



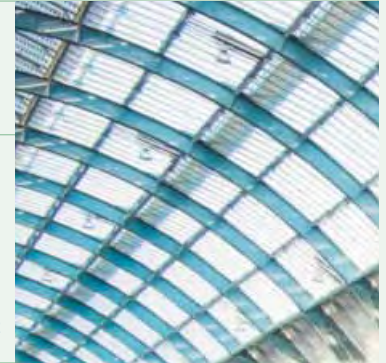
European Foundation for the
Improvement of Living and
Working Conditions



Social work sector: Working conditions and job quality

'Work plays a significant role in people's lives, in the functioning of companies and in society at large. But what is work? How can we describe it? Is it changing, and if so, is it for better or for worse? Is it fulfilling the numerous and at times conflicting expectations we have of it? How can we take steps to improve work for the well-being of all?'

Eurofound, *Fifth European Working Conditions Survey: Overview report, 2012*



This report gives an overview of working conditions, job quality, workers' health and job sustainability in the social work sector (NACE 88).¹ It is based mostly on the fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), which gathers data on working conditions and the quality of work across 34 European countries. Additional information on the structural characteristics of the sector is derived from Eurostat data. The sector contains all social work activities for the elderly and the disabled, child day-care activities, and all other social work activities that do not involve accommodation. The fifth EWCS contains responses from 875 workers in this sector. The report compares aspects of work in the sector with the EU28 as a whole.

Structural characteristics

In 2010, 4,838,800 European workers worked in the social work sector, 2.2% of the EU28 workforce (Eurostat, 2013). Employment in the sector increased substantially (5.9%) between 2008 and 2010, and increased again (2.6%) between 2010 and 2012.

Countries where the social work sector is a relatively large employer are Denmark (7.5%), Finland (5.0%), the Netherlands (4.4%) and France (4.0%). In Estonia (0%), Lithuania (0.4%), Croatia (0.4%), Slovenia (0.4%) and Cyprus (0.4%) relatively few workers are employed in the sector. The proportion of workers in social work (41%) who work in micro-workplaces (1–9 employees)

is very similar to that of all workers in the EU28 (42%). However, the percentage of workers in social work in small and medium-sized workplaces (SMEs, 10–249 employees, 54%) is larger than in the EU28 (46%) and the percentage working in large workplaces (250+ employees) is smaller than in the EU28 as a whole (5% and 12% respectively).

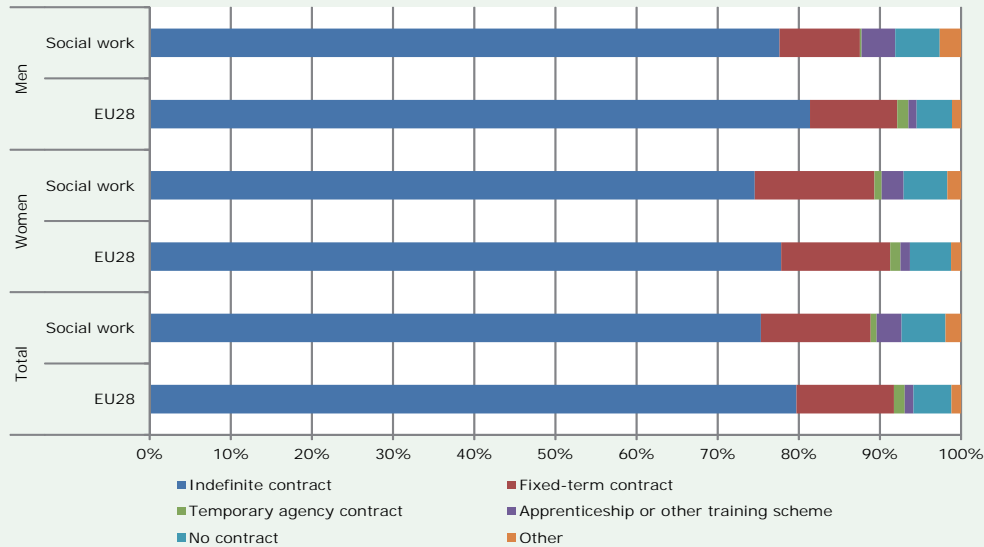
The sector is female-dominated, with 83% of workers being women. The sector has the same proportion of younger workers (15–24 years) as the EU28 (9%) and a slightly higher proportion of older workers (50 years and over) than the EU28 as a whole: 30% compared with 27%. Self-employment is less common in social work than in other sectors: just 1% of workers are self-employed with employees and 7% are self-employed without employees, compared to 4% and 11% respectively in the EU28. Fixed-term contracts and apprenticeship schemes are slightly more prevalent in social work than in the EU28 as a whole, while indefinite contracts are less prevalent. However, men working in social work have a lower proportion of fixed-term contracts than men in the EU28 (Figure 1).

Social work in a nutshell

- The sector is relatively large in Scandinavian and west European countries
- Workers report a good work–life balance
- A relatively high proportion of men and younger workers report being under-skilled
- Levels of employer-paid training are much higher than in the EU28 as a whole
- Many clerical workers work in autonomous teams

¹ Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne (statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community).

Figure 1: Employment status, by gender



Part-time work is more prevalent in the social work sector than in the EU28: 50% of women and 28% of men in social work work 34 hours or less, compared to 38% of women and 12% of men in the EU28.

workplaces: 34% of workers in social work working in large workplaces report an increase in the number of hours worked in the previous year compared to only 19% of all workers in large workplaces in the EU28.

