



Foundation Findings

Work–life balance –
Solving the dilemma



ISBN 978-92-897-0811-1
ISSN 1830-880-5

© European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions is an autonomous body of the European Union, created to assist in the formulation of future policy on social and work-related matters. Further information can be found on the Foundation website at www.eurofound.europa.eu

Printed in Denmark

The paper used in this publication is chlorine-free and comes from managed forests in northern Europe. For every tree felled, at least one new tree is planted.



The policy background



The European Union faces a dilemma in terms of social policy: it needs to increase employment rates to ensure continued economic growth and promote social inclusion. To do this, however, the EU needs to make it easier for people to combine their work and family commitments to facilitate people – women in particular – to enter the labour market. Despite the progress that has been made towards greater gender equality, women still have less paid employment than men, although they perform more work overall when domestic responsibilities are included. As equal opportunities should encourage more equal participation of women in the workforce, so there will be a need to increase the support for formal care, as women will no longer necessarily be available to assume the unpaid role of informal carer. A further effect of the difficulties faced in reconciling the demands of work and family means that families are having fewer children. A combination of falling birth rates and rising life expectancy means that Europe's population is ageing. This growing

population of older people is already placing a strain upon social support systems; to supplement this, families will be shouldering a greater burden of eldercare responsibility. Across Europe as a whole, however, our workplaces, social provision mechanisms and employment policies do not readily permit people to both carry out their work and care for their families. This has been recognised in the Kok report, *Facing the challenge: The Lisbon strategy for growth and employment*, which calls for measures that 'enable people to stay in employment ... by creating structures in which they can best combine their work and non-work responsibilities'.¹

EU policy background

The EU has attempted to address the issue of reconciling work and family life in a number of its policy formulations. In a 2005 Green Paper, the European Commission says 'If Europe is to reverse this demographic decline, families must be further encouraged by public policies that allow women and men to reconcile family life and work'.²

When Member States put family policies in place, experience suggests that the specific needs of families are made more visible – in

¹ *Facing the challenge: The Lisbon strategy for growth and employment* http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/pdf/kok_report_en.pdf

² *Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between generations* COM (2005) 94

particular, around the issues of childcare, parental leave and time off to care for elderly relatives. However, specific family policies are considered to reside under the principle of subsidiarity and hence remain the concern of individual Member States. As a result, family policies are not specifically mentioned in any of the European Treaties, and so no key programmes in terms of family policy were included in, for instance, the Commission's Social Policy Agenda of 2000, nor in the Communication from 2005 on the Social Agenda.

The reconciliation of work and family life has, however, received a boost from the EU's emphasis on equal opportunities and on encouraging more women into the labour market. Provisions in the EU Employment Guidelines (which coordinate Member States' 'National Action Plans for Employment') and the Directives (such as that on maternity protection from 1992, and parental leave from 1996), have supported a change in attitudes and resulted in the introduction of national legislation.



Key findings

- **Long working hours make balancing work and family responsibilities difficult.** While Europeans in the EU15 find it difficult to fulfil their family responsibilities because of the amount of time they spend at work, the problem is even greater in the new Member States and in the candidate countries, where working hours are longer. Furthermore, workers who work longer working weeks are more likely to find work–life balance difficult to reconcile.
- **Clear gender differences are apparent.** While men may work long working weeks in their paid jobs, women work even longer weekly hours as a result of their shouldering the greater part of domestic responsibilities in addition to paid employment.
- **Disadvantaged groups face extra pressures.** Resolving the conflicting demands of paid employment and domestic responsibilities is more difficult for disadvantaged groups, such as lone parents, who have to juggle work and care single-handedly. This struggle can result in lower incomes and poorer working conditions. Similarly, women as a group have lower lifetime incomes and poorer pension prospects; this is due in part to their taking on part-time work in order to reconcile the demands of work and family.
- **Facilitating employees' work–life balance can benefit companies.** Introducing organised systems of flexible working in order to assist employees in reconciling their work–life balance can reduce the amount of sick leave taken and boost productivity and staff retention.
- **Financial and social security considerations hinder greater working time flexibility.** Part-time work and long-term working time accounts are among the measures used to reconcile work and family demands. However, existing tax, social security and pension systems have not adapted to accommodate these forms of work organisation.
- **The organisation of care is a key issue in work–life balance.** As the European population ages, working citizens increasingly have to juggle both childcare and eldercare. Again, women face a greater care burden than do men. Care leave, such as parental leave, has an important contribution to make; however, its limited uptake by men raises other issues of equal opportunities.



