



Long working hours and health in Europe: Gender and welfare state differences in a context of economic crisis



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between moderately long working hours and health status in Europe. A cross-sectional study based on data from the 2010 European Working Conditions Survey (13,518 men and 9381 women) was performed. Working moderately long hours was consistently associated with poor health status and poor psychological wellbeing in countries with traditional family models, in both sexes in Liberal countries and primarily among women in Continental and Southern European countries. A combination of economic vulnerability, increasing labour market deregulation and work overload related to the combination of job and domestic work could explain these findings.

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1. Introduction

Although in recent years interest in health problems related to long working hours has increased, studies concerning the different areas of health are still scarce and gaps in the literature investigating this relationship and the involved mechanisms persist (Virtanen et al., 2008; Virtanen and Heikkilä et al., 2012; Virtanen and Stansfeld et al., 2012; Kroenke et al., 2007; Kivimäki et al., 2015; Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014). For example, most studies have found consistent associations with working ≥ 55 h a week but results for moderately long working hours are contradictory (Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014; Kivimäki et al., 2015; Virtanen and Heikkilä et al., 2012). However, very long working hours are uncommon in Europe – mainly among women – where the European Working Time Directive set up a maximum of 48 h weekly work time, although there are differences among European countries. Moreover, although some studies have found different patterns of associations between men and women (Fan et al., 2015; Artazcoz

et al., 2007, 2009, 2013), most previous research is based on men-only samples or does not separate the analysis by gender (Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014; Kivimäki et al., 2015; Virtanen and Heikkilä et al., 2012).

Besides the heterogeneity of methodologies or of the studied populations (Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014; Kivimäki et al., 2015; Virtanen and Heikkilä et al., 2012), the lack of consistent conceptual frameworks could contribute to the unexplained contradictory results for the relationship between moderately long working hours and health status. Causal pathways based on the lack of time for recovery, the decrease of private time and irregular lifestyles that lead to unhealthy behaviours have been proposed (Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014). However, although these mechanisms are likely to be important factors involved in the relationship between very long working hours and health status, they are probably less relevant in the association between moderately long working hours and health. In order to understand this latter association, it has been suggested the need of conceptual frameworks that take into account potential antecedent factors motivating moderately long hours, particularly whether they are forced or not and, consequently, their impact on health (Artazcoz et al., 2009, 2013).

Working time is affected by both individual-level and country-

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level characteristics. At the individual level some studies have highlighted the crucial role of choice in determining a person's response, in terms of health and well-being, to working long hours (Golden and Wiens-Tuers, 2005; Drago et al., 2008; Beckers et al., 2008). Choice of moderately long hours is, for example, shaped by the intrinsic rewards of the job, that could be beneficial for health and wellbeing (Artazcoz et al., 2007), but also by family financial pressures that lead to low bargaining power at the workplace and consequently to forced long working hours (Artazcoz et al., 2009, 2013). Many workers, primarily breadwinners, are obliged to accept high work demands simply to service their family debt (Pollert and Charlwood, 2009; Pollert, 2005).

Additionally, bargaining power considerations suggest that where employers hold greater leverage over employees (such as those working in non-unionized workplaces, on temporary contracts, receiving low wages, or in situations of economic vulnerability) workers are more likely to be forced to work long hours (Stier and Lewin-Epstein, 2003). Moreover, few studies have taken into account certain potential confounding variables like temporary contracts and family characteristics (Artazcoz et al., 2009, 2013). Additionally, working in the public or the private sector (Plantenga and Remery, 2010; Landivar, 2015) or having a supervisory position could also be confounding variables (Glazer and Kruse, 2008).

Individuals' work hours are motivated, not only by their own characteristics but by the overall social structure in which they are embedded. There are large cross-national differences in the amount of time devoted to work and countries differ significantly in how strictly work hours are regulated as well as in the kinds of family models and therefore in the probability that long working hours be forced or voluntary. Both labour markets regulation and family policies are closely associated with welfare state regimes (Korpi et al., 2009).

