

Gender Equality Index 2019. Work-life balance

Flexible working arrangements

Greater autonomy in setting work-time schedules — for some

The average weekly working hours of employees in the EU are on the decline as overall employment rates rise (see Chapter 2). Men's weekly working time decreased by 1 hour between 2008 and 2017 (from 41.0 to 40.0 hours). For women, their working week declined by 0.3 hours (or close to 20 minutes) – from 34.0 to 33.7 hours^[1]. This working-time reduction reveals a general aspiration to close the gap between desired and actual working hours, with a fifth of Europeans dissatisfied with the balance between their work and personal lives (Eurobarometer, 2018).

Furthermore, the relatively larger drop in working time for men reflects a growing phenomenon among them to strike a better work–life balance so that they are more able to care for children or dependent relatives (Akgunduz & Plantenga, 2012; Eurofound, 2017c, 2018b).

Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) provide greater possibilities for entering the labour market, retaining full-time jobs or striking a better work–life balance because they better match working hours to private life needs. Nearly half of part-time workers in the EU indicate they would be willing to move to full-time jobs if more FWAs were available (Eurobarometer, 2018). With only 42 % of people actually making use of available FWAs (Eurobarometer, 2018), greater attention must be paid to general availability as well as to barriers to take-up. These can include discouragement from management, stigmatisation, lack of support from colleagues or an expected negative career impact (Teasdale, 2013).

FWAs typically refer to flexibility on how much, when and where employees can work (Eurofound, 2017c; Laundon & Williams, 2018), and are viewed as a way to reduce tensions between the demands of work and private life. Historically, FWAs were introduced to facilitate women’s greater participation in the labour market, and are still closely associated with the need for more time for household work and family responsibilities (Laundon & Williams, 2018; Leuze & Strauß, 2016). This enduring association is influencing the low uptake of certain FWAs by men (Laundon & Williams, 2018). Nonetheless, changes in the labour market increasingly position FWAs as an innovative tool for companies to boost productivity and attract and retain employees, presenting a win-win situation for both employees and employers (Berkery, Morley, Tiernan, Purtill, & Parry, 2017; Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012; Wheatley, 2017).

Despite an increasing availability of FWAs (Eurobarometer, 2018; Plantenga et al., 2010; Wheatley, 2017), gender differences on their actual usage remain highly visible. For example, if 84 % of women employees predominantly work in the office, only 75 % of men employees do so^[2]; if about a quarter of men employees often work in clients’ premises, vehicles or other sites, only about one tenth of women do so. In 2015 in the EU, 57 % of women and 54 % of men also had no possibility of changing their working-time provisions, while 14 % of women and 19 % of men overall could completely determine their own working hours (Figure 59). In addition, the availability of working-time arrangements varies according to job sectors, providing a distinct link to gender segregation in the labour market.

