

# **Work–Life Balance**

**British-German Trades Union Forum Conference Report**



**Anglo-German Foundation**  
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# **Work-Life Balance**

Conference Report

**2007**

*Sixth British-German Trades Union Forum*

2 and 3 July 2007

## **Work–Life Balance**

Conference Report

**October 2007**

**Anglo-German Foundation  
for the Study of Industrial Society**

**Hans-Böckler-Stiftung  
Düsseldorf**

**Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung,  
London Office**

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## Summary

The ‘work–life balance’ is a term describing a new sphere of activity in the realm of representation of interests at the workplace. In July 2007 the British–German Trade Union Forum discussed the diverse trade union activities at the interface of ‘good work’ and ‘good life’ for two days in Hamburg. After focusing on the topics of minimum wages and industrial relations in previous years, this sixth forum centred on the question of how employees can better balance their jobs and their private lives.

The introductory speeches revealed that the British debate basically centres on the subject of time. Employees in the UK at the present time have never been further from the utopia of ‘work in the morning, music in the afternoon and philosophizing in the evening’. It is no coincidence that Jo Morris and Jane Pillinger at the Hamburg conference gave their trade union report on the ‘Organisation of work in the 21st century’ the title ‘Out of Time’ and described the work–life balance as at the ‘heart of social policy in Europe’.

In today’s management literature, consideration of employees’ personal interests is a business imperative. A study by the Work Foundation argues (like studies by the Prognos-Institut for the German Ministry for Family Affairs) that companies must be considerate of private wishes and obligations if only for economic reasons – in order to motivate their employees and retain their loyalty. However, most firms continue to adhere to the standard employment contract plus overtime – a male habit that focuses almost exclusively on work and gives other aspects of life a much lower priority.

Even when companies talk about work–life concepts, when it comes down to brass tacks in industrial conflicts priority is given to company interests. The win–win situation promised by many consultants frequently fails to materialise; the discrepancy between the differently structured areas of life – occupation and private life – worsens. Barbara Thiessen from the Deutsches Jugendinstitut referred in Hamburg to Arlie Hochschild’s study ‘The Time Bind’, which precisely describes this quandary. The American sociologist noted that every fifth person surveyed manifested a complete turnaround from traditional attributes: well-educated employees in particular sometimes perceive their occupation as the exciting thing in their lives – while at home only tiresome obligations await them. The Munich-based Thiessen therefore considers the work–life balance a ‘clumsy term’ that codifies ‘the old dichotomy between work and life’.

In the knowledge economy, said Stephen Bevan from the Work Foundation, only a small minority of employees are able to become ‘time lords’, exercising control over the time and place of their work. For most employees, however, work dominates their private lives: children are dropped off in the morning and picked up again in the evening, family members are fitted in between dealing with economic necessities, and in extreme cases are merely a shifting mass in a life dominated by job demands – the watchword is constant availability ‘24/7’.

In their *24/7 Survey* Julie Hurst and Wendy Richards interviewed 1,200 employees in all economic sectors in the United Kingdom. According to their report, three-quarters of those surveyed work longer hours than agreed in their contracts. Every tenth person

claimed to work more than 70 hours per week. Asked about their personal life balance, 97 per cent responded critically: it is difficult to synchronise professional and personal interests. The 2003 study worded the objective ‘to end the macho culture of long hours’ (which is also adhered to by career-minded women).

The Hamburg Trade Union Forum demonstrated that the topic of the work–life balance can hardly be treated without touching upon the gender perspective. The different time needs of men and women in their biographies, the continuing income gap between the sexes, the trap mothers fall into when they settle for working part-time jobs on a sustained basis; the male ‘one-and-a-half-person job’, which naturally relies on female care in private life: these gender-policy catchwords play a role in both Germany and the United Kingdom.