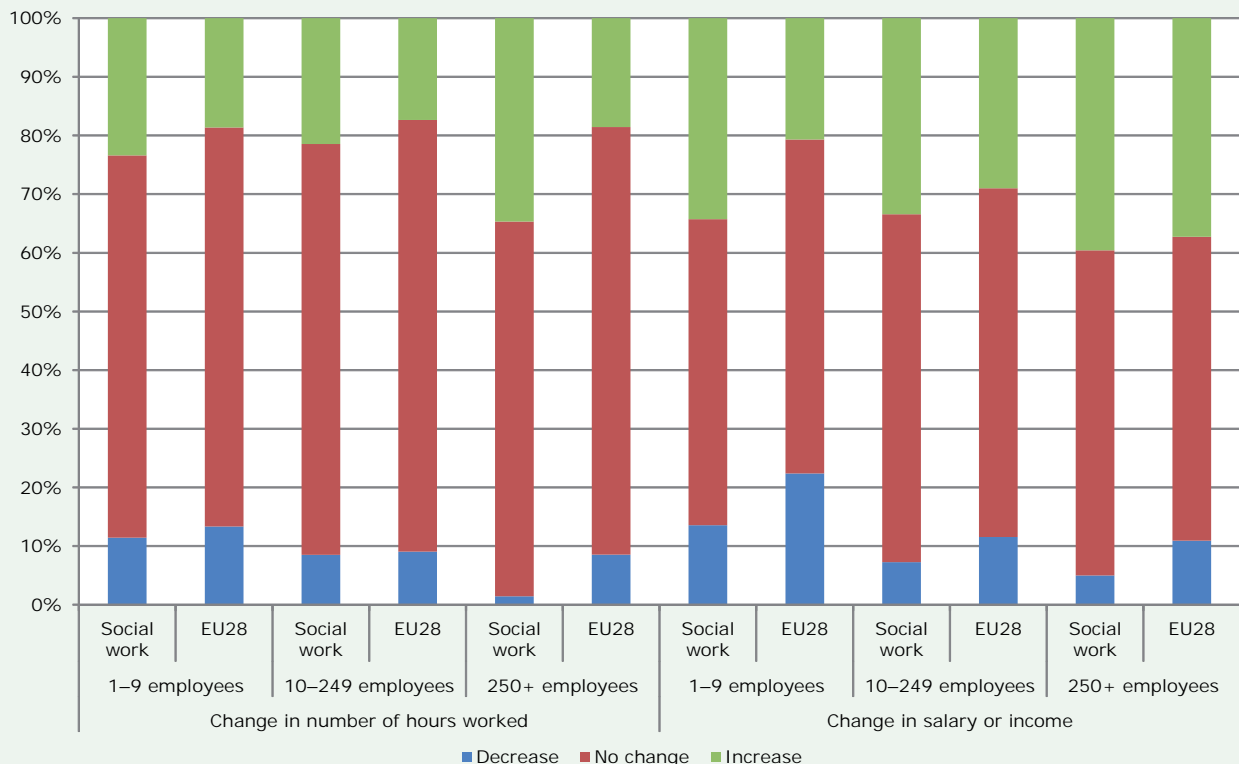
Working conditions

Changes since the crisis

Figure 2 shows that the social work sector differs from the EU28 average in terms of reported changes in hours worked. Workers in the sector more often report that their working hours have increased in the year prior to the survey than workers in the EU28. This difference is especially large for workers in large

workplaces. For all sizes of workplace, an increase in salary during the previous year was more common than a salary decrease. Increases in salary were more common in the social work sector than in the EU28 workforce as a whole. The difference is especially high for micro-workplaces. Wage cuts in this sector were less frequent than in the EU28 as a whole for all sizes of workplace. However, following the EU28 trend, workers in the sector working in micro-workplaces

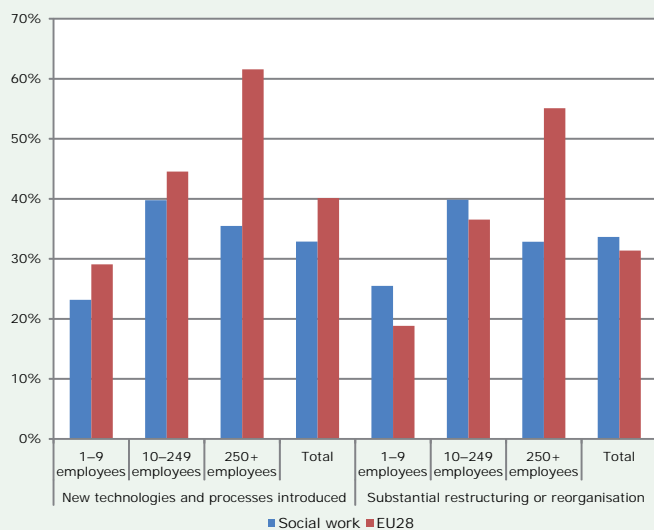
Figure 2: Percentage of employees reporting changes in number of hours worked and salary or income in past year, by workplace size



were more frequently affected by wage cuts than those working in SMEs and large workplaces.

In terms of restructuring and the introduction of new technologies (Figure 3), workers in social work were much less affected than the EU28 average worker. The difference was particularly prominent for large workplaces. On the other hand, workers in the sector working in micro-workplaces and SMEs experienced restructuring or reorganisation more frequently than the average EU28 worker, and those in large workplaces experienced restructuring or reorganisation less frequently than the EU28 average.

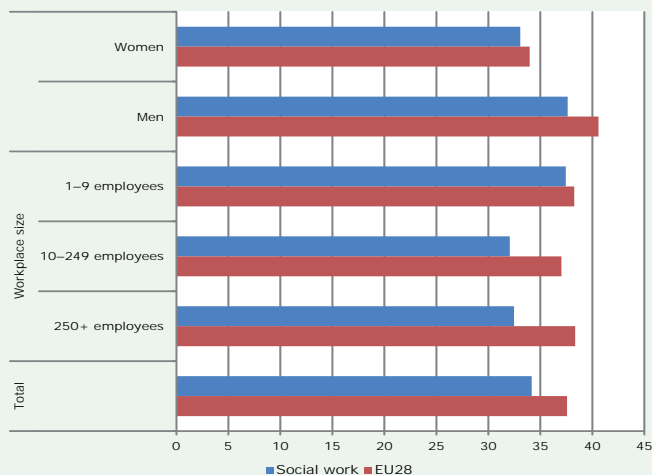
Figure 3: Restructuring and introduction of new technologies in past three years, by workplace size



Working time and work-life balance

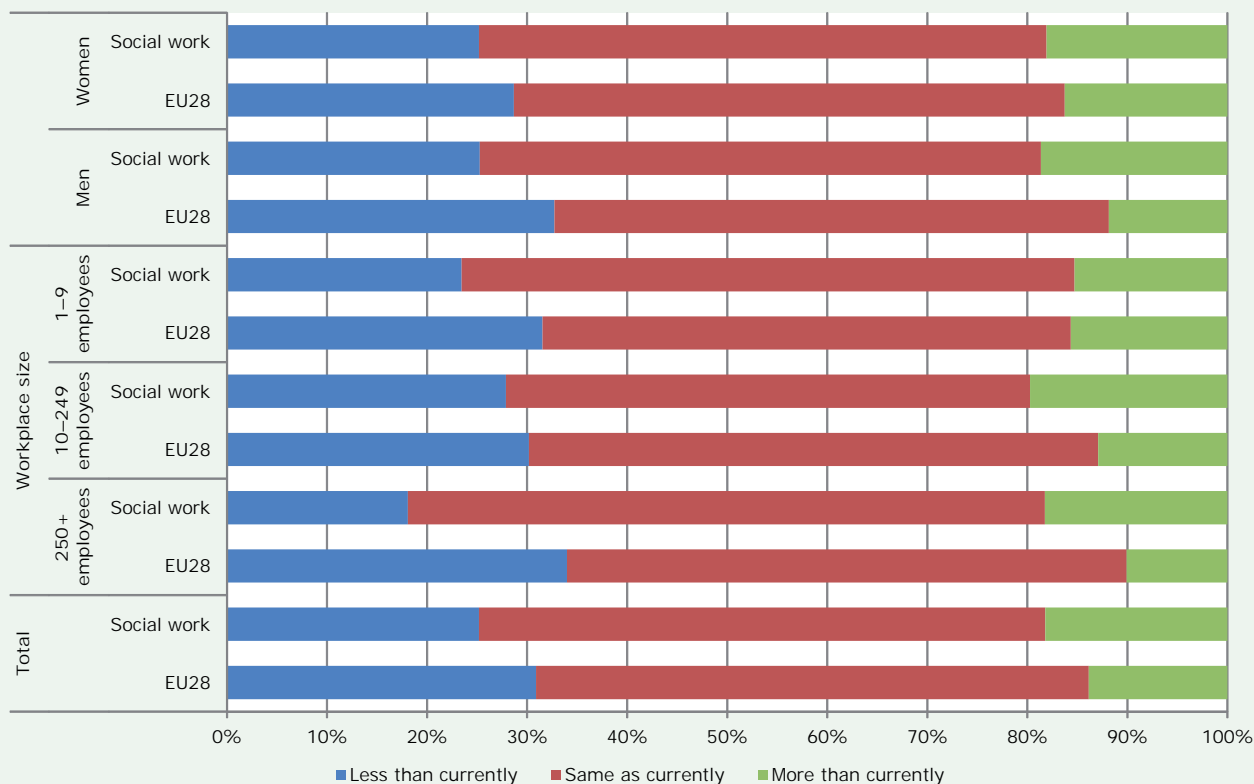
Workers in social work on average work 34 hours per week compared to 38 hours for the average EU28 worker. As in the EU28, men in this sector tend to work more hours than women (Figure 4). In the EU28, working time does not vary much across different size workplaces. In the social work sector, however, workers in micro-workplaces tend to work more hours than those in SMEs and large workplaces.