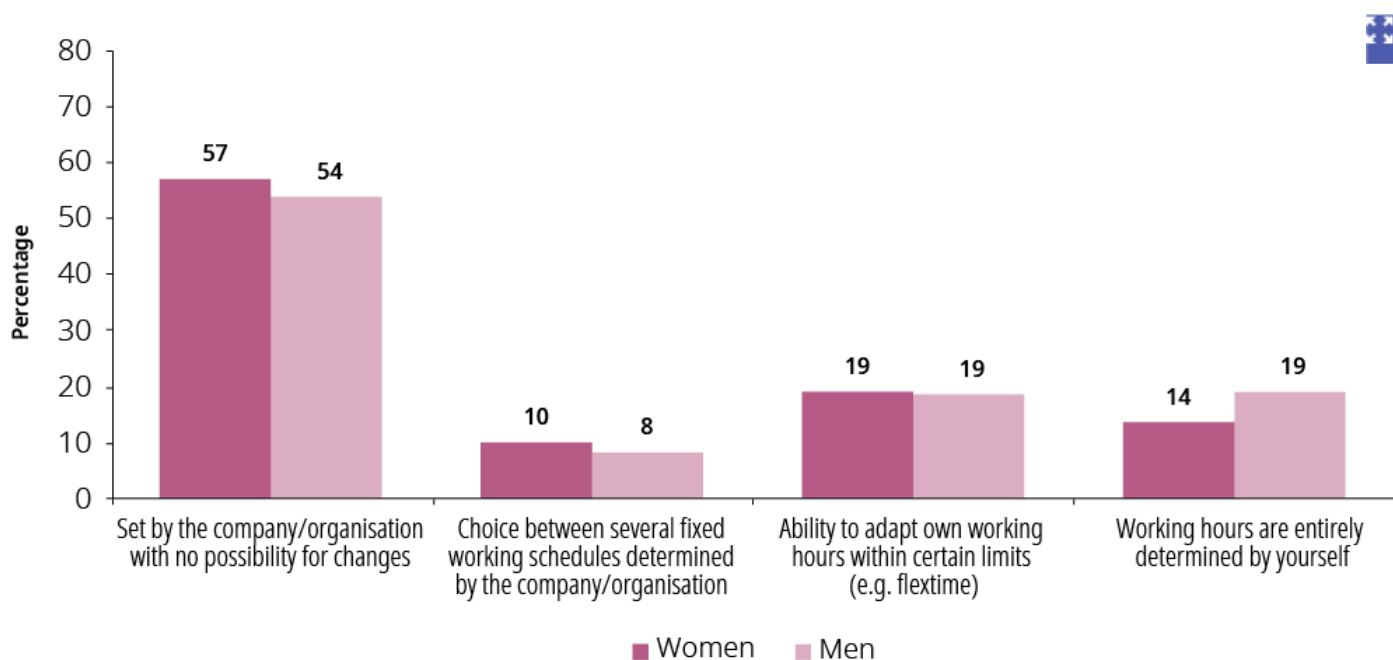


Figure 59: Percentage of women and men by ability to set their own working-time arrangements (16+), EU-28, 2015 (Indicator 12)

Private sector more flexible than public – but men benefit most in both

In the EU, the public sector accounts for 27 % of all female and about 16 % of all male employees^[3]. Despite the significant percentage difference, a similar share of women (65 %) and men (62 %) had no flexibility in setting their working-time arrangements, meaning that a disproportionate number of women are affected (Figure 60). When looking at different degrees of flexibility in working-time arrangements, the public sector had by far the smallest share of employees (5 %) – both women and men – who were entirely able to determine their working hours by themselves.