Differences were apparent in family policy, which was defined in the United Kingdom following Tony Blair’s taking office in 1997 primarily as ‘child policy’. This understanding focuses primarily on the well-being of the offspring and not on ‘parent-oriented childcare’, as Jonathan Gershuny noted. The Oxford sociologist summed it up with the simple formula that ‘more time and energy for care’ simply means ‘less time and energy for paid work’. The German female speakers cheered his demand for shorter working hours for both men and women.

Jenny Huschke of the DGB federal executive board advocated a new model of ‘short full-time work for all’. In practice, this concept is currently being thwarted by the lengthening of weekly hours and delay of retirement. Christina Klenner from the Institute of Economic and Social Research of the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung presented a differentiated model of working hour accounts based on the life course approach. Barbara Thiessen from the Deutsches Jugendinstitut also advocated arrangements that can be individually planned and aligned to biographical courses. For most people, the busiest years at work are the same as those during which they raise their families: between the ages of 25 and 45.

The German federal government’s ‘Seventh Family Report’ criticises the manner in which the federal and state governments – in contrast to those in the United Kingdom and, even more so, in Scandinavia – concentrate on direct monetary payments to parents. Another characteristic of the German debate is the growing importance of demographic issues. Thiessen emphasised that the main problem is not demographics, however, but structural social inequality: it is not sufficient to improve the situation only of the highly qualified.

‘Good work’, ‘good life’ and their interrelations form a trade union field of action that has become far more than a ‘women’s issue’ and will gain in significance in future. Since the amendment of the *Betriebsverfassungsgesetz* (Works Constitution Act) in 2001, the work–life balance and harmonisation of job and family are official tasks of interest representation in Germany. The British schemes, which were explained in Hamburg by Rowena Hayward for Bristol City Council and by Billy Hayes for the Royal Mail, are already very much oriented to the operational level.

Trade union policy criticises the male-dominated management culture characterised by virtually arbitrary availability and extremely long working hours. This leaves employees little leeway – apart from commendable examples cited at the Hamburg conference in Eva Viehoff’s (Alfred-Wegener-Institut) presentation – to successfully balance their working and private lives.

# Introduction

## **United Kingdom: Jo Morris and Jane Pillinger**

Jo Morris and Jane Pillinger presented results from the research study 'Out of Time – Organising Work in the UK for the 21st Century', commissioned by the TUC. The modern world of work is characterised by diversity: different forms of employment and a colourful blend of lifestyles exist alongside one another in the global 24-hour economy. The question for trade unions is whether they should limit their aspirations to actual employment issues or also make the relationship between working and private lives one of their concerns.

The political agenda proposed by the TUC is oriented towards personal biographies and the complex interaction of gender roles. The wage gap between men and women and how working hours are organised are central topics. The work–life balance is a pivotal subject matter of the future and is becoming, according to Jane Pillinger, the 'heart of social policy in Europe'.

The United Kingdom has the fourth highest labour force participation rate in the European Union and the fifth highest in female employment. Nevertheless, many women work only part-time – with grave consequences for their income, which lags far behind that of male employees. Compared with women's short working hours, men tend to work exceedingly long hours – even though the number of those working more than 48 hours per week has dropped significantly in the past decade due to trade union campaigns.

The United Kingdom continues to be dominated by a male 'long hours culture' and this is the greatest impediment to a successful work–life balance for employees. At the same time, this culture supports the traditional gender ratio: women are not rewarded for their flexible part-time work, but are 'penalised' with particularly low incomes. Poorly paid jobs are a 'mummy trap'. The traditional private division of paid work and unpaid nurturing remains largely unchanged.

In the United Kingdom the problem of reconciling work and family has so far been solved by flexible female part-time work. Despite all the diversity in forms of working and living, male full-time work, frequently still involving overtime, remains the prevalent employment standard. The challenge for the British trade unions is to combine individualised choices for one's personal work–life balance with a regulated and socially-safeguarded protective framework in the world of work.

