9

Gender Differences in Quality of Life

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1 Introduction

Despite decades of policy promoting emancipation, gender differences still constitute a major social problem in Europe. In terms of social inequality and quality of life, women run a higher risk than men of being among the disadvantaged groups (Padavic and Reskin, 2002; EC, 2008). Comparable data from the UNECE's Gender Statistics Database show that women in each of the eight countries in this research project have a smaller chance of being economically active and economically independent than men; they are also at a higher risk of unemployment, make less money when they do have jobs, are more often among the 'working poor' and have less institutional power than men in the workplace. Single mothers run a particularly high risk of poverty (Ypei, 2009). Moreover, due in part to persistent financial hardship, they also run a higher risk of depression (Brown and Moran, 1997), a dramatic expression of a lack of quality of life.

Nowadays, it is quite common to analyse both objective and subjective indicators of the quality of work and to do so within the larger context of the quality of life (e.g. Gambles et al., 2006). Although women might lag behind men in terms of their objective labour market situation, that may not be the case when considering their subjective feelings about the quality of work and the broader context of the quality of life. With respect to quality of work, work engagement appears to be closest to what men and women perceive as a good quality of work (Bryce and Haworth, 2001). Chapter 2 addressed the importance of work engagement. The theoretical framework presented there, which represents a guideline for the empirical chapters, will form the basis of this chapter as well. Here, however, we also add the life course perspective,

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arguing that the role of work is different over the life course of men and women, with important implications for their quality of life. For instance, research based on the concept of social production functions has shown that during the stage of life when men start building their careers, women take a different route towards social approval: raising a family and being a good mother (Sanders et al., 1991). Whereas men seeking social approval are forced to put all their eggs into one basket (their career), women can – if they want to or if they are less successful in the labour market – also opt for 'dedicated motherhood' for fulfilment and social recognition. The same is true during the later stages of the life course, when it is considered quite natural for women to participate in voluntary work and care for the elderly, while men primarily have to provide the household's income and future pension savings.

As in the empirical chapters, we make use of data collected on employees working in 32 service sector organizations in eight European countries. We start by describing the objective labour market situation of these employees and how they, both men and women, feel about the quality of work and life in the eight countries under study. We then consider the role of the life course in describing and explaining men's and women's quality of work and life. Because their differing labour market situations and roles in unpaid, voluntary and care work evidently affect the quality of life of women and men differently during the various stages of the life course, we also present data on unpaid working hours.

2 Working hours and work arrangements

Various researchers have attempted to explain why women have a less profitable labour market position than men. Their explanations include: the force of patriarchy (Reskin, 1988); differences in human capital (Becker, 1991); household responsibilities and domestic decision-making (Hochschild, 1989); and institutional and individual discrimination built into the conceptualization of the ideal worker in a global capitalist environment (Acker, 1990). They have devoted considerable attention to policies designed to strengthen women's labour market and income position, both at the national (Sainsbury, 1994) and the supranational level (Mósesdóttir et al., 2006), for example anti-discrimination legislation intended to improve women's education and offering facilities to help parents (mostly women) reconcile work and family life (Den Dulk, 2001). While companies have started to offer employees options that make raising a family more compatible with making a living, researchers have argued that this may push women into marginal

positions in the labour market. Employers may consider that women – who in their perception represent additional costs because they require so many special facilities and arrangements – are more expensive than men, who 'just do their job'. Consequently, employers may decide not to hire women at all, or to hire women at lower wages only. Economists label this phenomenon 'risk selection' or 'statistical discrimination' (Phelps, 1972). In addition, women's growing participation in the labour market may exacerbate global inequalities among women: middle-class women working in core countries are now able to hire domestic workers from peripheral countries and produce a female army of underpaid, vulnerable, and occasionally, even illegal labourers (Lan, 2006).