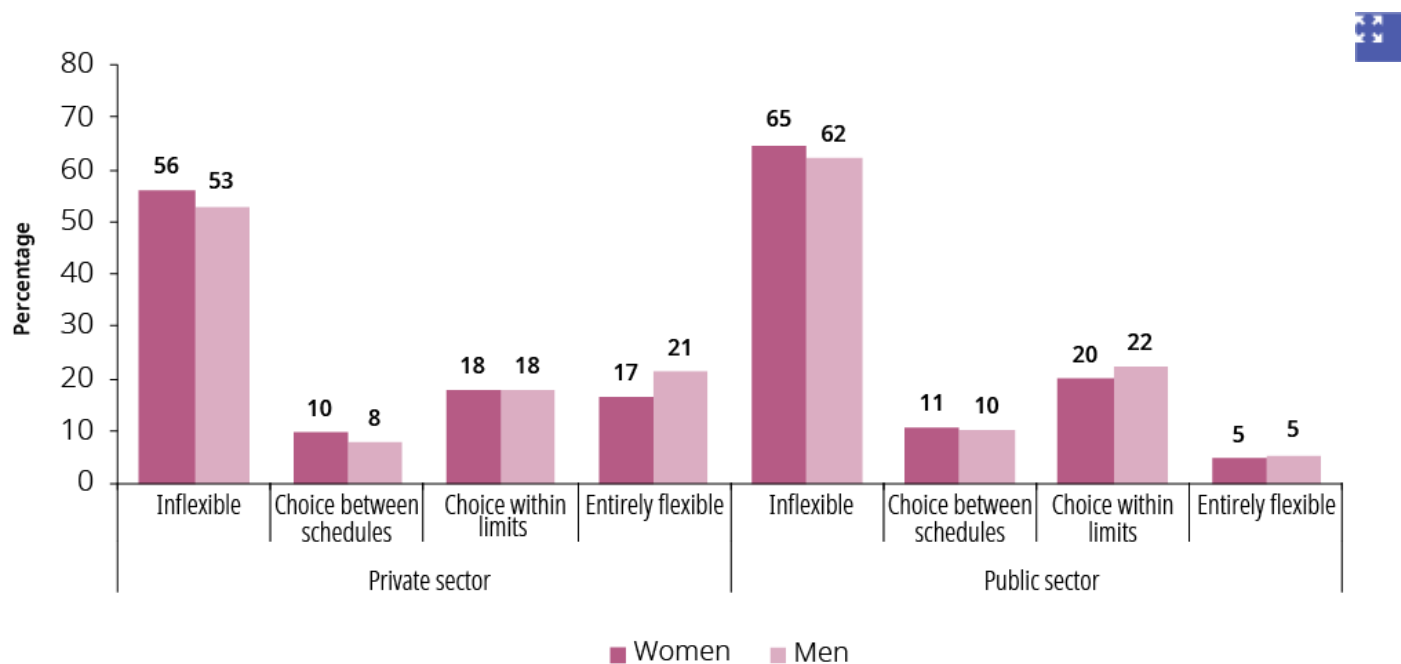


Figure 60: Percentage of women and men by ability to set their own working-time arrangements by sector (15+), EU-28, 2015

Note: 'Inflexible' corresponds to the original category 'Set by the company/organisation with no possibility for changes'. 'Choice between schedules': 'Choice between several fixed working schedules determined by the company/organisation'. 'Choice within limits': 'Adaptability of working hours within certain limits (e.g. flexitime)'. 'Entirely flexible': 'Working hours are entirely determined by yourself'. Data on men's working hours arrangements as regards 'choice within limits' within not-for-profit organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is of low reliability.

In the private sector, the share of those with inflexible working-time arrangements was about 10 p.p. less (56 % of women and 53 % of men) than in the public sector. As 78 % of all male employees and 65 % of all female employees in the EU work in the private sector^[4], this means that the sector not only surpasses the public sector in providing working-time arrangements that enhance work–life balance, it has also given men greater access than women to flexible work. Furthermore, 17 % of women and 21 % of men private-sector employees in the EU have complete flexibility in setting their own working hours, with 27 % of women and 26 % of men having access to some flexibility (i.e. choice between schedules or choice within limits). This figure compares to 31 % of women and 32 % of men having some flexibility and 5 % of women and men having complete flexibility in the public sector. Given that women shoulder a higher level of care duties, any flexibility difference between genders, combined with high rates of take-up among women, implies a ‘push’ to take alternative routes to accommodate home responsibilities, for example by leaving jobs or reducing working hours. This has substantial financial impacts, including gender gaps in pay.

In a few Member States (SE, DK, NL), both women and men in the public sector have a very high level (+ 50 % of employees) of access to considerable working-time flexibility. This includes options on complete or a certain amount of flexibility in setting their own working hours (Figure 61). In the Netherlands, more women than men in the public sector had such flexibility. In a few other Member States (BE, FR, LU, EE), women and men respectively had about roughly similar levels of flexibility in working-time arrangements in the private and public sectors, though women in the public sector had less access to flexibility than women in the private sector.