## Germany: Christina Stockfisch and Jenny Huschke

Christina Stockfisch and Jenny Huschke of the DGB federal executive board sketched out a political framework which, in Germany, constitutes a major change. Since the 2001 amendment of the Works Constitution Act the subject matter 'work–life balance' has been laid down as a sphere of action for works councils – and it is developing into a new challenge for stakeholders. The Act on Part-Time Work and Fixed-Term Employment, too, has been in force since 2001, for the first time granting employees a personal right to part-time work – if they work in businesses with more than 15 employees and their request does not conflict with 'operational considerations'.

The new parental benefit act came into force at the beginning of 2007, guaranteeing mothers and fathers taking baby leave 67 per cent of their last net monthly wage (€1,800 maximum) for one year. Two additional 'partner months' are linked to the condition that the parent previously in full-time employment (usually the father) also becomes involved in childcare. Alongside this time-out, parents are permitted to work up to 30 hours per week.

Supposedly, the currently entirely inadequate state of child care for those under three years of age in Germany will undergo distinct improvement over the next few years. In large cities and rural districts, there are now about 400 *Bündnisse für Familie* (alliances for the family), in which regional actors have joined together, with the participation of the trade unions. The federal government advocates the *family-minded business* and is holding a biannual company competition for the 'Success factor: family'. Five hundred firms have had themselves certified in the past decade by the *Audit Beruf und Familie* of the private Hertie Foundation.

Despite all the family-friendly rhetoric from experts and business consultants, weekly working hours and lifelong working times are being extended in Germany. The retirement age was raised to 67 years; the trade union battle for shorter general working hours has stagnated since the 1990s. Academics with close trade union ties, such as the Bremen economist Helmut Spitzley, demand 'short full-time' for both sexes and flexible working hour models that employees can influence and plan themselves.

In company reality, working hours have become longer, especially for men. As in the United Kingdom, the work–life balance in families is created by women giving up gainful employment; 45 per cent of women work part-time and 80 per cent of part-time jobs are held by women. They are elbowed out of the world of work not only by having children, but also by caring for elderly relatives. Trade union proposals to differentiate the length of working hours according to life phases and to link shorter working hours with the right to return to a full-time job have as yet barely been realised in practice.

# **Session 1 a**

## **‘Working time’ – ‘Living time’: How to achieve a balance?**

### **Jonathan Gershuny, Oxford University: Gender inequality in production and reproduction: Gender, time allocation and the wage gap**

Jonathan Gershuny, professor of sociology at Oxford University, spoke first about the wage and salary gap between the sexes. Whether they work full-time or part-time, British men always earn far more than women, given the same weekly hours. According to Gershuny, the reason for this difference is the private division of labour outside the world of work.

The sociologist humorously described typical arrangements between the sexes by giving a twist to the well-known Cinderella fairytale. In the tale, the prince marries the kitchen maid and turns her into a princess, whilst in reality the prince marries a princess and then turns her into a kitchen maid.

A research team at Gershuny’s faculty at Oxford studied how men and women spend their time based on detailed daily journals. He summarised the chief results of the study in a number of simple points:

- The time and energy that people can dedicate to work each day is limited.
- The progress of one’s professional career is an indicator of what percentage of time and energy are dedicated to paid work.
- Housework and child raising are also work.
- Expending more time and energy on unpaid care means less time and energy for paid work.
- Since most unpaid work is still done by women, they are unable to compete on the employment market and so earn less.
- The birth of the first child deepens the division of labour between the sexes to an especially grave extent.

From this status quo, Gershuny drew up the following demands for political action:

- Shorter working hours for men and women.
- Family leave not only for mothers, but also for fathers.
- Flexible working hours for both parents.
- Free childcare programmes.
- Day care schemes aligned to the needs of children and not only to parents’ (usually work-related) needs for support.

**Barbara Thiessen, Deutsches Jugendinstitut:  
Good work, good life – Perspectives for a life course  
approach in social and family policy**

Barbara Thiessen judged the term ‘work–life balance’ as clumsy because it codifies the old dichotomy between ‘work’ and a ‘good life’ only beyond the world of work. In this context, she referred to the research results of the American sociologist Arlie Hochschild. In a large company investigated by Hochschild for her study ‘The Time Bind’ – a demonstratively family-friendly business in the Midwest of the United States – the job has become employees’ real home. Well-qualified employees in particular perceive not their private lives, but their jobs as the exciting and emotionally stirring part of life, while at home only tiresome and less prestigious tasks await them.