Exploring the issues

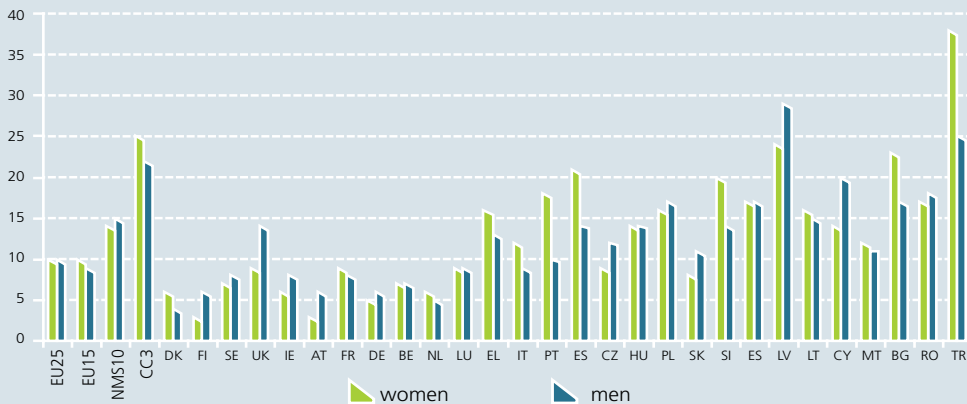


Balancing work and family responsibilities

Many people in Europe have difficulty finding the time to care for their children or for elderly or

dependent relatives. Work–life balance is more problematic in the 10 new Member States (NMS10) that joined the Union in 2004 than in the EU15, because working hours for both paid and unpaid work are longer in these countries.

Figure 1: Difficulties in fulfilling family responsibilities several times a week because of the amount of time spent at work (%)



Source: First European Quality of Life Survey, 2003

Note: CC3 refers to the then candidate countries of Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey.



It becomes even more problematic in Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey.

- ➔ 10% of men and women in the EU25 have difficulty fulfilling their family responsibilities several times each week because of the amount of time they spend at work.
- ➔ In the NMS10, the corresponding figures are 15% for men and 14% for women.
- ➔ In Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, they are higher still (22% of men and 25% of women).

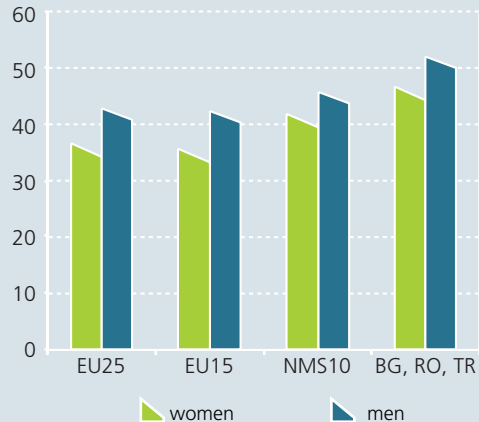
In southern Europe – Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal – a higher proportion of women than of men report having difficulty with work–life balance (17% of women, 11% of men), although fewer women have paid employment in these four countries than in the rest of the EU15. This may be because in southern Europe welfare systems are based much more on care provided within the family, largely by women.

Juggling paid work and housework

Domestic and work responsibilities are not shared evenly between women and men. In 2003, the employment rate for men was 71% as against 55% for women in the then EU25.³ According to the Labour Force Survey of 2003, men across Europe do more paid work than women: men in the EU25 on average work at least 17% more in their main paid job than do women (perhaps because more women than men work part time or are without any paid employment).

Women, however, do most of the unpaid work in the home, such as housework and caring for children. For instance, women in the EU25 do approximately 50% more hours of childcare than men.

