

Women and men – growing old working in an unequal world

European policies have steadily whittled down the idea of active aging to an aim of working longer. But exhortations to delay retirement disregard the unequal abilities of older workers. Specifically, they obscure the inequalities between women and men derived not only from segregation in employment but also the unequal division of daily tasks.

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Working for longer is a more pronounced trend among women. Many women cannot financially afford to stop work earlier.

Image: © Belga



Employees aged 50-64 made up 26% of the entire employed workforce in the European Union (EU) in 2013. In that age group, women are more concentrated in a handful of occupations: 15% in clerical support jobs, 12% in domestic cleaning and home helpers, 11% in teaching and 11% non-health associate professionals – four occupational categories between them accounting for half of all older women workers. The picture differs for same-aged men: 21% in the manual industry, craft and building trades, 10% vehicle or mobile plant drivers, 9% executives or managers (versus 4% of women). These few figures exemplify the segregation between female and male jobs which is a key factor in the gender differentiation of working conditions¹.

Part-time working is on average more common among the over-50s than among younger age groups, accounting in 2013 for 9% of male and 34% of female older workers in the European Union. Female part-time is most widespread and most widely differentiated between countries. Seven countries – the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom and Ireland in decreasing order – have more than 45% of women aged 50 and over working part-time. Only France, Sweden and Denmark are close to the European average, all others are well below. In some countries, the proportion of both men and women part-time workers rises sharply among the over-50s, suggesting that part-time work is a way of reducing working time in the countdown to retirement.

Since the guidelines laid down by the European Commission at the 2001 Stockholm Summit, the employment rate of the 55-64 population has become the flagship policy

indicator for older worker retention. The goal was to raise it to 50% by 2010, but despite a significant increase in the male (from 47% to 56%) and especially female (from 28% to 42%) employment rates from 2001 to 2012, it has been delivered only by seven countries. The rise in the employment rate of 55-64 year olds is not down to older worker retention policies alone, but also results from two other factors related to how the labour market works: the general increase in the female participation rate and gradual raising of women's pension age to equal that of men, and rising educational levels: better educational attainments equate to a higher employment rate.

However, the employment rate tells us nothing about the causes of non-employment, of which there may be many among older workers: registered unemployment, work incapacity or sickness, retirement, being out of the labour market for family or caring responsibilities, and many other reasons besides. On average, the wage employment rate among the population aged 50-59 in the EU in 2012 was 59% for men and 55% for women, and the self-employment rate 18% for men versus 9% for women. Self-employment is therefore widening the gender gap in employment rates. There is relatively little gender difference in the share of unemployed, work incapacitated or retired persons – 6%, 7% and 6% of 50-59 year-olds respectively. By contrast, the share of non-work due to family or caring responsibilities is much higher among women than men (8% against 1%); likewise the "other reasons" (9% versus 3%). An examination of the same data at national level reveals significant between-country differences. Many countries with a low proportion of retirees in

the 50-59 age group may be seen to combine a proportionately high work incapacitated population with a proportionately high unemployed population, and vice-versa, as if the two were interconnected. The wide range of national institutional arrangements enabling an early labour market exit is the key explanatory factor of these differences.

One logical consequence of the rising older worker employment rate is a lengthening average duration of working life, measured by an indicator devised by Eurostat. In 2012, the average length of men's working life (37.6 years) was significantly longer than women's (32.2 years) in all European Union

¹ Smith M., Piasna A., Burchell B. *et al.* (2013) Women, men and working conditions in Europe, 5th European Working Conditions Survey, Dublin, Eurofound.

Measures proposed to increase the older worker employment rate often disadvantage women.

countries apart from the Baltic countries, but with wide between-country variations: for example, women's average working-life length is longest in Sweden (39.3 years) and shortest in Italy (25.4 years). From 2001 to 2012, the average duration of working life increased for both sexes but much more for women than for men: 2.9 years for women against 1.3 years for men on an EU-wide basis. The between-country variations are not explained by gender parity or differences in the legal retirement age, but by other factors related to men and women's differential careers and life courses.