The family is in the grip of rapid social change. The old idea of the ‘one-and-a-half person job’, in which male sole earners can rely wholly on their wives’ ‘work for love’ is far from today’s reality. Ways of work and ways of life are becoming more diversified: ‘patchwork’ families, the polarisation between childless and family-centred lifestyles, high divorce rates, increasing female employment and the erosion of fatherhood are some of the catchwords. Egalitarian gender arrangements and the ‘double income family’ will be the new norm for the long term.

The German federal government’s Seventh Family Report, which was compiled under the responsibility of the Deutsches Jugendinstitut, advocates a political scheme that follows the life course point of view. The three decisive factors are time, money and infrastructure. During the ‘rush hour’ of midlife, many people – both men and women – feel overtaxed. Between the ages of 25 and 45 they are not only expected to start a family and have children, but at the same time to get ahead in their career and focus particularly intensively on their work.

In closing, Barbara Thiessen set out the following theses:

- Work–life balance concepts (as well as many elements of family policy) are aimed primarily at the middle class and highly qualified employees.
- Family policy has gained significance in Germany, but is increasingly based on demographic concerns. The real ‘time bomb’, however, is not demographics, but social inequality.
- Families and their individual strategies cannot solve the structural problems of society.
- Taxpayers’ money is not employed efficiently and fairly. The government spends too much money on direct payments, whilst neglecting appointments and equipment for schools or childcare facilities, for instance.
- A ‘good life’ in terms of a successful way of living includes time for training and gainful employment, as well as time for relationships and care and, let’s not forget, time for one’s self.
- Of the three central pillars of time, money and infrastructure, the trade unions can best influence the time factor. Schemes for time policies that are family-friendly and take a life course approach are a field of future action for the unions.

## Points from the debate

- The debate on the work-life balance is not really new, although it may have been given different names in the past. The DGB was addressing issues such as the salary gap between men and women in the 1980s and 1990s, although it usually did not go beyond moral appeals. Is this because men are afraid to fall behind equally or better qualified women?
- In male-dominated trade unions such as the German IG Metall, the work-life balance is the subject of controversy and meets with reservations. Greater use of parental leave by fathers represents an opportunity, for after baby leave men would have the same questions as women: How can I re-enter the workforce on the same footing? How can I get my job back?
- Appeals to fathers to take family leave frequently fall on deaf ears. Some men simply have a different perception of a 'good life', such as adventure, travel and sport.
- The managerial strategies of employers impede a successful work-life balance. Many part-time jobs, surveys show, are simply 'too short'. Employees would, for example, prefer to work 25 or 30 hours rather than only 20 hours. Even less do they want to be pushed into the marginal employment of 'mini jobs'.
- Is it necessary for family-friendly human resources policy to be economically profitable at all, as the business consultants always argue? Isn't orientation to children and families a desirable social objective 'in itself'?

## Session 1 b

### **Christina Klenner, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung: Flexibility and reliability – Working time arrangements and work-life balance over the life course**

Christina Klenner presented a model of working hours policy based on the life course approach that she developed at the Institute of Economics and Social Research of the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung. She based her work on life course studies in the USA and in Germany, gerontology research on flexible retirement, projects by the European Foundation and studies on so-called transitional labour markets by the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin.

The life course approach means acknowledging the decisive role that time plays in understanding personal behaviour – and to consider not only specific events in life, but the entire course of life. The research approach is lent particular significance by the changing framework conditions: demographic change is manifested in increased life expectancy, population ageing and the necessity of lifelong learning. Increased gainful employment of women and of mothers in particular makes reconciling family and work a central social issue. Companies are providing ever fewer lifelong positions; ‘perforated’ employment histories are characterised by frequent changes of job, which may also be interrupted by phases of unemployment.