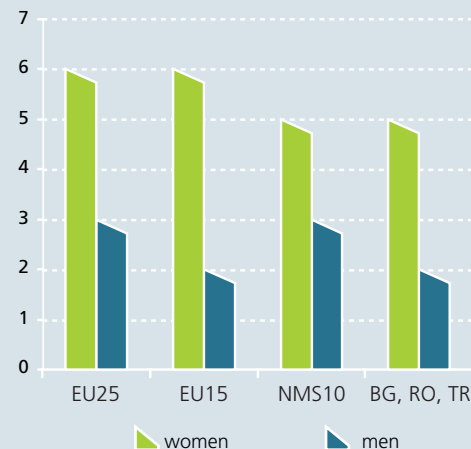
Figure 2: Paid working hours per week in main job



Source: Labour Force Survey, 2003

Across Europe, women do more housework than men. In the EU25, 80% of women do housework every day, as against 40% of men.

Figure 3: Childcare – hours per day (for respondents performing childcare every day)



Source: First European Quality of Life Survey, 2003

Men work longer hours than women in paid employment. However, when both paid and unpaid hours are considered, it becomes clear that women (even those working part time) work longer hours than men who work full time.⁴

³ European Commission, *Employment in Europe 2004: Recent trends and prospects* http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_analysis/eie/eie2004_forew_toc_sum_en.pdf

⁴ Fourth *European Working Conditions Survey*, 2005

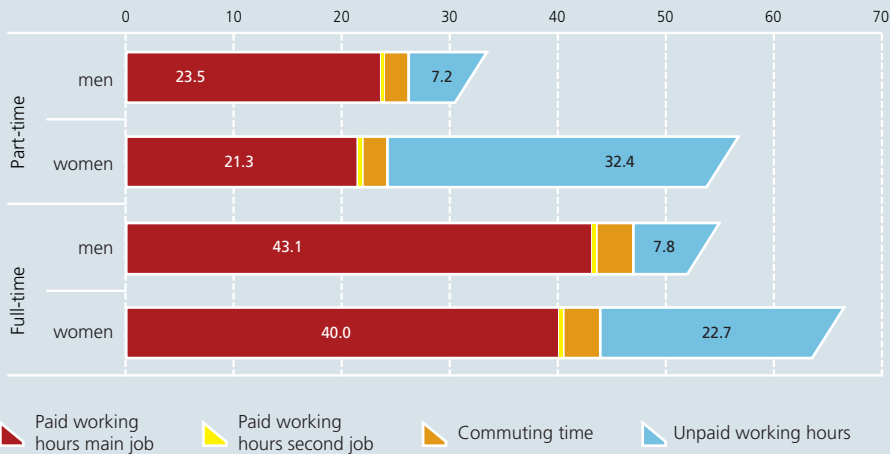
Figure 4: Percentage of men and women who do housework every day



Source: First European Quality of Life Survey, 2003

Note: Data unavailable for Czech Republic, Poland and Spain. The CC3 were the three then candidate countries of Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey in 2003.

Figure 5: Composite weekly working hours indicator, by part-time employment and gender (EU27 only)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005



Benefits of proactive measures

Taking steps to reconcile the often conflicting demands of work and family could bring a number of benefits. Such measures could:

- resolve the dilemma of increasing the labour market participation of women;
- improve the quality of life and the living and working conditions of European citizens;
- help soften the impact of Europe's ageing population upon its social protection provision;
- guard against social exclusion, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute the majority of European

businesses, are usually reluctant to introduce work–life balance measures, perceiving them to be too expensive and difficult to implement on a small scale. However, it would appear that – at least for larger companies – such measures can have beneficial financial effects: research indicates that companies that invest in work–life balance schemes can save as much as €16 for every €1 invested. In the UK, Xerox claims to have saved £1 million between 1999–2004 by introducing flexible working time and parental leave initiatives. Stress-related sick leave is estimated to cost UK businesses over £7 million each week; work–life balance measures can substantially reduce sickness absenteeism, as well as increasing productivity and staff retention rates.⁵

Further information

The reports upon which this Foundation Findings is based are available through the Foundation's website.