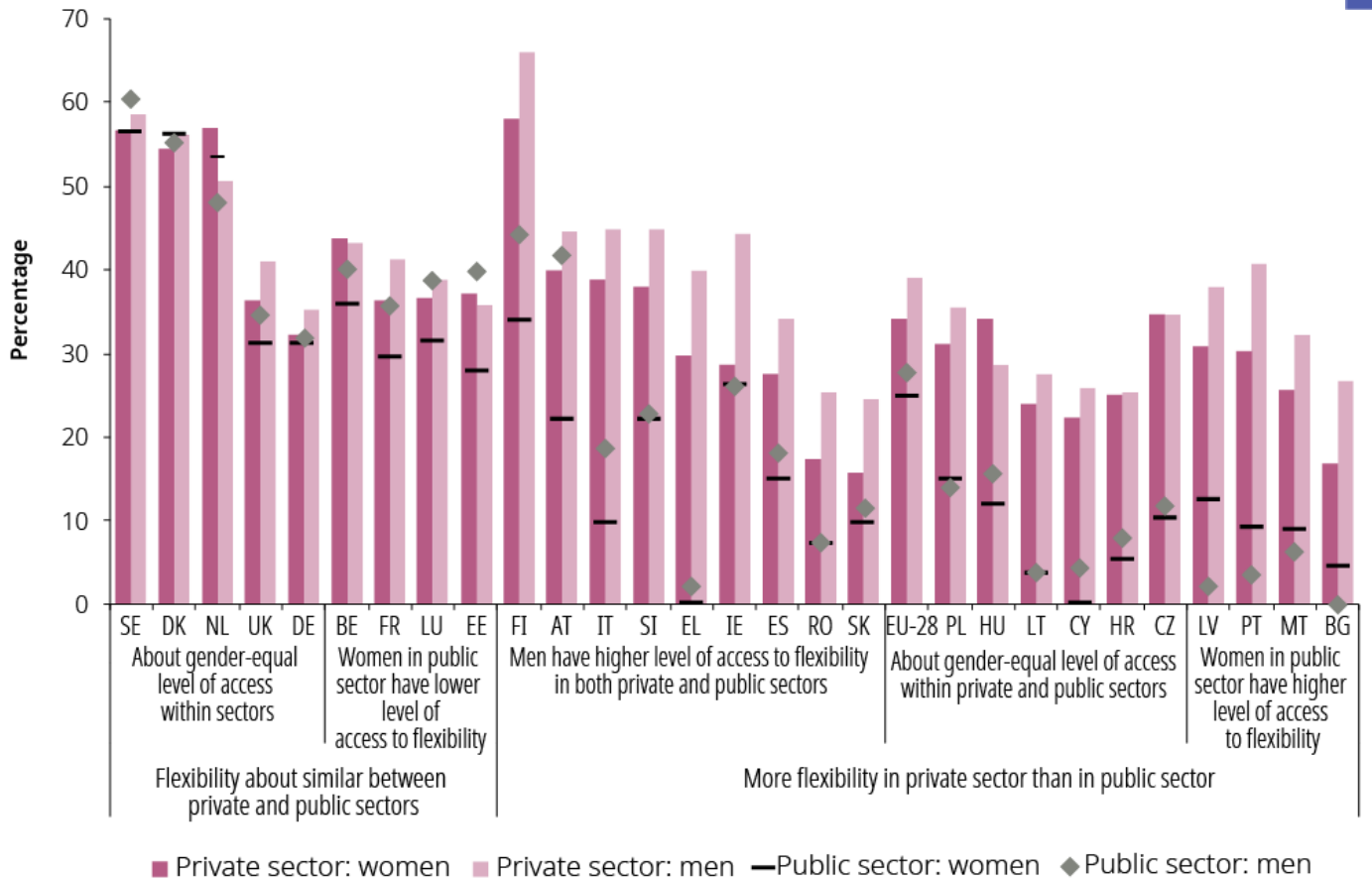


Figure 61: Percentage of women and men with considerable flexibility to set their own working-time arrangements, by sector (15+), 2015
 Note: ‘Considerable flexibility’ covers two categories: ‘Adaptability of working hours within certain limits (e.g. flexitime)’ and ‘Entirely flexible’: ‘Working hours are entirely determined by yourself’.

In the rest of the EU, the private sector considerably outperformed the public sector in the flexibility of working-time arrangements, with women predominantly having lower or about similar access to flexibility than men in each sector. In a few Member States, such as Latvia, Portugal, Malta or Bulgaria, more women than men in the public sector had considerable flexibility despite an overall low level of access (about or less than 10 %).

Occupation an important factor in accessing flexible work arrangements

Major differences in access to flexible working time exist not only across Member States and economic sectors but also across occupations. On average in the EU, more than 60 % of managers (women or men) have access to considerable (i.e. certain or complete) flexibility in setting their own working arrangements, though this occupational group is one of the smaller ones in the economy (Figure 62). Across other occupations, about a third of women at best have access to flexible working time compared to about half of men. For example, women have much lower access (35 %) than men (about 50 %) to flexibility in major occupational groups such as professionals, and technicians and associate professionals, which account for about 36 % of women’s and about 22 % of men’s employment. Just under a third of both women and men in the EU have access to flexible working-time arrangements in various occupations requiring a lower level of qualifications, such as clerical support workers, service and sales workers, craft and related trades workers or employees of elementary occupations. The lowest access to flexibility is seen among plant- and machine-operating workers, especially women (8 %).



Figure 62: Percentage of women and men with considerable flexibility to set their own working-time arrangements, by occupational group (15+), EU-28, 2015

Note: ‘Considerable flexibility’ covers two categories: ‘Adaptability of working hours within certain limits (e.g. flexitime)’ and ‘Entirely flexible’: ‘Working hours are entirely determined by yourself’. Occupational groups are distinguished on the basis of a 1-digit ISCO_08 codes; Percentages under the bars indicate the share of women and men that are employed in the respective occupational groups among the total of women and men in employment.