Individualisation and pluralisation of life paths make it necessary to differentiate employee groups according to biographical phases. Depending on their personal situations, new workforce entrants, childless couples, families, single parents, older couples and people re-entering the workforce following unemployment, illness or time-out prefer different kinds of working hours. These include part-time and full-time jobs, motherhood or fatherhood leave, parental leave or leave for caring for a family member, sabbaticals, educational leave, working time accounts and flexible transition to retirement.

The way in which work is organised at the workplace is still oriented to the traditional standard labour conditions and contracts. Deviations from this continue to be seen as exceptions and a particular challenge. Legal foundations and collective agreements are increasingly creating leeway for family-friendly provisions such as the reduction of weekly working hours, parental leave or leaves of absence to take care of sick children. Working time accounts are an especially versatile possibility for aligning working times to the rhythms of children and for making the daily lives of families easier to plan and more predictable.

Not only parents, but other employees have individual scheduling needs. Time account models are not only helpful during the family phase, but can ensure more flexibility throughout the entire course of life and ease the transition to retirement. Family-friendly solutions should always be embedded in any in-company debate about the work-life balance for all employees.

## **Stephen Bevan, The Work Foundation: Transforming work – Design of the workplace of the future**

Stephen Bevan described the options for a successful work–life balance in the ‘knowledge economy’. This economy has winners and losers – and surprisingly, some of the losers are highly qualified: up to 10 per cent of employees in the UK, estimates the Work Foundation, are overqualified for the work they do.

In a ‘frontierless’ economy based on digital technology, the old boundaries between paid and unpaid work, between job and private life are blurred. New types of work organisation develop. Employees want to reach flexible arrangements that are harmonised with their needs – and not merely with those of customers, who demand individualised services preferably at any time and in any place.

Stephen Bevan presented a typology of four different models of work and lifestyles in the knowledge economy. These types are differentiated chiefly by the extent to which employees can shape them autonomously and on their own terms. Only a small minority of employees are able to become ‘time lords’: competent decision-makers who can determine the time and place of their professional work themselves.

The ‘remote controllers’ are able perhaps to work from a café or even the beach, as networked telecommuters, yet their workload is firmly integrated in a fixed company schedule. By contrast, the ‘time stretchers’ have great freedom in their working hours, but they cannot move their workplace to their home office or elsewhere – they are spatially closely bound to their company (or its customers). The ‘shift shapers’, finally, are modern work slaves that correspond most to employees of the old industrial society: they can neither decide where they wish to work nor determine their own working hours.

Control over time is a political objective that is not only crucial in conjunction with family-related tasks, such as raising children or caring for elderly family members. It is a very general matter of high quality of work and life. A balance is just as necessary for male employees as for female employees.

The debate over the work–life balance has its roots in changing lifestyles: continuing education, civic involvement, and even travel and health have become more important to us. The trade unions should act on these new needs. This, however, demands that they put aside a viewpoint that considers only full-time work as ‘proper’ and ‘valuable’.

## **Session 2**

# **Conflict of work and care in a changing labour market: How can we desegregate participation?**

### **Rowena Hayward, Bristol City Council: The 'Time of Our Lives' project 1997–2007**

The 16,000 staff of the city council in Bristol have been confronted with the issue of the work–life balance for years. Since the launch of the project 'Time of Our Lives' in 1997 the British trade union GMB, which also represents employees in the public sector, has made efforts to implement schemes improving the balance between work and private life.

The initiators are supported at national level by the peak organisation the Trades Union Congress (TUC), but also by employers' associations. In addition to the desires of employees, the project always keeps the interests of local government in mind, which aims to work more efficiently and better serve the needs of the citizens.

The results so far include a 'code of practice' for telework, an employee handbook on the working hour models offered and the development of employer offers for sabbaticals and flexible transition to retirement. In the meantime, every tenth employee of the city council occasionally works from home and 56 per cent take advantage of flexible working hours in some manner.