Figure 4: Average working hours, by gender and workplace size



Workers in the social work sector are less likely to prefer working fewer hours than workers in the EU28 as a whole, and they are more likely to express a preference for working more hours (Figure 5). The

Figure 5: Working time preference, by gender and workplace size

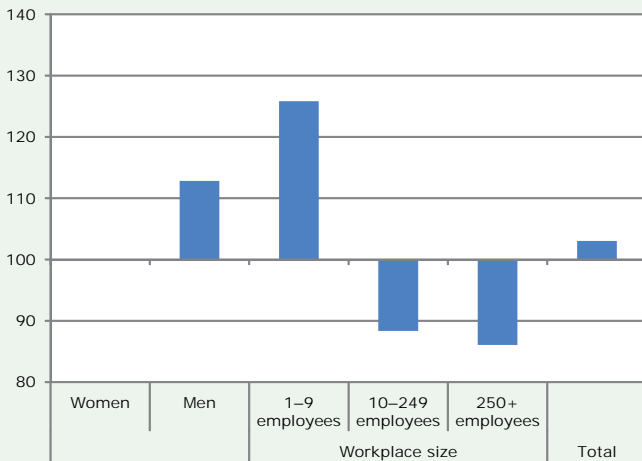


exceptions are workers in micro-workplaces, whose preferences are closer to those of the EU28 average.

In micro-workplaces the share of individuals preferring to work fewer hours (23%) is slightly higher than in larger workplaces and, at the same time, the share of those preferring to work more hours (15%) is considerably lower than in SMEs (20%) and large workplaces (18%).

Figure 6 shows that working atypical hours (weekends, evenings and/or nights) is almost as prevalent in social work as in the EU28 as a whole.

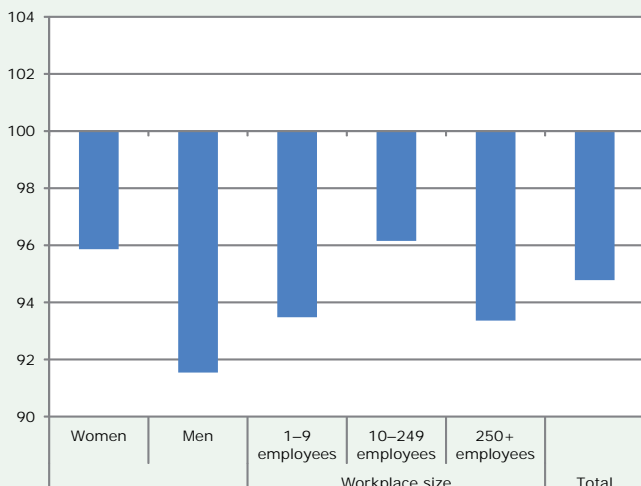
Figure 6: Index of working atypical hours (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



However, men in the sector tend to work more atypical hours than the EU28 average. Workers in micro-workplaces are more likely to work atypical hours than those in small, medium-sized and large workplaces and are much more likely to work atypical hours than workers in the EU28 as a whole.

Working hours in the social work sector are slightly less regular than in the EU28 as a whole, but differences are not very large (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Index of regularity of working time (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size

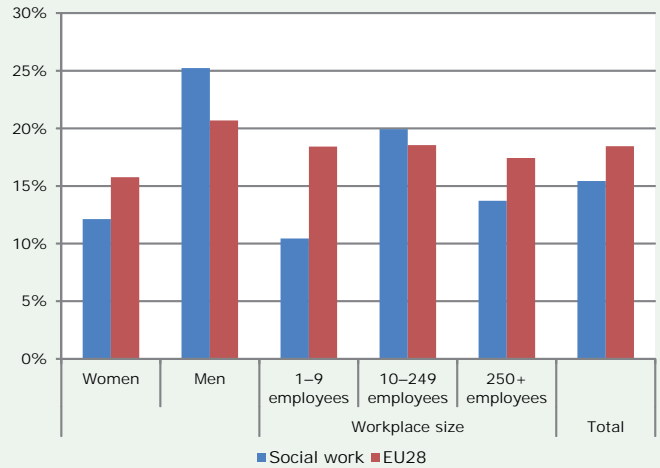


Both men and women in the social work sector report slightly less regular working time than the average EU28 worker. Figure 7 also shows that workers in micro and large workplaces tend to have less regular working time than those in medium-sized workplaces.

Figure 8 shows that work-life balance (the fit between working hours and family or social commitments) is better for those working in the social work sector than in the EU28 as a whole. However, there are some exceptions to this general trend. The first exception is that more men working in this sector tend to report a poor work-life balance than the EU28 average.

The second exception is individuals working in SMEs who report a slightly poorer work-life balance than the average EU28 worker in a workplace of similar size.

Figure 8: Poor work-life balance, by gender and workplace size



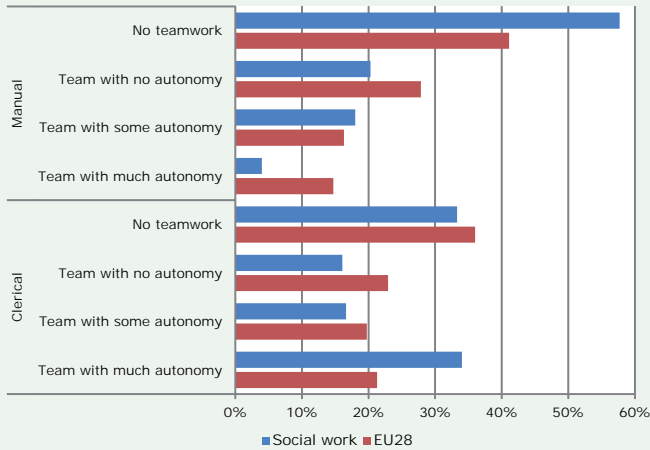
Work organisation

Teamwork

Teamwork has been proposed as an alternative to work organisation models based on high levels of labour division. As teamwork reflects a variety of practices, it can also assume a variety of forms. Different types of teamwork can be identified using the EWCS by looking at the level of autonomy within the teams.