A lack of financial security

Job insecurity and money concerns are big shapers of career pathways into retirement. According to the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) 2010², 16% of men and 15% of women aged 50 and over fear losing their jobs in the short term and nearly two-thirds of women and men (64%) think it would be difficult to find another similar job were they to lose their current one.

Job insecurity is compounded by income insecurity. Here, women and men's situations differ as they age. As women get older, they are more likely to become the main breadwinner: 57% of working women aged 60-plus are the main household income contributor versus 31% of 40-year-olds. The profiles of men and women wage-earner households diverge after the age of 50. So, most over-50 males have working spouses or partners: from 72% for the 50-54 age group to 60% for the 60-64 age group. The proportion of male one-person households is stable at around 9% in the 50-64 age group. The share of over-50-year-olds with an employed spouse falls more sharply among employed women than men: from 83% in the 50-54 age group to 45% between 60 and 64 years of age. Once into their 60s, 47% of working women have a retired spouse or partner compared to 16% of similarly-situated men. Additionally, more than one in four working women aged 60 to 64 (28%) is in a one-person household. The financial circumstances of unattached working women aged 50 and over appear more critical than that of unattached men: 41% report difficulties in making ends meet compared to 31% of men. This at-a-glance view of the profiles of households nearing retirement reveals

gender-differential situations which may necessitate working longer.

Other surveys bring evidence that financial pressures may influence the rise in older women's employment. Sociologists Magdalena Rosende and Céline Schoeni³ show from the Swiss example how variability in the second half of careers and "pathways" into retirement originates in the gender division of labour that shapes life courses. The measures mooted to raise the older worker employment rate often disadvantage women; ostensibly egalitarian, they take no account of past gender inequalities in the first halves of careers.

Additionally, second and third pillar pension schemes disadvantage women who have had discontinuous careers and/or worked mainly part-time. This results in a wide gender gap between those (often women) who have to work into old age to make up for a fragmented or late-starting career and those (usually men) who can make an early and relatively well-off exit. This narrows down many of women's choices⁴.

EU's "anti-ageing" policy: a foreseeable failure

The EU has not had a health and safety at work strategy since 2012. A grandly titled "strategic framework"* document adopted in June 2014 by the European Commission (see editorial p. 5) had three priorities, one specifically being ageing at work.

It offers a bankrupt analysis, treats ageing as a purely demographic fact, glossing over the issue of social inequalities and how working conditions play into the worsening health that leaves people old before their time and unable to keep working up to legal pension age. It is silent on the obvious differences between men and women, manual and non-manual workers, or the rung on which workers stand on the job ladder. It casts aside the fact that ageing is a cumulative process in that workers end up "paying" for the build-up of stresses and strains throughout working life. This calls for vital improvements to the working and employment

2. Fifth European Working Conditions Survey – 2010, Eurofound. Downloadable from <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu>.

3. Rosende M., Schoeni C. (2012) Seconde partie de carrière, régime de retraite et inégalités de sexe : le cas suisse, *Revue française des affaires sociales*, 2-3, 130-147.

4. Duberley G., Carmichael F., Szmigin I. (2014) Exploring women's retirement: continuity, context and career transition, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 21 (1). Molinié A.-F. (2012) Facette de la pénibilité, prisme du genre : une analyse de l'enquête santé et vie professionnelle après 50 ans, in Molinié A.-F., Gadart C., Puey V. (dir.), *La vie professionnelle. Âge, expérience et santé à l'épreuve des conditions de travail*, Paris, Octarès, 314-341.

conditions of all workers from the very start of working life, without which specific adjustments for older workers or rehabilitation for sick workers will be next to useless.