Women have fewer opportunities to move from part-time to full-time jobs

The data on flexibility in working-time arrangements refers to the (potential) opportunity of access and not necessarily the actual take-up of such arrangements. Although the figures generally point to lower availability of FWAs for women, actual take-up is higher among women than men. It is also one of the ‘penalties’ that flexible work imposes on women’s careers and lifelong earnings (EIGE, 2019c; OECD, 2016). In addition to take-up being shaped by gendered norms by which women disproportionately shoulder caring responsibilities, existing research notes a lack of supervisor support for actual utilisation of FWAs, or generally unsupportive organisational cultures on their take-up (McNamara, Pitt-Catsouphes, Brown, & Matz-Costa, 2012). FWAs might also be closely linked to the design of national public policies, such as parental leave, which provide highly varied employee entitlements across Member States (see Section 9.2). For example, parents in Sweden can use their parental-leave entitlements to shorten their working hours (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018), making FWAs subject not only to organisational but also to wider national public-policy contexts.

Women’s generally lower access to flexibility, especially in certain Member States and occupational groups, implies that the actual work–life balance arrangements for women and men are not yet based on the principle of equal opportunities, resulting in more severe consequences for women’s participation in the labour market. This, among other things, influences a particularly high prevalence of part-time employment among women (see Chapter 2), as well as reduced possibilities for transition between part-time and full-time work.

In 2017, four times more women than men aged 20-64 years in the EU worked part-time (31 % of women compared to 8 % of men in total employment)^[5]. This corresponds to more than 31 million women and more than 9 million men. Despite the pool of men working part-time being considerably smaller, their opportunities for moving to full-time jobs are much higher in comparison to those of women. Between 2016 and 2017, 59 % of men compared to 75 % of women working part-time maintained that status (Figure 63). Consequently, 28 % of men and only 14 % of women in part-time employment moved into full-time jobs. The transition rates indicate that despite an overall improvement in the labour-market situation in recent years, men’s opportunities for progression into full-time work improved (26 % in 2015) considerably more than for women (13 % in 2015).



Figure 63: Percentage of women and men who moved from part-time work to various activity statuses (16+), EU-28, 2017

Across Member States, a larger share of part-time employment within the economy, especially among women, is associated with less dynamic transitions into full-time jobs (Figure 64). In 2017, this was particularly the case in Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Luxembourg, Germany and the United Kingdom, where the share of women in part-time work was especially large (from 35 % in LU to 74 % in NL) and transition rates for women into full-time jobs were very low (from 6 % in NL to 11 % in AT). With the exception of Czechia, Cyprus and Denmark, men’s transition rates from part-time to full-time jobs were notably higher compared to women’s in all Member States.