In the same vein, Hochschild (1997) calls attention to the problem of the 'Time Bind': an increase in the amount of time spent at work and a decrease in the amount of time devoted to family and community-related activities. However, even though we have seen a spectacular rise in women's labour market participation rates in recent decades, we have not witnessed a similar increase in men's participation in unpaid labour. In other words, women are copying men's behaviour in paid labour or – more broadly – in the public domain, but they are also facing the less agreeable consequences of this behaviour, such as work-related and stress-related diseases and time wasted in traffic jams. On top of that, they still take or are forced to take primary responsibility for childcare and household chores. As a consequence, many women carry a double burden nowadays. What they have gained by accessing the world of paid labour has not been matched by a reduction in unpaid work and care.

Table 9.1 shows the basic distribution of men and women across the economic sectors covered in this project. We see the highest proportion of women in retail and the lowest in IT/telecommunications. The percentages, however, vary depending on what segment of the working population actually participated in the different countries and sectors (e.g. whether doctors or nurses were more likely to fill out the survey in the hospitals we visited). As our surveys were not strictly representative in statistical terms, we must be circumspect in interpreting their outcomes.

A number of factors influence how work impacts on the overall quality of life, but for most people, working hours and how they are distributed are certainly a key issue (Crompton, 2006; Scott et al., 2008). The ability to regulate one's working hours may be one way of achieving a comfortable balance between work and non-work responsibilities. In this section, we therefore explore gender differences in the length of time people work, both in the paid labour market and at home, as well

Table 9.1 Percentage of women in each country and in each company

	Retail	IT/telecom	Hospital	Bank/ insurance	Total women	Total *N*
Bulgaria	69%	68%	83%	82%	579	767
Finland	91%	69%	89%	83%	710	906
Germany	98%	38%	79%	54%	721	1201
Hungary	54%	32%	83%	51%	418	860
The Netherlands	93%	36%	83%	42%	691	1012
Portugal	51%	49%	55%	71%	735	1363
Sweden	77%	27%	82%	77%	410	650
The UK	57%	62%	46%	71%	460	780

as other time-related conditions of work. The exact wording of the questions used to construct the variables in the tables is given in Chapter 4. Table 9.2 shows cross-country differences in the amount of time employees in the 32 organizations devote to paid work. Men and women who live in less developed economies such as Bulgaria and Hungary (as well as Portugal, as the third least developed) work longer hours, and the gender gap is much smaller here than in most of the other countries. While women work one to two hours less than men in Bulgaria, Hungary and

Table 9.2 Means and percentages to describe working hours

		Hours worked	Commuting time (mins)	Unpaid work (hrs)	% working overtime	% using flexitime	% using flexi-place
Bulgaria	Women	44	34	15.1	32	33	5
	Men	45	31	7.3	27	35	10
Finland	Women	n/a	26	8.1	8	29	6
	Men	n/a	24	5.7	12	39	10
Germany	Women	34	28	13.6	16	33	5
	Men	42	38	7.5	13	67	17
Hungary	Women	45	47	14.2	32	30	9
	Men	46	40	7.4	33	39	18
The Netherlands	Women	29	34	12.4	6	26	9
	Men	40	43	6.9	19	49	28
Portugal	Women	44	37	13.4	32	35	8
	Men	46	35	6.8	40	49	17
Sweden	Women	36	32	11.9	11	59	10
	Men	41	28	8.4	30	71	41
The UK	Women	35	32	15.3	19	42	15
	Men	41	35	8.6	25	36	18

Portugal, the gender gap ranges from five to 11 hours in the other countries. This is due to the almost complete absence of part-time work for women in Hungary and Bulgaria. Women are less likely to work part time in Portugal as well, compared with the EU 25 average (EC, 2007). Not surprisingly, women and men in the three least developed countries are more likely to work overtime at short notice. In addition, women in these three countries have a longer commute than in most other more developed countries (although so do men). All these factors add up not only to longer working hours, but also to a work environment that is more burdensome for women (and for men, to almost the same degree) in the less developed regions of the European Union.