Rowena Hayward described resistance from middle management as the greatest impediment. Some executives or department heads dismiss the subject of work–life balance as an unimportant frill, apparently because they fear a loss of authority and control. Another central problem is the inadequate funding of the 'Time of Our Lives' project, which receives no outside grants but can make use solely of the city council's own funds.

Hayward's motto for the future of work is 'working differently': the trade unions ought to recognise the variety of personal biographies and individual circumstances and use them to develop a catalogue of offers for the work–life balance, by all means also in cooperation with employers.

## **Eva Viehoff, Alfred-Wegener-Institut für Polar- und Meeresforschung: Concepts of the work–life balance in Bremerhaven**

Once, hundreds of thousands of emigrants boarded ships to America in Bremerhaven. Today, the North Sea city is characterised by dismal post-war buildings; the unemployment rate is far higher than the average in other regions of Germany. It is difficult to lure qualified skilled workers to this region, reported Eva Viehoff, staff council at the Alfred-Wegener-Institut für Polar- und Meeresforschung. The highly specialised and internationally oriented research centre, now the second-largest employer in the town, relies on well-trained young recruits – and therefore invests in the ‘work–life balance’.

Management and employee representatives together attempt to make up for the disadvantages of a remote location with attractive working hour models, extensive childcare services, programmes that promote women and a perceptibly family-oriented working atmosphere. A single father in management was the initiator of the scheme. With a fairly typical history, Eva Viehoff, who is also the Equal Opportunity Officer at the research facility, believes that only after male executives make the work–life balance their personal concern and serve as a personal example will something begin to be done about this topic, which is not popular with all superiors.

The human resources department considers the family-friendly schemes primarily as support for highly qualified female employees in order not to lose them during the family phase, but keep them in the company. The first company agreement on flexible working hours was signed as early as 1987 at the Polar Research Institute and the choices have since been supplemented by further options.

Flexitime and working time accounts are a matter of course; parental leave is just as desirable as a six-month sabbatical. Employees may use these temporary breaks for further education or for longer stays abroad. They finance three of the months from their savings and the funds for the remaining three months are provided by the employer – a generous and, compared with other firms, exceptional financing model.

The plan for the promotion of women, which also lays down quotas and family-friendly working hours, guarantees that employees can always return from a part-time to a full-time position. Another detail lends the concern for a successful work–life balance in Bremerhaven special weight: the coordinator of the exemplary programme of in-house childcare is not a woman, as in most cases, but a man.

**Billy Hayes, Secretary General CWU:  
Challenges of work–life balance and culture change in a male  
dominated industry: the Royal Mail**

Billy Hayes described the British Royal Mail as a workplace dominated by men and manual labour. In the past, only 15 per cent of the staff were women; the expansion of part-time work has raised this quota to 20 per cent in recent years. Efforts by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) have obtained improvements for female employees and the union has taken up such issues as family-friendly working conditions, further training, bullying and sexual harassment.

The union participated in the establishment of workplace kindergartens and a system of childcare vouchers. These vouchers enable employees to pay for qualified care by childminders. The CWU also supported the lawsuit of a female union member against the Royal Mail Group, who succeeded in asserting her right to parental leave for an adopted child. It is nevertheless noticeable, said Billy Hayes, that many women in this male-dominated company culture do not dare to state their grievances, let alone take their rights to court.

The CWU ensured that female workers re-entering the workplace after baby leave have a right to work flexible hours according to their wishes. The same applies to employees nursing family members. The trade union additionally continues to advocate shorter weekly working hours. The growing group of part-time workers within the company would be better off financially if all employees worked fewer hours.

A CWU study investigated the positive effects of shortening working hours on the wages of part-time employees: the reduction of weekly hours by 1.5 hours in 1988 resulted in a 3.5 per cent increase in the hourly wages of part-time workers. Similarly, the reduction in 2000 by one hour brought about a wage increase of 3.75 per cent. According to CWU calculations, a further reduction from the present 40 to 39 hours per week could mean a 5.5 per cent rise in income for part-time staff.