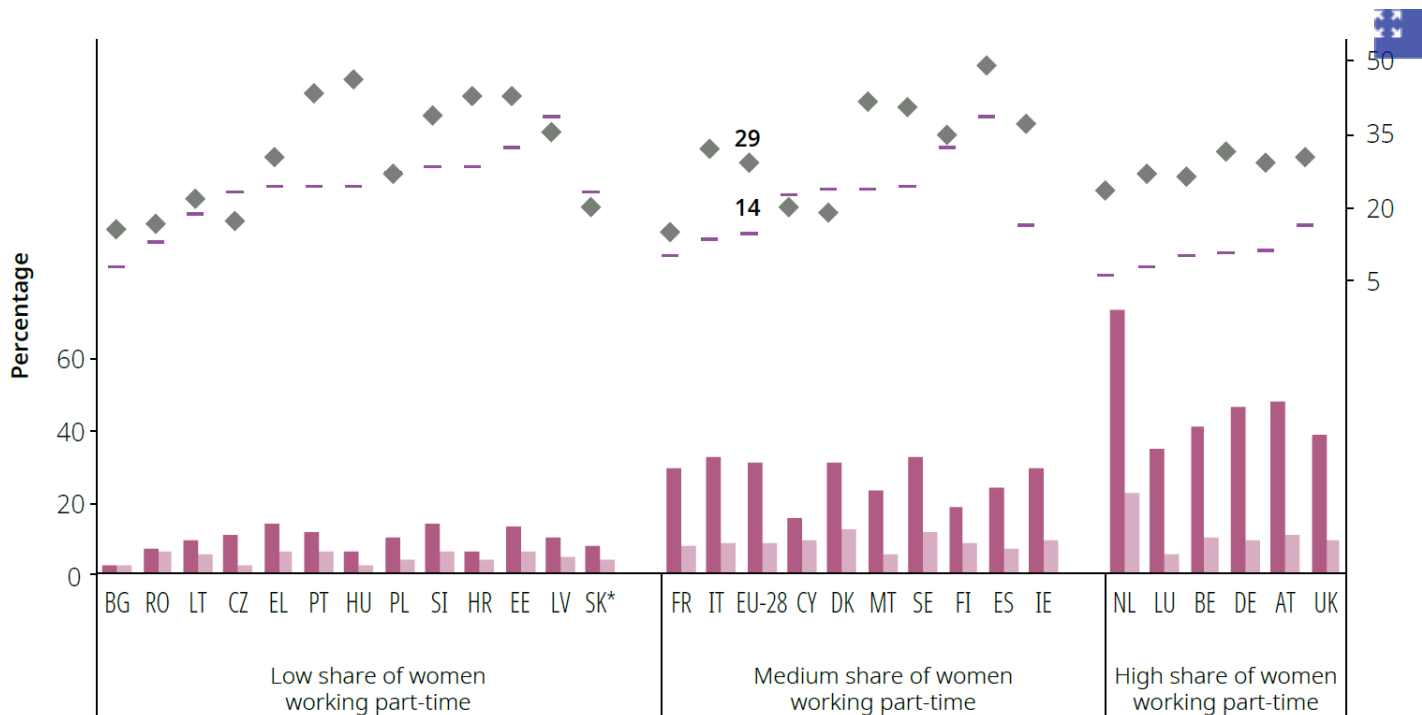


Figure 64: Percentage of women and men who moved from part-time work to full-time work (16+), 2017 (Indicator 13)

Note: * Reference year of transition rates in Slovakia is 2016 due to lack of data for 2017. Member States are grouped on the basis of women's share in part-time employment. 'Medium': 15-35 % of all employed women being in part-time employment, with due implications on thresholds 'low' and 'high'. Within the group, Member States are sorted in the ascending order of women's transition rate from part-time to full-time jobs.

The largest gender gaps in part-time to full-time transition rates (at least three times lower for women) were noted in the same group of Member States that also had a high share of women working part-time (Figure 64). Furthermore, gender gaps in transition rates were also very wide in the Member States where men's chances of finding full-time jobs are especially high (e.g. HU, PT, MT) or in a number of other Member States where part-time employment accounts for a significant share of the labour market (e.g. IT, SE).

Besides national labour-market characteristics, research findings (Gash, 2008; Kelle, Simonson, & Gordo, 2017) identify parenthood as a major constraint on the ability of part-time workers to move into full-time jobs, especially in Member States with limited or unaffordable childcare provision (e.g. UK, DE). As noted in Section 9.4, 10 % of women in the EU are either economically inactive or work part-time because they are looking after children or adults with additional needs. This situation affects only 0.6 % of men, underlining how the gendered nature of informal childcare disproportionately impacts women's employment.

The variability of transition rates between part-time and full-time work across and within Member States is also influenced by other factors. National policy designs, especially those that support maternal employment, are noted not only for strongly influencing opportunities but also for shaping preferences at individual and society levels (Gash, 2008). Empirical research shows that women who are in a weaker economic – and usually also negotiating – position within their partnerships are more likely to move to and remain in part-time jobs. However, this pattern is highly sensitive to the wider institutional settings of the country (Dieckhoff, Gash, Mertens, & Gordo, 2016). For instance, the institutional settings of the United Kingdom, as compared to those of Denmark and France, considered to be supportive of maternal employment, are empirically proven to be a major constraint on United Kingdom part-time workers with children moving into full-time jobs (Gash, 2008). Similarly, research shows that the German home-care allowance, a benefit for parents to stay and take care of children at home, is a deterrent to using formal childcare and to either remaining in or re-entering the labour force (Kelle et al., 2017).