Our initial finding, then, is that women in the new European Union member states spend significantly more time in paid work than their counterparts in the older European Union member states, and that the gender gap in paid working hours is smaller. On the one hand, this may mean that women in Bulgaria, Hungary and Portugal have a higher level of economic independence than women in the other five countries. On the other hand, of course, the longer hours that women in the less developed economies work may mean that they need to contribute (substantially) to the household income. Some would consider women's lack of freedom to work part time or to stay at home and care for their children as a serious form of deprivation. These different interpretations key into a long-running policy debate concerning the trade-off between economic independence and the freedom to choose not to participate in the labour market. No matter how we interpret the data, women in peripheral economies, therefore, have a different work–life balance than their counterparts in the other countries.

Table 9.2 shows that women in all eight countries do significantly more household work than men. Cross-country differences are also notable: women in the countries where paid working hours are longer tend to do more, rather than fewer, hours of domestic work. As a consequence, women in less developed countries spend more hours in total on paid and unpaid work than women in the more developed countries of north-west Europe. In line with economic theory, the latter women have transformed part of their greater wealth into additional leisure time. For example, women in Bulgaria spend 59 hours on average doing paid and unpaid work (men: 52 hours), while women in the Netherlands spend 41 hours (men: 47 hours).

There is considerable cross-country variation in the use of flexible working arrangements (flexible hours and teleworking). In each country, however (with the exception of the UK), men are more likely than

women to report having had access to flexible working arrangements in the weeks prior to our survey; they are more likely to work in positions that allow them to work flexible hours and to work from home, typically upper-level professional jobs. In other cases, flexible hours are not necessarily beneficial to workers. If working-time flexibility takes the form of stand-by or on-call work, it may be detrimental to anyone who wants to combine work and family life, especially since caring for young children requires parents (or any other carer) to be available at fixed times.

3 Subjective feelings about working conditions

Although their working conditions are clearly inferior, women are just as likely as or – occasionally – even more likely than men to enjoy their work. Schaufeli et al. (2002) introduced the concept of engagement, a positive emotional and motivational state of mind characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption. For them, vigour refers to working energetically and being willing to work hard even in difficult situations. Dedication, in turn, is linked to the experience of meaningful work. Being dedicated to one's work means being proud of the work one is doing and feeling inspired by the content of that work. Absorption, on the other hand, means being immersed in one's work and deriving pleasure from it (Hakanen, 2004, p. 229).

In addition to work engagement, Table 9.3 describes three other indicators of subjective feelings towards work and life: perceived pressure at work, work–family balance and satisfaction with life. These variables are explained in Chapter 4. Workers in Bulgaria feel the most pressure at work, followed by those in Finland, Sweden and the UK. The difference between genders is small in this regard, with the exception of Germany, where women claim to feel more pressure in paid work than men do. Dutch workers, men and women alike, take the most pleasure in their work, 'engagement' as we called it, followed by Portuguese workers. In many countries there is a gender difference here: women are more likely to experience 'work engagement' than men. For example, in the UK the value of this indicator for women is 4.33 while it is 4.15 for men (on a scale from 1 to 7, with an overall mean of 4.8 and standard deviation of 1.2). The gender differences are small, which is remarkable since women appear to be at a disadvantage in a number of other areas (e.g. they lack autonomy and authority and are less likely to be able to use flexible schedules). Yet they appear to derive more pleasure from work than men. There is little gender difference in the support