The policy pointers read like unadulterated management-speak. Not one concrete policy objective is cited; it is all about setting up a network of experts, spreading information around and promoting good practices. Not only is it a far cry from the aim of improving working conditions mainly through binding legislation as required by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, but the Barroso Commission has actually gone the other way to call for a "simplification" of the existing rules.

The question now is whether the new Commission and Parliament will steer clear of a policy that aims so low.

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* European Commission (2014) Communication on an EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2014-2020, COM(2014) 332 final, 6 June 2014.

Arduous work has different impacts

Some health problems grow more common with age. Backache and upper limb musculo-skeletal disorders affect more than one in two workers of both sexes from age 50 onwards. With age, a feeling of overall fatigue affects a steadily rising proportion of women, peaking between 45 and 49 years of age (45%), while for men, the peak is reached between ages 50 and 54 (42%). There is a slightly higher frequency of sleep disorders among women than men, increasing as they get older. The gender gap widens from the 40s until the early 60s. More than one in four women in their 50s complains of sleep disorders. Women's double workload (paid work and housework) is a key explanatory factor in feelings of fatigue and sleep disorders.

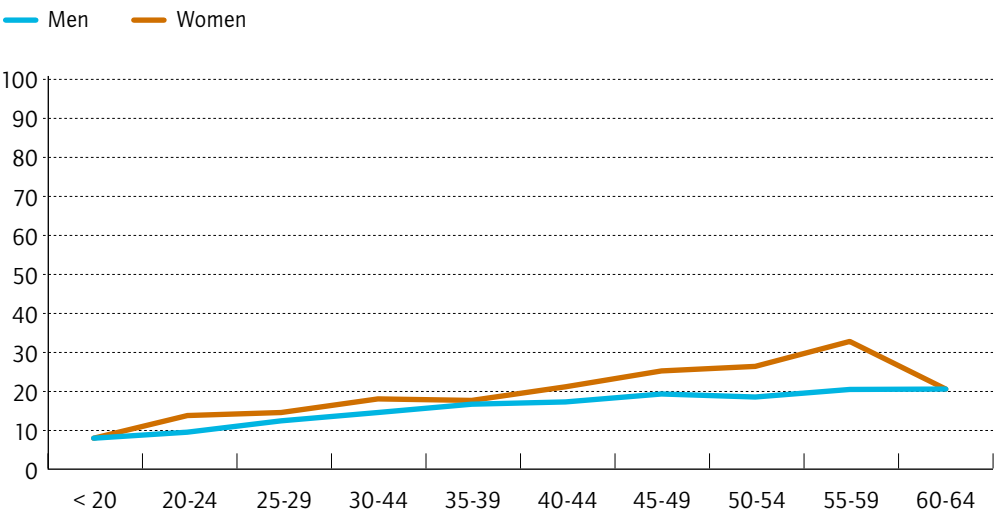
While the ability to handle stress declines with age, 25% of male and 28% of female employees aged 50 and over report being stressed through their work. The differences between sexes can vary widely with occupational category. More women than men professionals, managers and supervisors, and to a degree, associate professionals, for instance, are exposed to stress.

Like stress, high emotional demands can also make work arduous. Such "emotional work" is typical of person-facing activities (patients, students, users, etc.) or specific situations that engage the employee's emotions (dealing with annoyed customers, putting on a polite face, dealing with pain, etc.). This kind of "emotional work" is more common in female jobs, which is a logical consequence of gender segregation in the caring occupations.

The 2010 European Working Conditions Survey found that 25% of female and 30% of male employees aged 50 to 59 feel that their work affects their health negatively, with line of work being a key explanatory factor. In men, Among men, semi-skilled manual workers and technicians see themselves as at highest risk, whereas more surprisingly, perceived negative effects on women's health are higher among professionals (intellectual professions, managers, executives). The worst work situations for both sexes are painful or tiring positions, followed by inconvenient working hours.