For manual workers in the social work sector, teamwork is less prevalent than in the EU28 (Figure 9). However, the pattern is reversed in the case of clerical workers. Clerical workers in the social work sector tend to work in teams and have greater autonomy than the average clerical worker in the EU28 (34% and 21% respectively).

Figure 9: Teamwork and team autonomy, by occupational category



Task rotation

Task rotation is also an important feature of work organisation. Depending on how it is implemented, task rotation may require different skills from the worker ('multiskilling') or may not ('fixed task rotation') and is either controlled by management or by the workers themselves ('autonomous'). Task rotation has been shown to be beneficial for workers' well-being, and autonomous multiskilling systems in particular are associated with higher worker motivation as well as better company performance. Figure 10 shows that, for all categories of workplace size, workers in social work tend to report rotating tasks, using different skills and deciding the division of tasks by themselves

('autonomous multiskilling') more frequently than the EU28 average. At the same time, having no task rotation is less common in the sector than in the EU28, with the exception of large workplaces.

Female bosses

It is interesting to note that in the social work sector 74% of women and 51% of men report having a female boss. These figures are considerably higher than the EU28 average of 47% in the case of women and 12% for men. However, overall, the percentage of female bosses (68%) is still considerably smaller than the percentage of female workers (83%) in the sector.

Skills and training

Overall, the majority of workers in the social work sector say that their present skills correspond well with their duties (Figure 11), which is slightly below the EU28 average. Overall, workers in the social work sector are more likely to report being 'under-skilled' (21%) and less likely to report being 'over-skilled' (29%) than in the EU28 as a whole (13% and 32%, respectively). Male workers in the sector are less likely to be 'over-skilled' than the average EU28 male worker, and much more likely to report 'under-skilled'. A similar pattern is found for young workers in the sector, with 28% of workers under 35 reporting to be 'under-skilled', compared to the EU28 average of 16%. At the same time, young workers in this sector report being 'over-skilled' (24%) much less frequently than in the EU28 (31%).

The percentage of workers in social work who report having received training is much higher than in the EU28 (Figure 12).