Fourth European Working Conditions Survey

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0698.htm>

Working-time preferences and work–life balance in the EU: Some policy considerations for enhancing the quality of life

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0342.htm>

Working time options over the life course: New work patterns and company strategies

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef05160.htm>

Working time and work–life balance in European companies – Establishment Survey on Working Time 2004–2005

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0627.htm>

Working time options over the life course: New work patterns and company strategies

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef05160.htm>

Employment developments in childcare services for school-age children

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0632.htm>

Working time options over the life course: Changing social security structures

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef05101.htm>

Employment in social care in Europe

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef05125.htm>

Family-related leave and industrial relations

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2004/03/study/tn0403101s.html>

First European Quality of Life Survey: Families, work and social networks

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0592.htm>

A new organisation of time over working life

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0336.htm>

⁵ From the Foundation Forum 2004 web pages
<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/events/2004/forum2004/>



Policy pointers



Reduction of working time

- **Explore the benefits and costs of reducing the 48 hours per week limit of the Working Time Directive**

Employment policy could usefully shorten the working week, including lowering the 48 hour per week limit of the Working Time Directive.⁶ Foundation research has highlighted the impact of long hours upon workers: for instance, the Foundation's fourth *European Working Conditions Survey* of 2005 found that more than 44% of those working more than 48 hours a week were unhappy with their work–life balance. Furthermore, in the Foundation's *Establishment Survey on Working Time*, 19% of employee representatives (the second-largest group) said that a reduction in the working week was, in their opinion, the most important measure that could be undertaken to further improve the work–life balance of employees. And, as was noted earlier, work–life balance is more problematic in the NMS than in the EU15,

in part at least because working hours for both paid and unpaid work are longer in these countries.

Part-time work

- **Encourage greater uptake of part-time work among men and those in higher-ranking positions**
- **Enable switching between part-time and full-time work**
- **Explore social security provisions that make part-time work more feasible in the longer term**

The European Working Conditions Survey found that 85% of those working less than 30 hours per week were satisfied with their work–life balance. Furthermore, part-time workers and those working less than 35 hours a week reported the lowest levels of both physical and psychological health problems.

Part-time work is one strategy frequently used by workers who wish to better balance their work and family life; according to the

⁶ *Working-time preferences and work–life balance in the EU: Some policy considerations for enhancing the quality of life*



Establishment Survey on Working Time, the most frequently mentioned category of employees who work part-time are mothers. In order to accommodate better work–life balance, part-time work should be facilitated more widely and at all levels of organisations. This requires raising the quality and profile of part-time jobs. Part-time work should be promoted in more, higher-level occupations.⁷

However, the present concentration of part-time work in lower-status occupations and in largely female sectors means that women will tend to go on bearing the greater burden of juggling work and family (as the *European Quality of Life Survey* indicates they already do), hindering the EU's agenda of equal opportunities. Being able to move temporarily into part-time work, when responsibilities at home are particularly pressing, would assist many workers. Currently, the transition between full-time and part-time status is difficult for many workers;⁸ greater flexibility on the part of workplaces in facilitating such temporary transitions would be beneficial. It could also encourage more men to avail of part-time work and, potentially, make a greater contribution to domestic responsibilities.⁹ This could also help boost men's subjective satisfaction with their own work–life balance. Moreover, in the Netherlands, various forms of part-time work have been used to promote an unusually fast transition to paid labour among women.¹⁰

If, however, part-time work is to be facilitated, this then raises questions in terms of social protection and pension provision: in some countries, those with short working hours or earning an income below a certain threshold have no (or only limited) access to social security. Such issues need to be addressed in tandem with measures to make work organisation more family friendly.

Childcare

- **Establish a cross-European policy for a baseline of high-quality, affordable, flexible childcare**
- **Increase provision of childcare for school-age children**
- **Integrate childcare provision into employment policy**

The third *European Working Conditions Survey* of 2000 found that one of the factors that working parents found most problematic was a lack of childcare facilities.