More than half the trade union members in the United Kingdom are women. Representation of their interests is by no means merely an academic, but a real social issue. Since the workforces of even traditional men's domains such as the Royal Mail are becoming increasingly feminised, efforts in pursuit of the work–life balance increase the appeal of trade unions in such restructured companies.

## Points from the debate

- Eva Viehoff's presentation was like a report from 'employee paradise'. The privileged working conditions at the Bremerhaven research institute are a rarity among German companies – and have even less in common with circumstances in the United Kingdom.
- The trade unions cannot evade the pressure for workplace flexibilisation forever. In the retail trade with its lengthened opening hours, for instance, work can no longer be done according to the old 'nine to five' pattern.
- The examples from workplaces prove how important it is to listen to members and sound out their needs. The trade unions have an important role to play in changing male-dominated company cultures such as that of the Royal Mail.

## Session 3

# Gender equality and work-life balance

### **Catalene Passchier, ETUC Confederal Secretary: Change of culture at work and at home – A challenge for the trade union agenda**

Catalene Passchier began by quoting a survey by the *Financial Times*, according to which 42 per cent of German women believe that having children would end their careers. Why, asked the ETUC Confederal Secretary, do German women believe this? Would the survey come up with the same dramatic results in other countries?

Wages and working hours have always been the central issues of trade union policy and interest representation. The old time utopia of the workers' movement – eight hours of work, eight hours of leisure and eight hours of sleep per day – was based on a male-oriented model of employees. The fact that men usually needed to have a woman in the background in order to be able to relax was not part of the vision. Can gender equality limit itself to enabling women to work like men?

In the 1970s, there was talk of an impending 'leisure society' in Western industrial nations. Further shortening of working hours appeared inevitable. In the meantime, the trend has reversed: a globalised economy and the mobility of workers in Europe have put great pressure on the trade unions. For example, Polish nurses are quite willing to work a 60-hour week in Germany, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom for what they consider good pay.

Delayed retirement, which politicians call for or have already implemented, can function only in combination with shorter weekly working hours – otherwise employees are simply burnt-out at the age of 60. The ETUC supports schemes for time-outs over the course of life – for raising children, nursing parents or regular further training.

Traditionally, trade unions have advocated improving male incomes as the chief source of family income. Hence, they long opposed increases in part-time work, although in many countries it is still the only means for women to be part of the workforce.

Family-friendliness and the work-life balance are not only women's issues. They are closely connected to matters such as gender equality and discrimination. In figurative terms, the women carry their children in a heavy knapsack, so that men can go to work relatively or entirely free of burdens. The results are lower wages and lower retirement pensions for female employees.

The antiquated concept of the sole male earner is slowly dissolving; new role distributions and gender ideals are being tested. In particular for young parents in families where both the father and the mother earn money and yet wish to enjoy their

family, this is an enormous burden. In addition, there is a risk that workplace conditions will force them to squeeze the children in among dealing with economic necessities. This is what the trade unions should take a stand against and design positive approaches for a successful work–life balance.

### **Concluding discussion**

- The final presentation painted too positive a picture of the present situation in Europe. Men's interest in a different distribution of roles for the sexes in particular is still in short supply. Men cannot be convinced to work fewer hours just by being told how wonderful it is to stay at home with the kids.
- Men can be motivated to support equal opportunity policies by making the economic connections clear to them: when women's work is offered only under poor conditions, while at the same time the workforce is becoming more 'female', wage levels for all, even for male employees, will come under pressure. This is therefore a situation in which everyone loses out. The trade unions must deal more intensively with issues of equality and the work–life balance.
- The most pleasing aspect of this conference was that, unlike in the past, not only women got involved in the debate on this crucial issue. Twenty years ago, questions such as reconciling job and family, or balancing work and private life were considered purely female concerns in the trade unions; men did not feel affected by them. This has changed and that gives us hope for the future.