Figure 10: Prevalence of task rotation, by workplace size

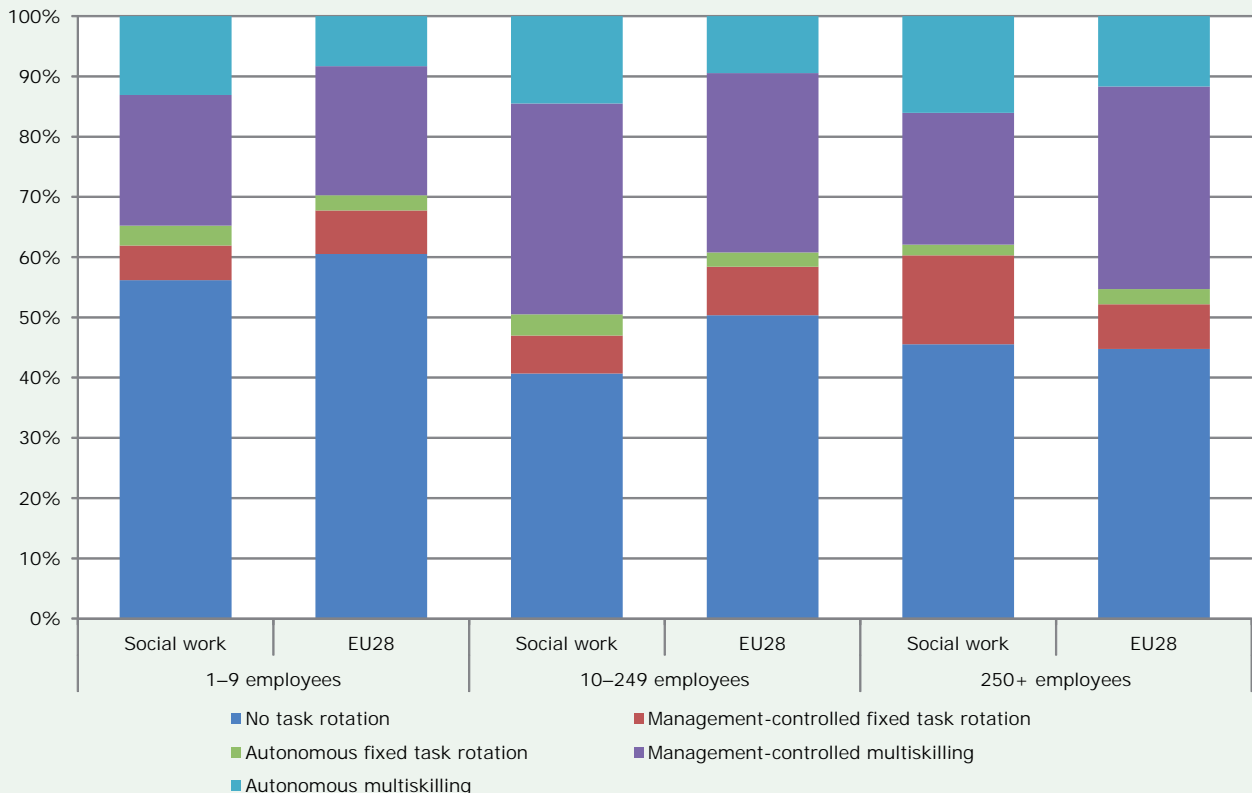


Figure 11: Match between skills and tasks, by age group

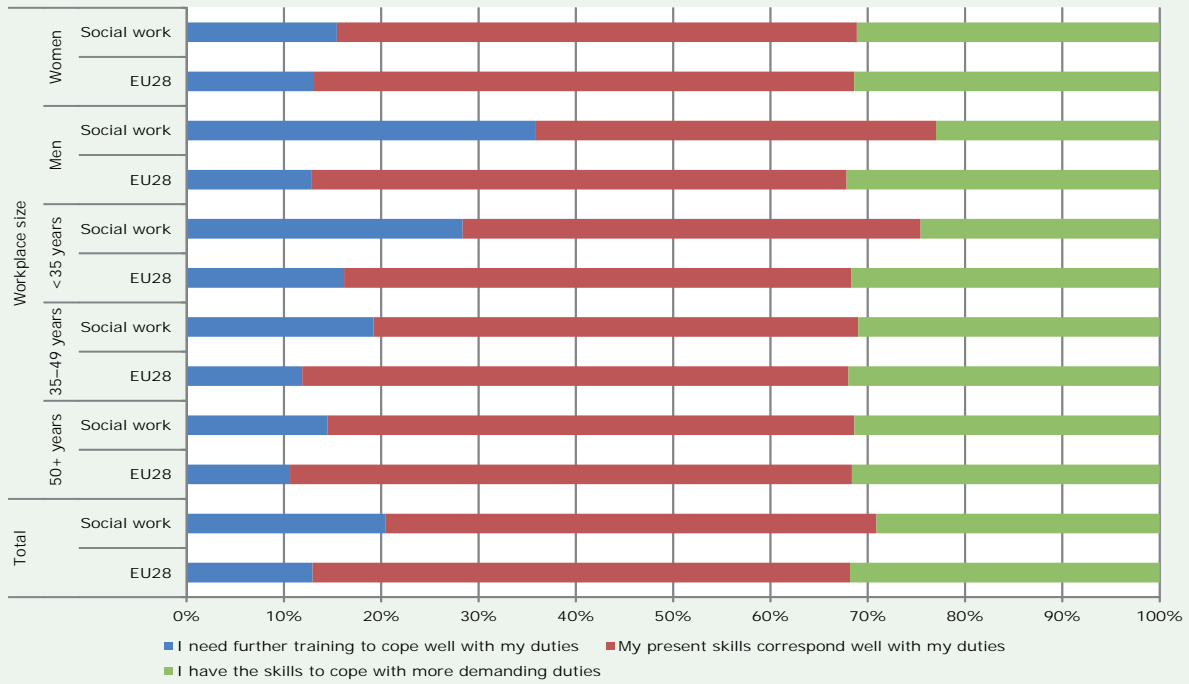
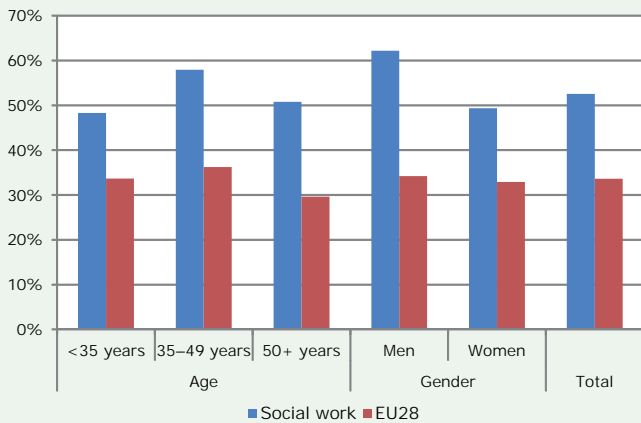


Figure 12: Employer-paid training, by gender and age



The differences are most pronounced for workers aged 35 to 49 and workers over 50 and for men.

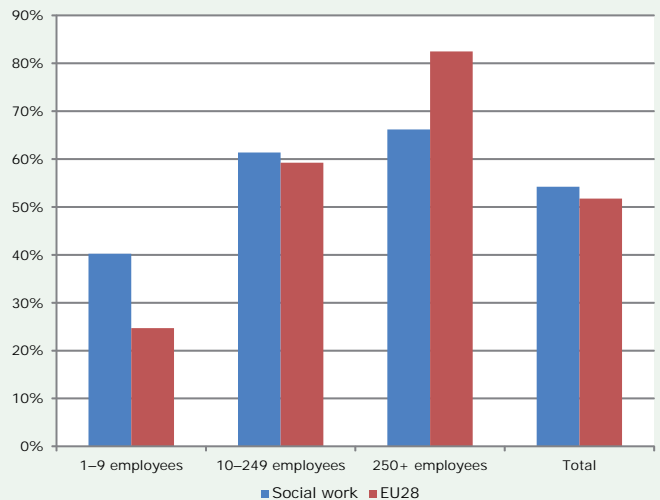
Employee representation

The EWCS contains fairly limited information on formal employee representation. It asks whether an employee representative is present at the workplace and whether workers have raised an issue with an employee representative in the past year. Figure 13 shows the combined results of these questions (an employee representative has been considered to be 'available' if they are present at the workplace or when an issue was raised).

In 2010, 54% of employees in social work reported that an employee representative was available compared to 52% of workers in the EU28. As is the case in the EU28, the more workers employed in the workplace, the higher the probability of having an employee representative present, although this relationship seems to be weaker for the social work sector. In micro-workplaces, employee representation is much more common in the social work sector (40%)

than in the EU28 (25%). On the other hand, in large workplaces, employee representation in the sector (66%) is well below the EU28 average (82%).

Figure 13: Availability of an employee representative at the workplace, by workplace size



Psychosocial and physical environment

Job autonomy and work intensity

The psychosocial and physical environment impacts heavily on workers' well-being. According to the job demand and control model of the American sociologist Karasek (1979), workers are more likely to suffer from work-related stress when they are faced with a high level of demand while being limited in the control they have over the way in which they carry out their job.

Figure 14 shows the likelihood of workers in the social work sector suffering from work-related stress. Groups of workers are plotted along two axes: job autonomy and work intensity.

Figure 14: Distribution of groups of workers by average levels of job autonomy and work intensity