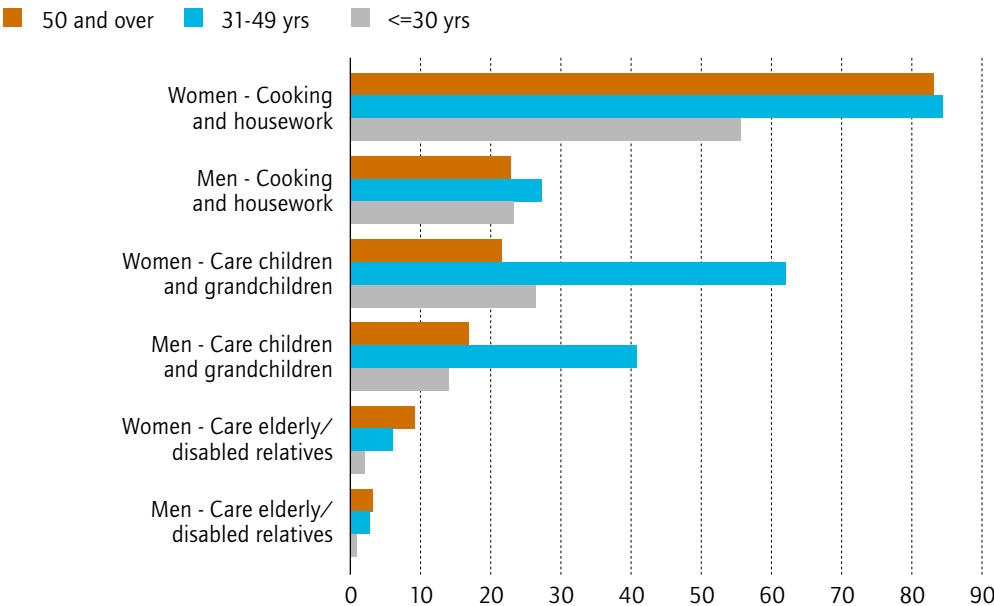
These findings need to be set against other research findings which emphasise that that men and women are never exposed in the same way to the hazards of work. Men

Figure 1 Sleep disorders, insomnia, by sex and age group (% of employees, EU27)



Source: EWCS 2010

Figure 2 Employees reporting spending more than an hour every day on domestic or caring duties, by sex and age group (% of employees, EU27)