Table 9.3 Quality of work and quality of life

		Work pressure	Work engagement	Work–family balance	Life satisfaction
Bulgaria	Women	2.8	4.82	3.3	4.3
	Men	2.75	4.64	3.4	4.2
Finland	Women	2.65	4.83	3.4	4.8
	Men	2.59	4.53	3.4	4.7
Germany	Women	2.42	4.73	3.4	4.8
	Men	2.22	4.77	3.3	4.6
Hungary	Women	2.48	4.99	3.2	4.1
	Men	2.48	4.99	3.3	4.2
The Netherlands	Women	2.25	5.33	3.6	5.0
	Men	2.34	5.21	3.6	4.8
Portugal	Women	2.59	5.13	3.1	4.4
	Men	2.57	5.15	3.2	4.4
Sweden	Women	2.6	5.07	3.5	5.0
	Men	2.62	4.92	3.5	5.0
The UK	Women	2.67	4.33	3.2	4.2
	Men	2.61	4.15	3.2	3.9
All	Women	2.56	4.91	3.3	4.5
	Men	2.51	4.83	3.3	4.4

men and women receive from their supervisors and their peers. Men, however, perceive their career as more demanding than women (these variables are not presented here in detail). They are more likely to say that they are required to work overtime and work hard, to be available at all times and to prioritize work over their home lives in order to get ahead. This could be interpreted as a lack of support. Women and men may receive different types of support, or be supported on different issues, and still experience the same or a similar level of overall support, however. Women are just as likely as men to believe that they have found the right balance between work and family obligations. This is surprising, since women are obviously doing more household work and have less leisure time overall than men. Yet this does not seem unacceptable or objectionable to the women in our sample. Similarly, women in each of the countries surveyed seem, on the whole, to be slightly happier with their lives than men (although not by much), with little variation between countries.

In summary, we see some systematic cross-country patterns in the subjective evaluation of the quality of work: men and women in peripheral

countries are more likely to feel pressured and experience their work as a burden and a negative influence on their family lives. This is in line with our previous argument concerning patterns of labour force attachment in these countries: those who work must do so for longer hours and under more stressful conditions. In terms of gender differences, our main finding is that they are small overall. We should note, however, that our surveys were conducted well before the financial and economic crisis that hit most European countries in 2008–09. It is quite possible that many of the respondents are now out of work, although it appears that women have been hit less hard than men so far, as men are more concentrated in sectors and industries – such construction, automotive and banking – where jobs have disappeared at a much faster rate than in 'female' sectors such as care or education.

4 The role of the life course in understanding gender differences

In attempting to understand the role gender plays in the quality of life, we argue that it is important to consider men's and women's life stage and family status. It could well be that small differences between men and women in perceived quality of work and life will change if we control for their life stage.

There are major differences between male and female life courses. While the male life course has been dominated by paid work and the need to provide his family with a proper income, care-giving has been the theme of the female life course. Female life courses have become more diverse in recent decades (while male life course patterns have scarcely changed) as more women entered the labour market. Yet the role of paid work in the life course of many women in Europe is still quite different from that of men. While men usually arrange their lives around their work, many women still arrange their work around their unpaid care tasks – and indeed are obliged to do so. While leaving aside whether this is women's 'own choice', that is, a choice they would have made even if they had not been bound by any restrictions, or the result of a lack of opportunity to make a paid career their priority, we cannot ignore the possibility that some of our results might relate to life course issues. One hypothesis concerns the differing impact a partner has for men and women. A young single woman is expected to want a career, and we presume this must have a big impact on her quality of work. A partnered woman has more household duties, is likely to spend less time on her career (Van der Lippe et al., forthcoming), and

therefore depends less on the quality of her work. We expect to see less of a difference between single or partnered males in this respect. Another hypothesis is that the quality of a man's work, in terms of work engagement, increases when he starts a family (more responsibility and the desire to show he is a proper breadwinner). A young mother, however, may show less work engagement during the same life stage because she will make her 'new career' of dedicated motherhood her priority. At the same time, men and women may also report differences in the quality of life, especially since they 'produce' that quality via different channels in this stage of the life course. Women may depend less on work engagement than men to achieve a good quality of life, but also find themselves more dependent on having a family life.

For the purpose of analysis, we distinguish the following stages of the life course (also noting that individuals do not necessarily pass through all these stages, or pass through them in the same sequence; see Liefbroer and Dykstra, 2000): 1) young, single people without children; 2) young couples without children; 3) couples (<50 years old) with children; 4) individuals (singles and couples) age 50 and above.