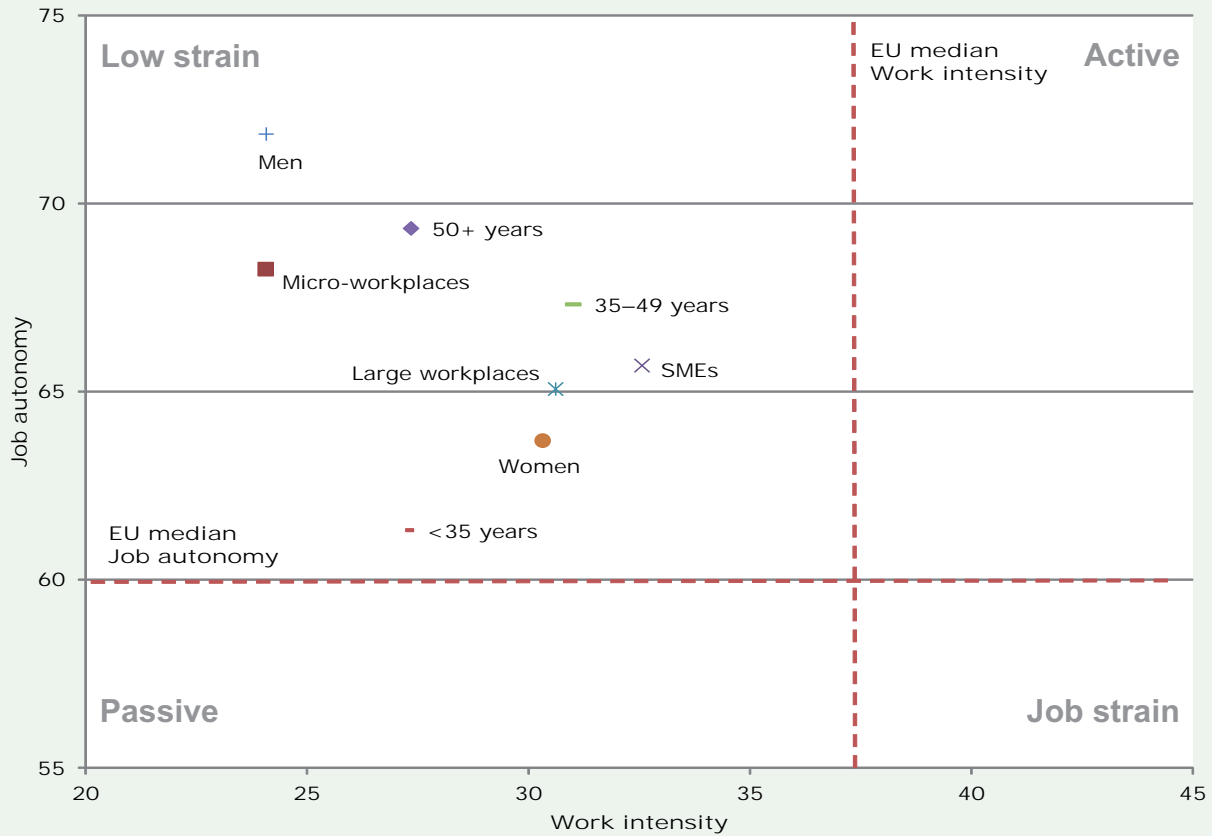


Figure 14 shows that workers in the social work sector, independently of gender, age and workplace size, tend to be in ‘low strain’ jobs, characterised by low levels of work intensity and high levels of job autonomy. Due to the relatively low levels of work intensity these workers are at low risk of stress, and as they enjoy relatively high levels of job autonomy they are not very likely to suffer from frustration or loss of motivation. However, their jobs might not challenge them to realise their full potential. Jobs that are more challenging in this regard are the jobs in the top right quadrant: ‘active’ jobs with relatively high levels of work intensity but also with high levels of job autonomy. Although these jobs can be very demanding, workers have sufficient discretion to choose the way in which they do their job and are challenged into developing their potential to the full. Relatively few worker in the social work sector can be found in this or in the other two quadrants. The two bottom quadrants are ‘passive’ jobs on the left, characterised by relatively low levels of intensity and relatively low levels of autonomy. The risk of work-related stress is low in this type of job, but workers are at risk of frustration and low motivation as their jobs are not sufficiently challenging and they have little control about what they do in their job and how they do it. And, finally, the most problematic category is ‘job strain’ in the bottom right quadrant. These jobs are characterised by higher than average levels of intensity as well as lower than average levels of autonomy. Workers in these jobs run the risk of accumulating high levels of unresolved strain, which can cause unhealthy stress levels and consequently

a range of stress-related illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and mental health problems.

Social environment

A good social environment is characterised by the existence of social support and the absence of abuse at work. Social support can help workers deal with high levels of work intensity. The social environment in workplaces in the social work sector tends to be poorer than in the EU28, but the difference is not very large (Figure 15). Men working in the sector report a less favourable social environment than women, and a decline in the quality of the social environment can also be seen in SMEs and large workplaces, compared to micro-workplaces.

Figure 15: Index of good social environment (EU28 = 100), by gender and workplace size

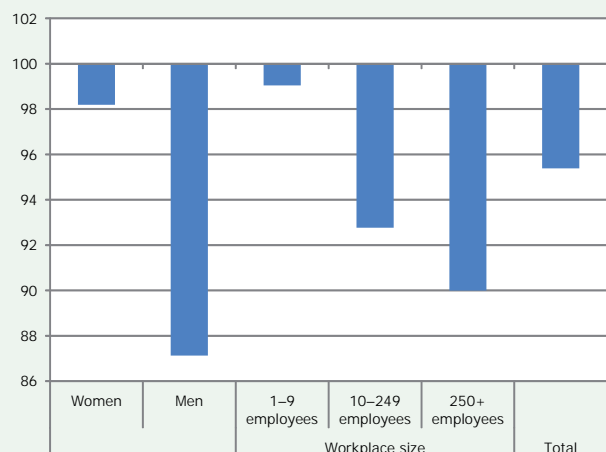
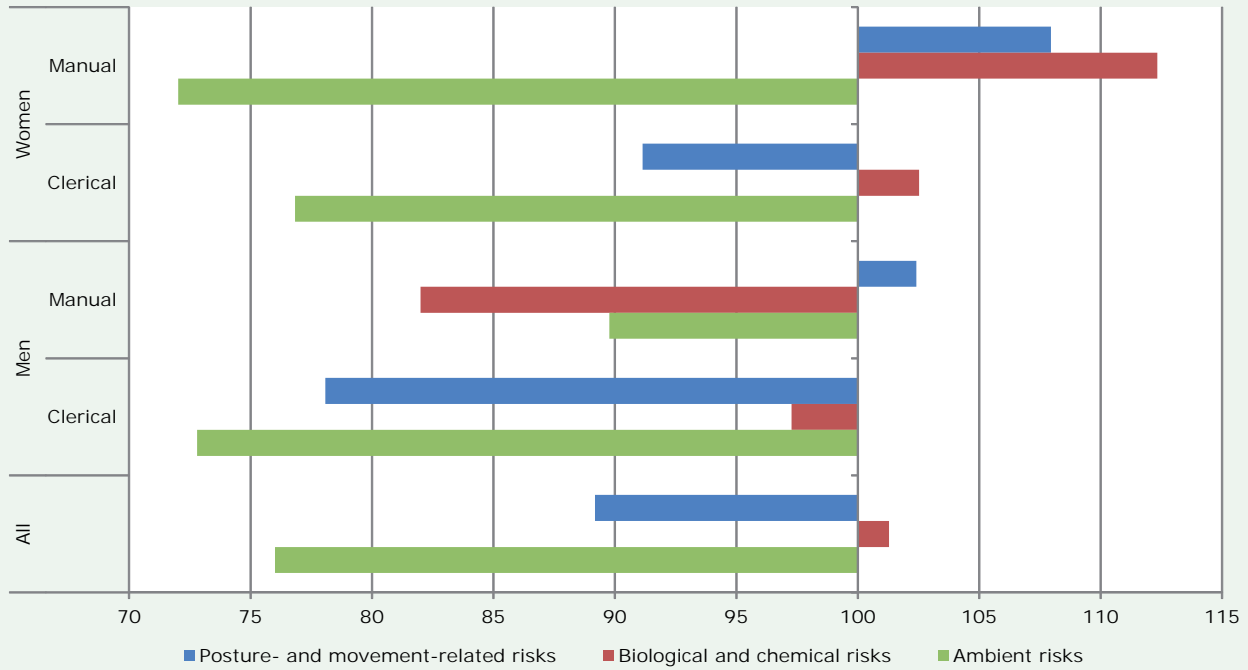