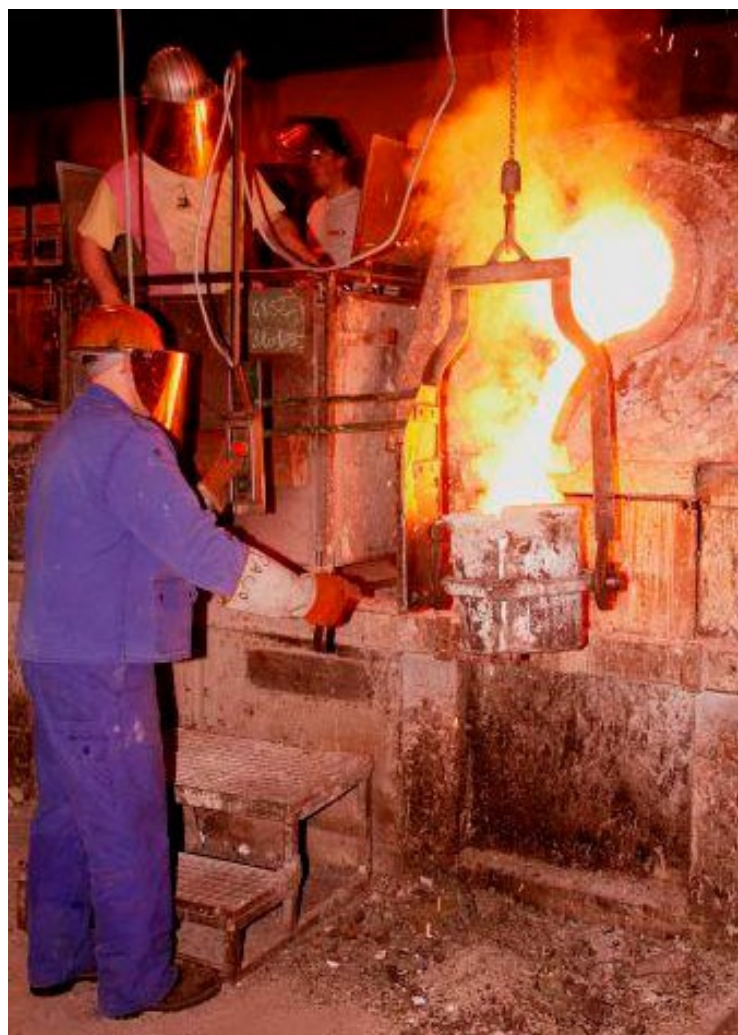


Source: EWCS 2010

are more often concerned by particular more readily identifiable, measurable and "recognized" (through bonuses or early retirement opportunities, for example) working conditions like vibration, noise, heat, cold, exposure to toxins, radiation, heavy loads and night work, while women are more often exposed to repetitive gestures, inability to break off work, dependence on other people's work and lack of job discretion. Also, the physical demands of women's work are not always characterised in the same terms as men's. The similarity of some types of arduous work to domestic labour makes it harder for older women workers to call what they do "physically demanding work".

Our Western societies continue to regard only male-dominated occupations as hard work.

Image: © Isopix



The impact of unpaid work

The combined burden of paid and unpaid work impacts differently on men's and women's life courses and health. Staying working longer is not a feasible prospect unless the short and long term effects of this double workload are factored in.

Housework and caring remain largely women's responsibilities at all ages. The burden lightens from age 50 but still concerns 22% of women versus 17% of men. Caring for elderly parents and/or disabled relatives falls to rising proportions in this age group, and is the lot of 9% of working women and 3% of working men.

Work/life balance is one of various factors that will influence the decision to keep working or retire. The EWCS 2010 found a high correlation between the proportion of employees aged 50 and over who do not think they will be able to still do their current job when they reach 60 and how well their working time "fits" with their private life. Where working hours are least well-suited, 58% of women and 48% of men aged 50-59 reported that they did not think they would be able to keep doing their current job at the age of 60. Also according to the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS, 2011), 26% of women and 20% of men aged 50 and over reported that work-related fatigue stops them doing household chores.

The combined and reciprocal effects of work and working conditions and the stresses of juggling work and private life undermine women's health and, notwithstanding their still greater longevity, reduce their healthy life expectancy over the long term⁵.

The issue of working conditions cannot be divorced from the institutional conditions of organized career wind-down.

Gender should be seen as central to the analysis of working conditions and policy-making to improve them. The issue of working conditions cannot be divorced from the institutional conditions for organized career wind-downs, which are often specific to national contexts that are strongly influenced by European guidelines. Allowance must be made for gender-differential career and non-career paths, and the inequalities and injustices in this area redressed. ●

This article is based on a working paper published by the European Trade Union Institute in 2012. Vendramin P. and G. Valenduc (2012) Occupations and ageing at work. An analysis of the findings of the fifth European Working Conditions Survey, Working Paper 2012.09, Brussels, ETUI. Downloadable free of charge from: www.etui.org > Publications > Working Papers

5. Teiger C., Vouillot F.
(2013) Tenir au travail,
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29, 23-30.

Testimony

'Damaged beyond repair'

In Europe, increasing life expectancy and the future pappy-boom are everyone's worst fears. How will we pay all the pensions in coming decades? According to employers, if workers live longer, they will naturally work longer. This apparent good sense fails to take account of the demanding nature of certain trades in which workers, worn out by their labours, cannot even reach retirement. This can be illustrated by the case of a foundry worker.

