dimitrios Politis**

Information Liaison Officer

Tel: (353 1) 204 31 40 Fax: (353 1) 282 64 56 E-mail: [dmp@eurofound.ie](mailto:dmp@eurofound.ie)

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European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Wyattville Road, Loughlinstown, Dublin 18, Ireland.

**Tel:** (353 1) 204 31 00

**Fax:** (353 1) 282 64 56/282 42 09

**E-mail:** [postmaster@eurofound.ie](mailto:postmaster@eurofound.ie)

EF/01/58/EN



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OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

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ISBN 92-897-0121-8



9 789289 701211