Statistical evidence shows there is a considerable share of people with unfulfilled employment preferences, but often these preferences are highly influenced by the underlying gender norms on how women and men perceive their labour-market engagement given the gendered distribution of other duties. For example, despite women's disproportionate representation in part-time employment in the EU, with ensuing pay consequences, only 23 % of women (compared to 36 % of men) working part-time in 2018 indicated that this was an involuntary choice and that they actually wished to work more ('longer') hours^[6]. This suggests, among other things, that there are continuing incompatibilities in institutional support for gender equality in labour-market participation.

In general, the impact of FWAs, be it part-time or otherwise, is multidimensional. For individuals, accessing FWAs is often linked to negative career consequences, such as lower salary, job levels or promotion possibilities (Laundon & Williams, 2018). FWAs users also tend to have reduced access to – or awareness of – the full range of benefits available to them within the workplace, including other types of flexible working arrangements (Leslie et al., 2012). Fur

thermore, reduced time in the office results not only in limited training or participation in relevant information sessions, but also in limited access to knowledge on how to make the most optimal FWAs and other benefit decisions (Leslie et al., 2012).

Given the diverse and multidimensional impacts of FWAs, it is important to stress that although they are an important measure for gender equality, they do not automatically lead to it. For example, as noted in EIGE (2018d), both genders apply autonomy in setting their own working time differently: women use it to achieve a better work–life balance while men use it to increase their work commitment. For example, some men are able to opt for longer working hours due to a partner’s greater availability at home (Holth, Bergman, & MacKenzie, 2017). Despite this, the availability of FWAs is increasingly recognised as a facilitator of gender equality and of better work–life balance opportunities for both women and men.

Flexible working arrangements can increase gender-equal opportunities

The Gender Equality Index – in its entirety and across all its domains – shows a significant correlation to the availability of flexible working schedules in Member States. Member States that had a higher share of employees with access to considerable (i.e. complete or a certain amount of) flexibility in setting their own working hours displayed higher Gender Equality Index scores (Figure 65, Panels A and B). Across the domains, the strongest linkage between the Gender Equality Index and the availability of FWAs for women is noted in the domain of time (Figure 65, Panel C), followed by the domain of money (Figure 65, Panel E) and the domain of knowledge. This highlights the importance of FWAs on how women and men allocate their time for home and paid work activities, as well as for their education and training opportunities.