Currently, availability and cost of childcare differ greatly between Member States; moreover, increasing flexibility of parents' working hours calls for a corresponding flexibility in childcare provision, e.g. extended opening hours, weekend opening and holiday care.¹¹ A pan-European policy of facilitating the provision of childcare that is affordable, sufficiently flexible and of high quality would be of great benefit to European citizens in reconciling the demands of home and work. Such a policy should also recognise the need for childcare that extends to older children: while European employment initiatives such as the Barcelona targets aim to increase childcare provision for younger children, there is no specific childcare policy in place for children of school age.¹²

Another key aspect in improving childcare provision is to integrate childcare policy into a broader range of employment policies around the reconciliation of work and family life – such

⁷ For instance, Daimler Chrysler in Germany promotes part-time work in leading positions in the company. See also *Working time options over the life course: New work patterns and company strategies*

⁸ *Working time and work–life balance in European companies – Establishment Survey on Working Time 2004–2005*

⁹ Berlinwasser, another German company, has a 'full-time work light' scheme – a 10% reduction in working time – with a guaranteed option of returning to full-time work; many male employees avail of this. See also *Working time options over the life course: New work patterns and company strategies*

¹⁰ *A new organisation of time over working life*

¹¹ *Employment developments in childcare services for school-age children*

¹² *ibid*

as parental leave and flexible working patterns.¹³ However, few EU governments have yet successfully integrated policies in this way.

Eldercare

- **Establish provisions for paid eldercare leave on analogous basis to parental leave**
- **Expand the supply of skilled care personnel**

The Kok report recognises the importance of eldercare, saying ‘... a better reconciliation of family and working life also demands the provision of availability, affordability and good quality childcare and eldercare’.¹⁴

The ageing of the European population means that care for elderly relatives is becoming of increasing concern to the European workforce, and may come to be as pressing an issue as caring for children. At the moment, however, no provisions at EU level exist to facilitate those in employment who are caring for elderly relatives; and at the national level, no European countries (with the exception of Sweden and the Netherlands) have any provision for eldercare leave.¹⁵

While care leave should be facilitated, the supply of skilled personnel who can both supplement and substitute for family-based care needs to be expanded. Foundation research has looked at initiatives across Europe to promote labour supply in the care sector: one approach that would appear to be useful is to raise the profile and conditions of the sector, as well as better enabling migrant workers to work in the area. A further possibility is to give tax deductions to private households to encourage

them to provide paid employment to care assistants and care workers. Such schemes, as practised in Finland, have resulted in job creation while better enabling workers to fulfil their family responsibilities.¹⁶

Maternity and parental leave

- **Provide payment and ‘non-transferable’ leave for both partners to encourage greater take-up of parental leave provisions, particularly among men**
- **Guarantee that parents returning from maternity or parental leave will be able to return to their same position**
- **Extend legal rights for parental and maternity leave to workers holding atypical labour contracts**

Parental leave has the potential to ease gender inequality by enabling both men and women to look after children. However, it may also interrupt a worker’s career: if it is primarily women who avail of parental leave, this may in fact reinforce gender inequality.¹⁷ A further problem with parental leave, as currently practised, is that it varies in length and flexibility and in payment provided – in a number of Member States it is unpaid, while where it is paid, the percentage of salary paid varies, and many parents are financially unable to avail of unpaid leave.

Taking leave can be perceived as a career setback for working parents; guaranteeing a return to one’s former position would encourage more parents to take their leave provision. In Ireland, for instance, there is more take-up of parental leave in the public sector, where return-to-work guarantees are stronger.¹⁸

With increasing flexibility and casualisation, increasing numbers of workers now fall outside traditional leave arrangements; extension of legal rights to atypical contracts would be both more fair and would possibly remove some of the disincentives that such work arrangements

¹³ *Employment developments in childcare services for school age children*

¹⁴ *Facing the challenge: The Lisbon strategy for growth and employment*
http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/pdf/kok_report_en.pdf

¹⁵ *Working time options over the life course: Changing social security structures*

¹⁶ *Employment in social care in Europe*

¹⁷ *Family-related leave and industrial relations*

¹⁸ *ibid*



can currently pose. Maternity and parental leave are in some form available to regular wage earners in most Member States. But with increasing labour market deregulation and growing numbers of atypical labour contracts, it may be time now to develop new forms of protection that reflect the reality of the changing labour market.¹⁹

Experience in Sweden and Norway in take-up of parental leave indicates that reserving a portion of leave for each parent is a key incentive in encouraging men to take it.²⁰ More fathers avail of parental leave when the payment provided rises to near their normal salary level, and where there is a specific quota of days that can't be transferred to the mother.²¹

However, on average, male employees have availed of parental leave in only 30% of establishments across 21 European countries. The figures vary widely – in 69% of Swedish establishments male employees have taken parental leave; however, the corresponding figure for Cyprus is only 2%.²²

If parental leave is paid, and paid up to a sum close to the salary, men are more likely to avail of it. They are also more likely to take parental leave when their portion is not transferable. As women generally earn less than men, a household suffers a smaller income drop if women take parental leave.