Figure 16: Indices of exposure to physical risks (EU28 = 100), by gender and occupation

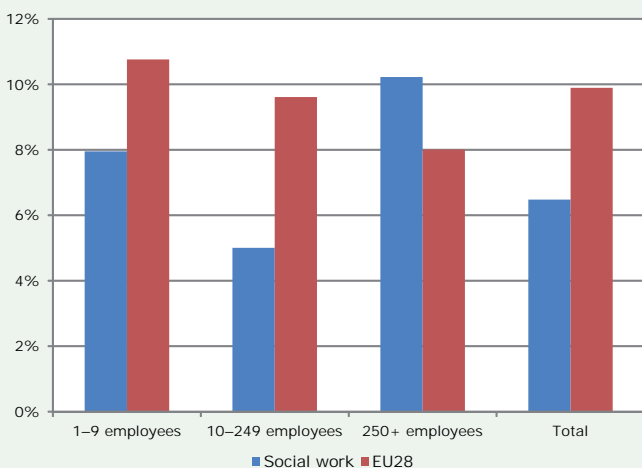


Physical risks

Exposure to biological and chemical risks is the most prevalent type of risk in social work. Levels of exposure to posture- and movement-related risks and ambient risks in social work are much lower than in the EU28 as a whole.

However, women in manual jobs report higher exposure to posture- and movement-related risks and biological and chemical risks than the EU28 average. Women in the sector working in clerical positions are slightly above the EU28 average in respect to biological and chemical risks, and men in manual positions report levels of exposure to posture- and movement-related risks that are also higher than in the EU28.

Figure 17: Not very well or not at all well informed about health and safety risks at work, by workplace size



Only 7% of workers in the social work sector report being not very well or not at all well informed about workplace risks, compared to 10% in the EU28 (Figure 17). Contrary to the pattern in the EU28 as a whole, the percentage of workers in this sector who are not sufficiently informed is higher in large workplaces (10%), than in micro (8%) and small and medium workplaces (5%).

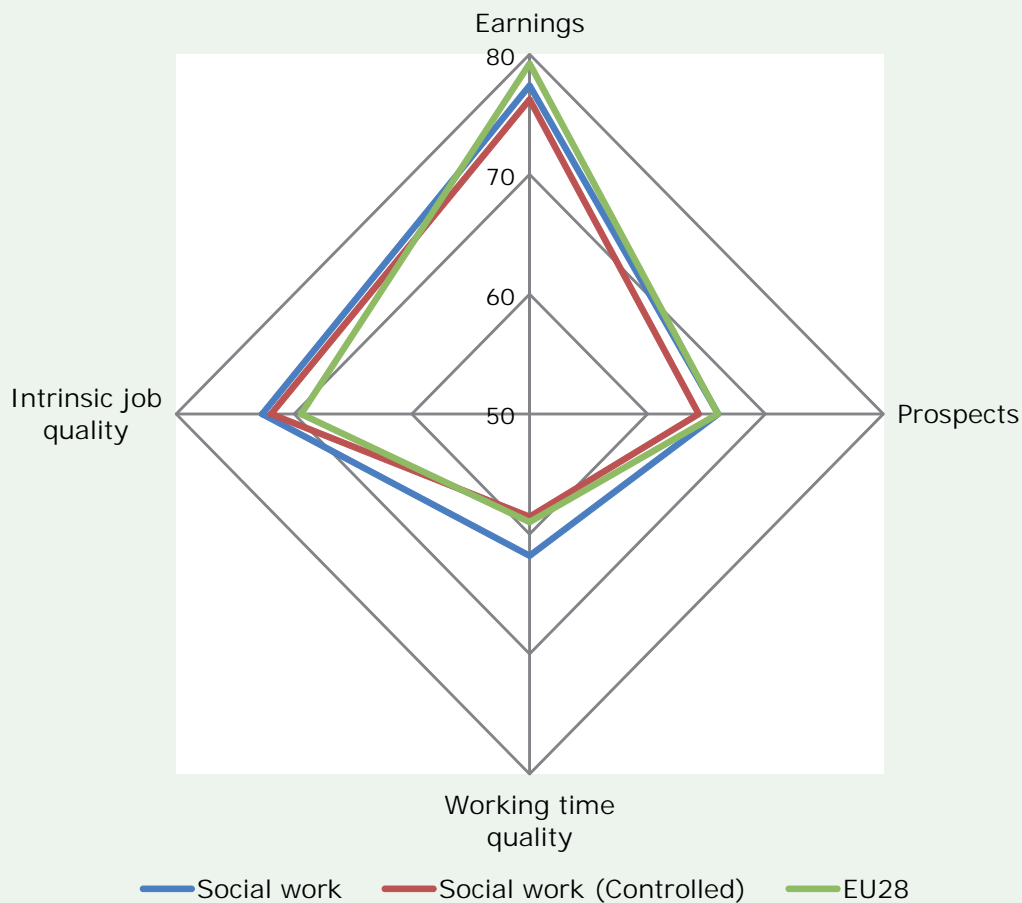
Job quality

In the report *Trends in job quality in Europe*, the authors constructed four indices of job quality: earnings, prospects, intrinsic job quality and working time quality. The indices are built using job characteristics that are unambiguously associated with workers' well-being.

Figure 18 summarises job quality in the social work sector. It shows the average score for the sector on each of the indicators, with and without controlling for the structural characteristics of the sector's workers (age, gender, workplace size, education level and country), and for the EU28.

The graph shows that job quality in the social work sector on most dimensions does not differ much from the average in the EU28. Only for earnings does the sector score slightly worse than the EU28 average. Controlling for the structural characteristics of the workforce, such as gender, age, education level, establishment size and country does not change the results.

Figure 18: Job quality in the social work sector compared with EU28



Note: Scores on all four indicators range from 0 to 100

Health and sustainability of work

Working conditions can impact both positively and negatively on the health of workers and on the sustainability of their jobs.

Figure 19 shows that the social work sector compares favourably with the EU28 in terms of the lower incidence of absenteeism due to work accidents. However, a slightly higher proportion of workers have poor self-reported health. The proportion of workers reporting that their health is at risk because of work and reporting that work affects their health negatively is very similar to that of the EU28.

The sector reports a slightly higher proportion of workers who report having worked when they were sick than the EU28 average (presenteeism), and also a higher proportion of workers reporting that they think they will be able to do their job at age 60. The difference between social work and the EU28 in terms of the poor self-reported health remains significant even if taking into account differences in gender, age, education, workplace size and country. On the other hand, the differences between the EU28 averages and higher rates of presenteeism and of workers stating that they would be able to do their job at the age of 60 disappear after taking into consideration these other factors. It is also interesting to note that negative differences remain between the sector and the EU28 in health at risk due to work and work affecting health after controlling for these factors.