At first, descriptive analysis shows that both men and women demonstrate increasing work engagement over the life course (see Table 9.4). Older people display more work engagement than younger people, and couples with children display more work engagement than couples without children. Furthermore, there appear to be gender differences in the young singles and older people stages: women in these stages

Table 9.4 Relationship between life course, work engagement and quality of life of men and women in eight European countries

Life course	**Work engagement**		**Sign. Diff.**	**Quality of life**		**Sign. diff**
	Female	**Male**		**Female**	**Male**	
Young singles	4.77 (1.25)	4.55 (1.32)	**	4.33 (1.26)	4.23 (1.28)	**
Young couples without children	4.74 (1.21)	4.78 (1.31)		4.82 (1.17)	4.65 (1.16)	**
Couples with children	4.96 (1.52)	4.92 (1.22)		4.79 (1.23)	4.57 (1.23)	**
Individuals older than 50 years	5.07 (1.19)	4.91 (1.30)	**	4.70 (1.24)	4.57 (1.26)	**
Other	4.75 (1.28)	4.59 (1.39)	**	4.62 (1.35)	4.42 (1.28)	**
Total	4.89 (1.20)	4.79 (1.29)	**	4.85 (1.24)	4.58 (1.26)	**

$^{*}p \leq 0.05$; $^{**}p \leq 0.01$.

feel more work engagement than men. Young couples without children report the highest quality of life and young singles the lowest quality of life. The gender differences remain significant in every stage, with women feeling more satisfied. Given the nature of our data collection – a survey conducted at a single point in time in all the participating countries – we cannot rule out the possibility that we are not in fact measuring a life course stage effect, but a generational effect. Individuals in the 50+ set belong to a different generation than the young families or the young singles in our dataset.

For a better understanding of the causal effects, we also performed multivariate analyses. In the first of two analyses (see Table 9.5), work engagement is the dependent variable. The explanatory variables include gender, the different stages of the life course as described above, and job demands and resources. In addition, we include the interaction between gender and the stage of the life course so as to allow for different life course stage effects for women and for men. In the second of the two multivariate analyses, quality of life is the dependent variable. Besides covering the same explanatory variables as in the first regression, we also include work engagement and the interaction of gender and work engagement so as to allow for gender differences in the way work engagement contributes to the quality of life.

The analysis for work engagement reveals a separate and independent gender effect: women experience more work engagement overall, as can be seen in model 1 of Table 9.5. The same holds for couples with children, who display more work engagement than single people. Job demands and resources in general have the expected effects. Job security is negatively related to quality of work, and all support factors are positively related. Country differences can be found as well: employees in north-west Europe feel more work engagement than their counterparts in south-east Europe. The interaction terms in model 2 show that both the presence of children and having a spouse decrease the level of work engagement for women. It is apparently the other way around for men: having children contributes to more work engagement. This is in line with the hypothesis discussed above.

As we can see in model 3, women's quality of life is higher overall than men's. Work engagement contributes to the quality of life, just like having a partner and children. As we expected and demonstrated in model 4, work engagement is less important for women than for men in achieving a better quality of life. Having a partner and having children contribute positively to both men's and women's quality of life. This contribution is larger for women than for men. More so than