Life-course perspectives

- **Examine schemes to make working time accounts portable between jobs and companies**
- **Facilitate workers in saving income to finance time off later in career**
- **As the retirement age is revised upwards, so prolonging working life, more paid leave could be made available during the 'stress' phase of life**

Working time accounts enable employees to work longer hours than normal and 'bank' the extra hours in an individual working time account. In the *Establishment Survey of Working Time*, 26% of employee representatives listed the introduction or extension of annualised working hours (and flexible working time schemes) as the most important measure that could be introduced to further improve the work–life balance of employees in their establishment. However, extended working time accounts, which would allow employees to take all their free time entitlements together to create a longer period of leave, are rare, existing in only 13% of companies.²³ This is despite the fact that 68% of managers say that flexible working hours were introduced to 'enable employees to better combine work and family or personal life'. It would appear that, for a majority of companies, the gap between theory and practice is still wide. Such schemes, despite their potential for assisting employees in finding a better work–life balance, have a core problem – what to do with accumulated hours if the worker moves job or country. Given that the EU wishes to promote greater geographical and labour mobility, it would be worthwhile to examine schemes that permit workers to transfer their hours to other positions, in other countries.

¹⁹ *First European Quality of Life Survey: Families, work and social networks*

²¹ *Family-related leave and industrial relations*

²² Bruning, G. and Plantega, J. 'Parental leave and equal opportunities: Experience in eight European countries', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 9 (3), 1999, cited in *First European Quality of Life Survey: Families, work and social networks*.

²³ *Working time and work–life balance in European companies – Establishment Survey on Working Time 2004–2005*

²⁴ *ibid*

Arrangements have been proposed at national levels in some countries – the Netherlands – for instance, to institute tax arrangements that enable workers to bank income specifically to finance time off later in their career; such time off could be used for care responsibilities. The application and feasibility of this should be further explored. (The advantage of such a scheme is that it goes some way to addressing the question of how to finance time spent out of paid employment.)

As the retirement age is revised upwards, so prolonging working life, policymakers should ensure that – in exchange – more paid leave be made available during the so-called ‘rush hour of life’.²⁴ The possibility of such a ‘quid pro quo’ has been suggested by, among others, Odile Quintin, former Director General for Employment and Social Policy: ‘... the way in which periods of work, leisure, learning and caring are distributed over the life cycle should be rethought by policymakers. People should have some freedom, for instance, to take longer holidays in exchange for later retirement.’²⁵

Flexible working time

• Facilitate flexibility more generally

Flexible working hours should be extended across more levels of more organisations. Flexible working hours have met with a positive response, according to Foundation research: some 61% of managers state that higher job satisfaction results from the introduction of flexible working time arrangements. Lower absenteeism (27%) and a reduction in paid overtime (22%) are other positive effects mentioned by managers.²⁶

²⁴ *A new organisation of time over working life*

²⁵ Quintin, O., Opening speech at the conference ‘A new architecture for social protection in Europe’, organised by the Belgian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs Public Health and the Environment with the support of the European Commission, Leuven, 19–20 October 2001.

²⁶ *Working time and work-life balance in European companies – Establishment Survey on Working Time 2004–2005*

'For many people the working day doesn't finish when they get home from their paid employment: they start a second working day, including housework, educating their children and caring for dependent relatives and the elderly. When formulating strategies, this additional time has to be taken into account, as does the fact that this double workload is rarely distributed between men and women.'

**Bernhard Jansen, former Director, DG Employment,
Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, European Commission**

This Foundation Findings is dedicated to the memory of
Henrik Litske, 1958–2007,
Research Manager at the Foundation.

Foundation Findings provide pertinent background information and policy pointers for all actors and interested parties engaged in the current European debate on the future of social policy. The contents are based on Foundation research and reflect its autonomous and tripartite structure.



**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
postmaster@eurofound.europa.eu
www.eurofound.europa.eu

ISSN 1830-880-5

ISBN 978-92-897-0811-1



9 789289 708111