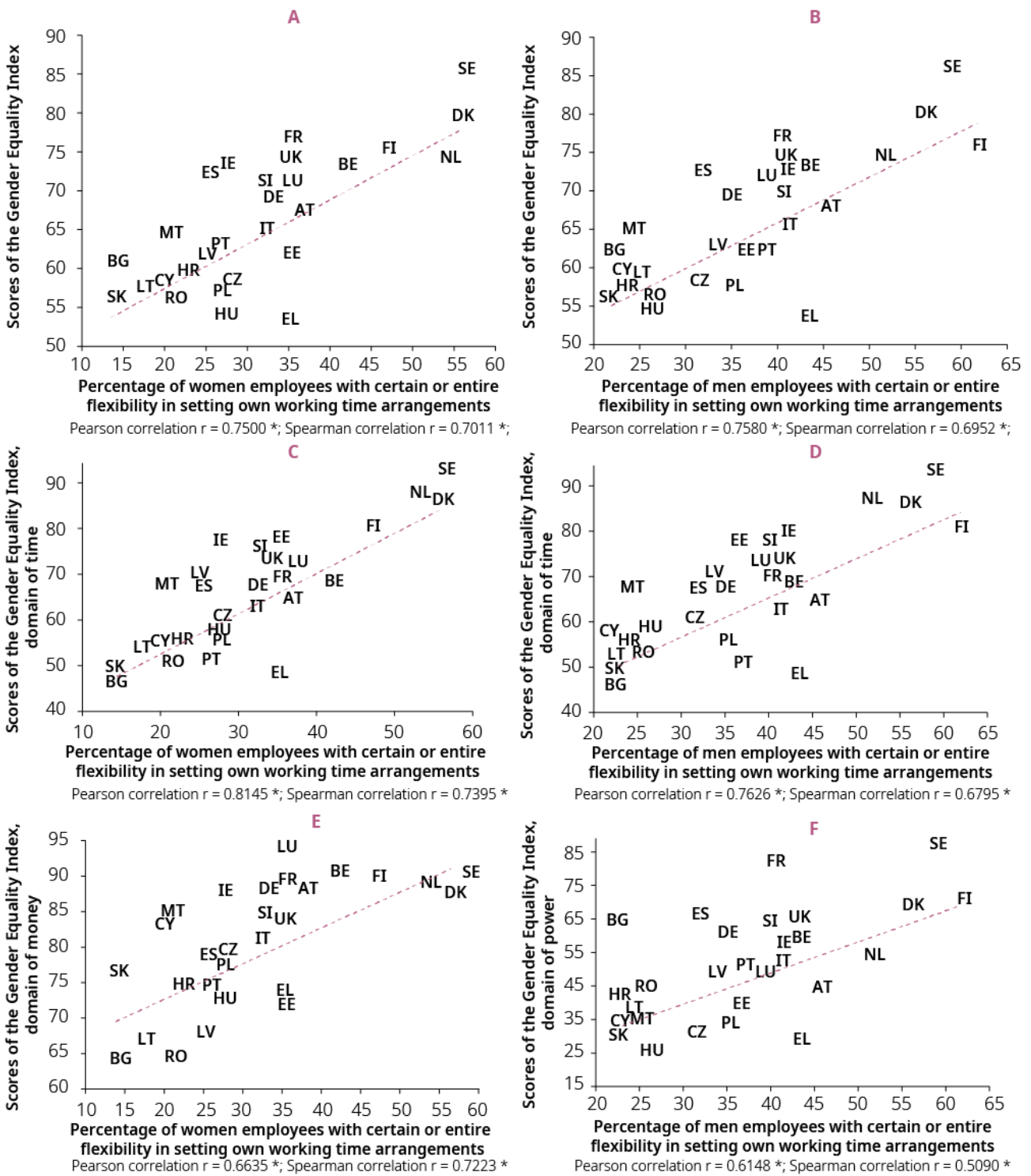


Figure 65: Percentage of women and men by ability to set their own working time arrangements (with considerable flexibility) and Gender Equality Index scores (15+), 2017

Note: EIGE's calculations, EWCS (2015), Gender Equality Index, (*) refers to significance at 10 %. 'Considerable flexibility' covers two categories: 'Adaptability of working hours within certain limits (e.g. flexitime)' and 'Entirely flexible': 'Working hours are entirely determined by yourself'.

The link between higher availability of flexible work for men and gender equality is strongest in the domain of time (Figure 65, Panel D), though this relation is somewhat weaker in comparison with women's. The second strongest association between FWAs for men and gender-equality scores is noted in the domain of power (Figure 65, Panel F), followed by the domain of money. These associations, among other things, suggest that higher FWA availability (and consequently take-up) for men considerably boosts women's time resources. As a result, gender-equal opportunities are increased at home and in the public domain, including in economic, social and political participation.

Overall, the associations between the ability to set one's own working hours and the various domains of the Gender Equality Index are in line with emerging wider research. This links the availability of FWAs to a consequent reduction in gender inequalities on earnings (Van der Lippe, Van Breeschoten, & Van Hek, 2018). Research shows, for example, that organisations which offer work–life balance policies, and particularly those that offer flexibility in time schedules rather than working time reduction, tend to have a smaller gender pay gap (EIGE, 2019c; Van der Lippe et al., 2018).

Demonstrated linkages between FWAs and the Gender Equality Index also support findings that point to the availability of flexible working time arrangements having differentiated impacts on women and men in different areas of life. For example, flexitime – more commonly taken by men – has positive effects on their job and leisure satisfaction as it enables them to be both fully employed and more engaged in household activities (Wheatley, 2017). Figure 65 (Panel F) shows that this type of FWA availability for men accompanies women's greater opportunities in political, economic and social engagement, leading to increased gender equality in the domain of power.

In contrast, FWAs that reduce the number of working hours and that are more prevalent among women are more often connected to negative impacts on women's job, leisure and life satisfaction (Wheatley, 2017). This is possibly due to resulting constraints, such as less economic independence, increased stress from coping with the remaining workload and overall expectations at work while fulfilling household duties (EIGE, 2018d; Wheatley, 2017).

Footnotes

[1] Eurostat (lfsa_ewhun2).

[2] EIGE calculation based on EWCS (2015) data.

[3] EIGE calculation based on EWCS (2015) data.

[4] EIGE calculation based on EWCS (2015) data.

[5] Eurostat (lfsi_pt_a).

[6] Eurostat (lfsa_eppgai), reference age group 20-64.