Statement taken by
Denis Grégoire, ETUI

He's 60 years old but sometimes feels like he's 20 years older. 'I can't lift a bottle of water with my left arm', he confides as we are discussing the past, sat at a kitchen table in a house in Rocroi, in the French Ardennes. For Guy Durbecq, a foundry worker who started work at the age of 14 and who for 30 years got up at midnight to start his shift at 1.30 a.m., finding himself in this weakened state is hard to take.

'After the operation, my arm was in a cast for three months. I couldn't do anything on my own and I wasn't allowed to drive. The surgeon said to me: "Your body is worn out – it's damaged beyond repair." That was hard to take. But I had to accept it.'

His health problems are in fact long-standing – he has lived with a herniated disc for 20 years – but, up to the end of the 2000s, he refused to follow his doctor's recommendation 'to take it easy' because he was riddled with tendonitis. 'I was not the type of guy to just stop, so I kept going and kept going, but

I was getting increasingly worse', he recalls. Injections – up to eight a month – helped at the start, but quickly lost their effectiveness. His body then literally failed. 'The surgeon told me that, in my left arm, my tendon had basically disappeared, but that he could save what was left in my right arm if I had an operation. Since then I have suffered less and the pain no longer stops me sleeping, but I have to take 17 different drugs every day', he says, brandishing a small, transparent, yellow plastic box full of tablets.

Foundries were a big part of his life: his father spent all his working life at Le Croissant foundry – aged 82, silicosis is eating away his lungs – and made his son start work there when he was barely into his teens. 'At the time, in Rocroi, if school wasn't for you, you were sent to the foundry.' In the 1960s, this town, well-known for its star-shaped fortifications designed by Vauban, had seven foundries, each employing around 100 workers.

'I started at the age of 14 as a hand moulder, which involved making the moulds into which molten metal was poured to make parts. At the time, there were no overhead cranes and I had to carry the moulds myself', he remembers. He stayed in that job for 10 years.

It was hard work, which was also badly paid. So he decided to cross the Belgian border to Couvin, some 10 kilometres away, where wages were higher than in Rocroi. There he was employed as a ladle pourer in the foundry of a manufacturer of wood and coal burning stoves. The ladle was in fact a kind of saucepan filled with 50 kg of hot metal which had to be poured into moulds to make the parts. 'Four of us could pour between 50 and 60 tonnes per eight-hour shift with those ladles. As we were paid by the casting, the less in each casting, the more you earned. The worst part was the summer when the heat smacked you in the face.'

He 'ladled' for 15 years, after which he was put in charge of maintaining the cupola furnace, a vertical oven in the shape of a cylinder around 10 metres high, in which the materials to be melted came into direct contact with the coke used as fuel.

This was also hard work: 'Once a week, we had to clean the cupola furnace. We had to remove all the red coke, firstly using hooks, and then with a pick hammer. The bottom and walls of the cupola then had to be scrubbed clean. After that, we had to recoat the cupola: two of us would empty 50 kg bags of rammed earth into a machine, which was connected to a pipe operated by a colleague inside the cupola, who had to recoat the walls with refractory material. The operation took three to four hours and was done at night because the cupola had to be operational by the following morning at 5 a.m.'

When he was not maintaining the cupola furnace, Guy Durbecq operated a bulldozer and loaded 25 tonnes of coke and limestone per day into the caster. 'I was constantly making the same movements and so I started to develop tendonitis.'

As in Rocroi, where there are only two remaining foundries, the number of foundries in Couvin is also shrinking. The stove manufacturer, renowned for the quality, and the price, of its products, was declared bankrupt last February. Guy Durbecq received his redundancy letter, together with around a hundred of his colleagues, but without any severance pay for the time being, despite his 30 years of labour. He remains in contact with Gilles Woirin, the trade union representative – 'a guy who has always defended us – who is currently fighting through the courts to get them something. It is some consolation for Guy, unlike many workers, that his health problems have been recognised as an occupational disease. How could it have been otherwise?