Regarding labour markets regulations, collective agreements play a dominant role in determining working hours, while statutory maximum hours provide a safeguard for unorganized workers. There is a concern that in weakly regulated regimes, such as the United Kingdom, some forms of flexible working time arrangements may not sufficiently protect workers who do not have the collective strength to realize their preferred hours (Lee et al., 2007).

Family arrangements, and the history of these, overlap in specific ways with the welfare state regimes (Pfau-Effinger, 2004, 2005). Given the temporal constraints that family responsibilities typically impose on women's participation in paid employment, the average actual hours of work of employed men exceed those of employed women. On the other hand, the traditional role of men as family breadwinners is more likely to be related to forced long working hours when family financial stress exist (Artazcoz et al., 2009). However, the gender differences in the family sphere may differ by welfare state typologies.

Five welfare state regimes typologies have been described in Europe. Nordic countries are characterized by fairly regulated labour markets, social policies with a major role in promoting maximum employment for women and dual earner/dual carer family models, with reproduction work actively allocated to the state. Liberal countries (UK and Ireland) are characterized by deregulated labour markets, strong male breadwinner models and the dominance of the market in providing services. Continental and Southern European countries have strong labour market regulations, male breadwinner family models, low levels of support for female participation in the labour force, primary welfare responsibilities lie with the family and policies that help reconcile motherhood and careers are relatively undeveloped, primarily in Southern Europe (Ferrera, 1996). Eastern European countries combine dual earner families with a traditional division of housework and social care for three to six year old (Aidukaite, 2009).

Therefore, we expect that when long working hours are related

to family responsibilities and/or non-permanent contracts, primarily in countries with deregulated labour markets, they are more likely to be forced and then related to poor health status. It should be noted that since the start of the economic crisis, many European countries have taken a range of measures to deregulate labour markets and boost enterprise flexibility, including increasing overtime options or extending the reference period for calculating working time (Clauwaert and Schömann, 2012; Robert et al., 2014). Additionally, in Europe as men have become unemployed, women have expanded their labour supply contributions not only in unpaid work, but also in paid work, even under conditions of extremely low remuneration (Antonopoulos, 2009).

The objectives of this study are: 1) to identify employment and family characteristics associated with moderately long working hours in the EU27 (41–60 h a week); 2) to examine the relationship between moderately long working hours and health; and 3) to analyse whether patterns differ by gender and welfare state regimes.

2. Methods

2.1. Data

Cross-sectional study based on data from the 5th European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) of 2010, a representative sample of non-institutionalized persons aged ≥ 15 years who were in employment during the reference period. Details of the survey are reported elsewhere (Eurofound, 2012). For the purposes of this study a subsample of all employees of the 27 EU Member States (EU27) aged 16–64 and working between 30 and 60 h a week was selected. In order to avoid the effect of very long working hours, people working more than 60 h a week were excluded (1.2%). The final sample under analysis was composed of 13,518 men and 9381 women.

2.2. Variables

2.2.1. Health outcomes

Two health and well-being outcomes were examined. Data on self-perceived health status were elicited by asking respondents to describe their general health as "very good", "good", "fair", "poor" or "very poor". This variable was dichotomized by combining the categories "fair", "poor" and "very poor" to indicate poor self-perceived health, and "very good" and "good" to indicate good perceived health. Subjective wellbeing was measured using the WHO-5 wellbeing index, which has been shown to be a reliable measure of emotional functioning and a good screen for depression. A dichotomous variable was created, where a score of ≤ 50 indicated poor psychological well-being, though not necessarily depression (Bech et al., 2003).

2.2.2. Predictor variable

Working hours were determined using two questions: "How many hours do you usually work per week in your main paid job?" and "How many hours a week on average do you work in job (s) other than your main paid job?" Number of hours were summed and grouped into three categories 30–40 h (reference category), 41–50 h, and 51–60 h.

2.2.3. Family characteristics

Family characteristics were measured through the partner/marital status (married or cohabiting and other), main contributor of household income (yes/no) and number of children at home (none, one and two or more).

2.2.4. Employment characteristics

Job category – a proxy of job qualification and socioeconomic

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