Figure 19: Health and sustainability of work

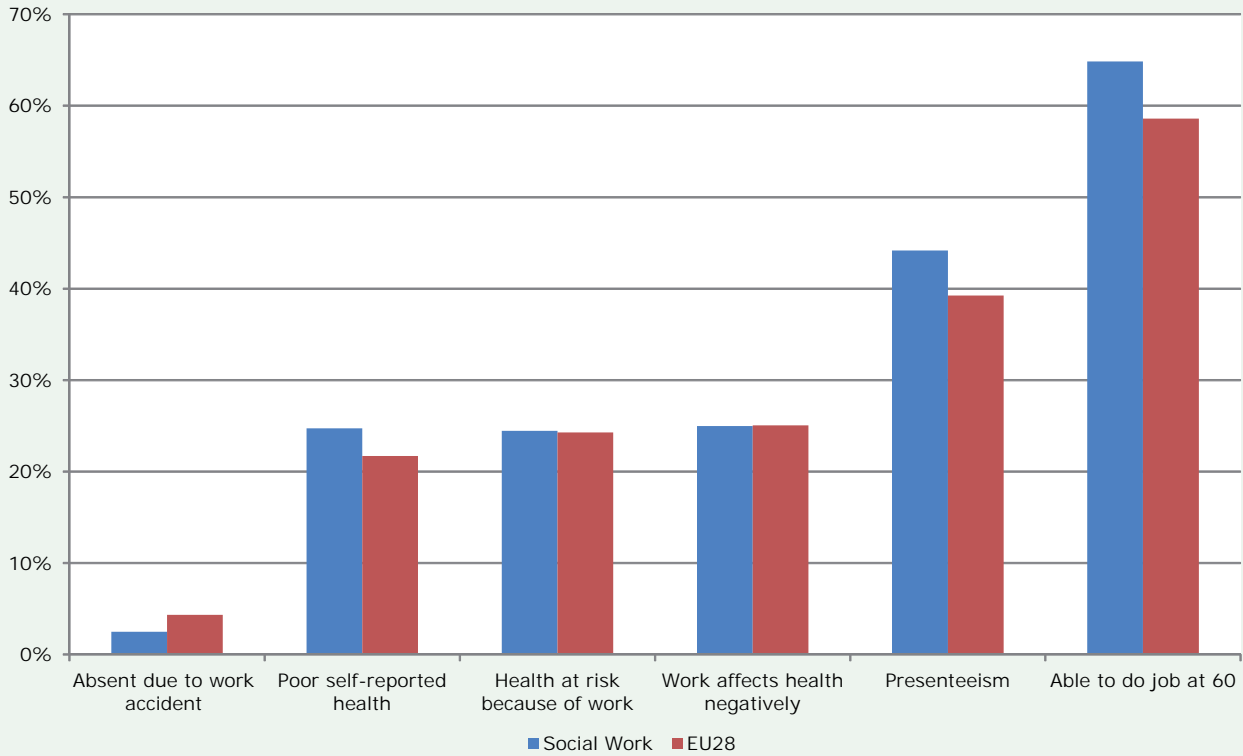
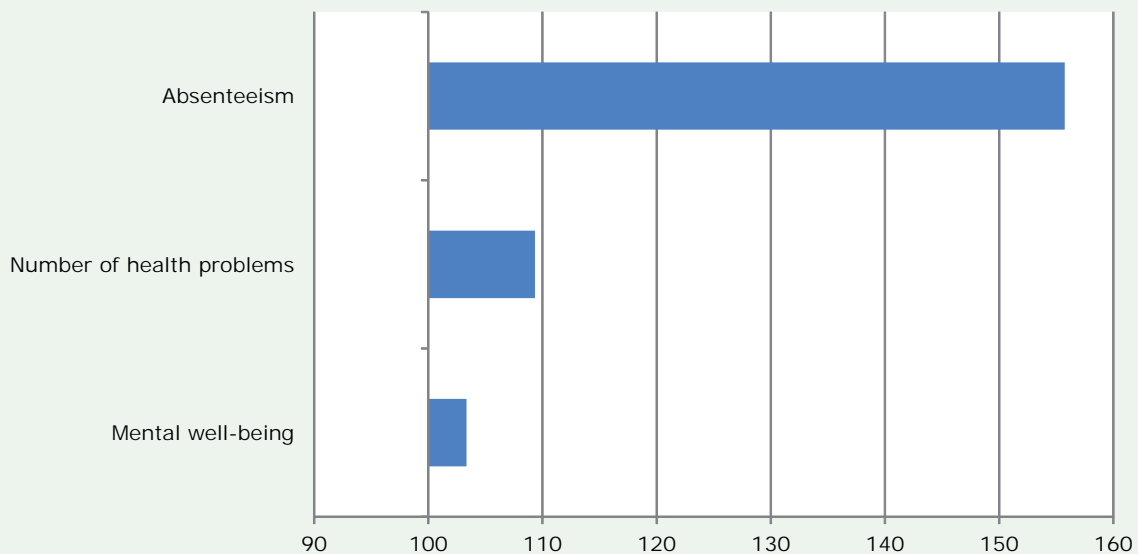


Figure 20 shows a high absenteeism rate in the social work sector compared with the EU28 average. The number of health problems and mental well-being are also slightly above the EU28 average. Neither the high absenteeism nor the above-average number of health problems seem to be explained by differences in the age, gender, workplace size or education of workers in this sector.

It is important to bear in mind that the impact of work on health is a very gradual process that can take a long time and cannot be fully captured in a cross-sectional survey. The results in this section are likely to underestimate the often negative health effects that physically and psychologically strenuous working conditions can have.

Figure 20: Indices of health symptoms, mental well-being and absenteeism (EU28 = 100)



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European Working Conditions Survey

Eurofound developed its European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) in 1990 in order to provide high-quality information on living and working conditions in Europe. Five waves of the survey have been carried out to date, enabling long-term trends to be observed and analysed.

The EWCS interviews both employees and self-employed people on key issues related to their work and employment. Fieldwork for the fifth EWCS took place from January to June 2010, with almost 44,000 workers interviewed in their homes in 34 countries – EU28, Norway, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. The 5th EWCS was implemented by Gallup Europe, who worked within a strong quality assurance framework to ensure the highest possible standards in all data collection and editing processes.

The questionnaire covered issues such as precarious employment, leadership styles and worker participation as well as the general job context, working time, work organisation, pay, work-related health risks, cognitive and psychosocial factors, work-life balance and access to training. A number of questions were included to capture the impact of the economic downturn on working conditions.

For more information on the EWCS, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/index.htm>

Sectoral analysis

The report *Working conditions and job quality: Comparing sectors in Europe* and the series of 33 sectoral information sheets aim to capture the diversity prevalent across sectors in Europe in terms of working conditions and job quality. The report pinpoints trends across sectors in areas such as working time and work-life balance, work organisation, skills and training, employee representation and the psychosocial and physical environment. It identifies sectors that score particularly well or particularly poorly in terms of job quality and sheds light on differences between sectors in terms of health and well-being.

For more information, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/2010/sectorprofiles.htm>

Further information

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