Table 9.5 Regression analysis to explain work engagement and quality of life, unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in brackets)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Work engagement	**Work engagement**	**Quality of life**	**Quality of life**
Work demands				
Actual working hours	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.06** (0.01)	−0.06** (0.01)
Work pressure	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.18** (0.04)	−0.18** (0.04)
Job insecurity	−0.02** (0.00)	−0.02** (0.00)	−0.20** (0.02)	−0.20** (0.02)
Work resources				
Job control	0.12** (0.01)	0.12** (0.01)	0.13** (0.03)	0.13** (0.03)
Social relations	0.09** (0.00)	0.09** (0.00)	0.21** (0.02)	0.20** (0.02)
Work–life balance support	0.04** (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)	0.13** (0.03)	0.13** (0.03)
Training	0.20** (0.03)	0.20** (0.03)	−0.02 (0.14)	−0.02 (0.14)
Controls				
Education	−0.01** (0.01)	−0.01** (0.01)	0.13** (0.05)	0.13** (0.05)
Income	0.01** (0.01)	0.01** (0.01)	0.44** (0.04)	0.43** (0.04)
Gender (1 = female)	0.19** (0.03)	0.28** (0.03)	0.44** (0.14)	0.87 (0.57)
Life course (single = reference)				
Married without children and younger than 40 years	0.04 (0.04)	0.14 (0.07)	1.69** (0.21)	0.98** (0.34)
Married with children	0.14** (0.04)	0.23** (0.05)	1.22** (0.18)	0.68* (0.27)
Individuals older than 50 years	0.21** (0.04)	0.22** (0.06)	0.70** (0.20)	0.19 (0.32)
Other	0.01 (0.05)	0.03 (0.09)	0.70** (0.20)	0.12 (0.46)

Table 9.5 (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Work engagement	**Work engagement**	**Quality of life**	**Quality of life**
Sector (ref. cat. hospital):				
Retail	−0.15** (0.04)	−0.14** (0.04)	−0.07 (0.22)	−0.10 (0.22)
Bank	−0.09* (0.04)	−0.09* (0.04)	−0.11 (0.20)	−0.11 (0.20)
Telecom	−0.38** (0.04)	−0.38** (0.04)	−0.12 (0.20)	−0.12 (0.20)
North-west Europe	0.25** (0.04)	0.25** (0.04)	−0.20 (0.19)	−0.24 (0.19)
Interactions				
Female * young couples without children		−0.16+ (0.08)		1.12** (0.42)
Female * married with children		−0.15* (0.07)		0.88** (0.34)
Female * individuals older than 50		−0.03 (0.08)		0.82* (0.40)
Female * other		−0.05 (0.11)		1.16* (0.57)
Work engagement			1.49** (0.06)	1.64** (0.09)
Female * work engagement				−0.24* (0.11)
Expl.Variance (Adj. R^2)	0.28	0.29	0.30	0.30

+ $p \leq 0.10$; * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$.

men, women have to 'earn' or construct their quality of life through their careers as mothers. As we expected, then, the home situation plays a greater role for women in achieving a good quality of life, and the quality of work plays a greater role in this for men.

5 Conclusion

This chapter explores gender differences in the quality of work and life in eight European countries. We found no systematic gender differences in how people perceive and/or describe their feelings and opinions about their lives. Regardless of all the amply documented manifestations of social inequalities in and outside the household, the women who responded to our survey questions appear to be as satisfied with their lives as men, if not more. Although we were unable to report significant general differences between men and women, the differences did become clear once we took the life course into account. We may conclude that single women experience a better quality of work than women with a partner and/or children. Men feel more work engagement when they have a partner and children. Apparently, they 'need' a wife and children to feel more 'productive' in the workplace. Interestingly, it is completely the other way around for quality of life. Women report both more work engagement and a better quality of life than men, but their quality of life appears to depend less on work engagement than men's. Women need a family life to achieve a better quality of life, whereas men need a good quality of work to feel more satisfied with their lives. More research is needed to understand what precisely is happening in the lives of men and women, and preferably in the lives of couples as well, so that we can compare how quality of work and quality of life come about within a relationship. Subsequent research should also take the life course stage of men and women into account, and collect data that do justice to the life course perspective.

Finally, we found a number of systematic cross-country differences in our samples: men and women in less developed economies work longer hours and do so within overall harsher social conditions. In addition, men and women in peripheral countries are more likely to feel pressured and experience their work as a burden and a negative influence on their family lives. This is in line with the previous argument concerning patterns of labour force attachment in these countries: those who work must do so for longer hours and under more stressful conditions. In studying gender differences in the quality of life, we must take the social and institutional context into account.