Gender still determines how, and how long, we work

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Female-coded family work keeps women away from late working life – but it makes a difference where in Europe they live because Nordic countries do not recognize this divide.

Key Findings

- Childcare impacts upon late working life – women tend to be employed part time or outside paid labor if they engaged in childcare during earlier life stages; men with children are more likely to be in full-time employment.
- Women are more affected by early working life decisions – previous labor-market participation or a reduction in working hours due to childcare obligations have a greater impact on late working life.
- A North–South divide in Europe – it is mostly in southern and western Europe that women’s domestic work or part-time employment prevents full-time employment in late working life, but in northern Europe, female employment in late working life is barely affected by previous family obligations.

Women do not fully participate in the prolongation of working lives

Policies to increase the participation of older workers, such as raising retirement ages, have been implemented as ageing societies have been challenged by a growing shortage of skilled workers and the rising costs of pensions. Although overall participation has increased, inequalities in late working life have deepened.

There is unequal access to the labor market and not everyone is able to exit working life later or participate full time. This is especially the case for women. Compared to men, women still exit significantly earlier, are less active in working life, and do more part-time work.

Late work is shaped by previous life experiences, especially for women

Previous participation and family history, such as childbirth, partnership, cohabitation, or divorce, have an impact in late work participation and exit time. Compared to men, women are still culturally expected to do more of the unpaid care work, which leads to career interruptions (e.g., labor-market exit, reduction of working hours), especially where there are insufficient public care services.

Consequently, while women’s late working lives tend to be characterized by unpaid care work, part-time employment, and early exit, men’s late working life is largely structured as full-time work and later exit.

Types of late working life by binary gender (w/m) in percent (%); Source: Own calculations, SHARELIFE (YEAR); Schmitz et al. (2023)
Regions make a difference and social policies impact upon gender inequities

Social security institutions and pension policy reforms are designed to reward continuous and extended employment biographies (permanent full-time employment). This is more accessible for men than for women, who are generally expected to take on unpaid care duties and family-related interruptions.

Our findings highlight the importance of national context, such as social policies or gender norms, on women’s participation in working life. Women’s labor-market attachment and participation is higher when there is flexibility in the labor market and strong institutions for social services, such as free childcare.

Examples from different European regions

Gender inequality in late work participation is lowest in northern European countries (e.g., Sweden) which support flexible careers, the dual-earner model, and public childcare.

Western European countries (e.g., UK, Germany), which reward continuous employment, and southern European countries, which lack social care interventions, have higher gender inequality in late work participation than northern European countries.

Eastern European countries (e.g., Poland) are generally characterized by a high prevalence of full-time female employment and only short employment disruptions due to the provision of public childcare.

Recommendations

• Activation policies for inclusive early working lives reduce inequalities in late participation.
• Gender-inclusive working life policies increase equal participation at all ages.
• Flexible labor markets that, e.g., allow for temporary reductions in working hours and easier re-entry can reduce the negative gendered effects of career interruptions.
• Public policies for childcare or leave options, which are common in northern European countries, have the potential to increase female participation in late working life.

About the research

This research on gendered late-working-life trajectories is part of the research programme EIWO. Schmitz, W., Naegele, L., Frerichs, F., & Ellwardt, L. (2023): Gendered late working life trajectories, family history and welfare regimes: Evidence from SHARELIFE. *European Journal of Ageing*, 20, 5. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-023-00752-3 (open access). The paper received the "Best Paper Award 2023 for Early Career Researchers" from the German Gerontological Association.

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About EIWO

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