

An Anglo-German Foundation Report

Time use and work–life balance in Germany and the UK

*Frank Bauer, Hermann Groß, Gwen Oliver,
Georg Sieglen and Mark Smith*

Executive Summary

Work–life balance has become one of the most pressing issues facing industrial societies such as Germany and the UK. As the proportion of dual-working households grows with women’s increased participation in the labour market, time pressures increase as families seek to co-ordinate and control their working lives. At the same time, pressures from employers can pull in the opposite direction as organisations try to organise time in order to be more responsive, meet consumer demands, and compete both domestically and internationally. These tensions between employer and household needs can be regarded as incompatible and, as such, result in the difficulties that families face in balancing work and non-work life. At the root of these difficulties are the challenges of organising two separate working lives and one family.

Traditionally, the male-breadwinner model of family organisation provided a relatively simple solution to the tension between work and family, albeit at the expense of gender equality. Furthermore, a ‘normal working day’ secured personal space for individual time allocation, guiding the practical organisation of everyday life: the collective character of this time order facilitating the co-ordination and synchronisation of the time available for family, friends and other activities. However, time regimes based around a ‘normal working day’ are in a process of change from various directions creating tensions at individual, household, organisational and societal levels. Similarly, while the traditional gender-specific division of labour still ‘works’ for some households, it has lost its general acceptance among many couples, particularly those of younger more educated generations. The experience of employment is also undergoing a process of change. Here the change is connected with the development from an industrial society to a ‘service society’ and with growing pressures of national and international competition. The blurring of the boundaries of work creates concerns about the erosion of limits and norms established to delineate work and non-work life. These blurred boundaries have an impact upon the spatial and temporal organisation and distribution of activities of families and individuals.

Our analysis of time use patterns in working households demonstrates how there are both considerable similarities and differences in the allocation of time across households and countries.¹ In both the UK and Germany, time use for formal work (gainful employment) can be seen to increase as childcare responsibilities decrease. These differences in the overall time use distributions are strongly affected by the underlying differences in participation of women and men across different types of household. Although there are important country differences, reflecting the underlying societal differences in the regulation of working time and norms around hours of work, we also show how dual-working couples in both countries face work–life balance difficulties, even those households where the mother only works part-time hours.

While all working families face problems in synchronising and organising their work and family lives, it is families where both parents work full-time who face the greatest pressures. We find that childcare intensity is the decisive variable in determining the amount of non-labour market work; as time allocated to childcare activities decreases, the more total time use for informal work decreases and time use for formal work increases. Dual full-time households are more common in the UK and, although there are similarities across countries between households with the same working arrangements, the impact of the long-hours culture in the UK is significant. Families in the UK spend more time at work and less time at home together; on average, dual-earning couples with children under four years in Germany spend 84 minutes more together at home each working day than their UK counterparts.

In the UK, we also found a greater spread of hours across both the day and the week. In Germany, half the working population has started work by 7.00am and, although in the UK this threshold is not reached until 7.40am, more than a half of employees are still working until 5.50pm while in Germany half of them have stopped work by 4.20pm. The share of employees confining their episodes of formal work to core hours in the UK is almost twice as large as in Germany, but core hours are more spread out in the UK. More female employees than male employees confine their working hours to the core period. The long-hours culture in the UK also extends to a greater propensity to work at weekends and bank holidays, for both women and men. However, to mitigate these pressures, families in the UK tend to draw on more paid help than in Germany although, as our results for family time show, this does not necessarily provide for a more synchronised family life.

The results presented here demonstrate the persistence of country differences and, even where we compare households with similar participation patterns, we are able to identify country-specific patterns in both the levels and gendered involvement in different activities. These differences not only represent the different approaches to the organisation of time but also the differential impact of childcare and working-time status on families in the UK and Germany.

At an aggregate level, the differences in the participation of women in formal employment clearly play an important role, but societal and policy differences also have

¹ This document presents results drawn from the UK 2000–1 National Time Use Survey and the German Time Budget Survey 2001–2, but the interpretation of the data and other views expressed in this report are those of the authors. The authors bear full responsibility for all errors and omissions in the interpretation of the data.

an impact. In the UK, the extent of long-hours working and the wider daily distribution of working times create labour market level barriers to the balance of work and family life. On the other hand, in Germany, the greater reliance on household organisation based around a non-working or part-time working partner creates a household level barrier to a more equal balance of labour market and care work. Furthermore, the larger service sector in the UK creates a double-edged sword providing services to help working families but also creating jobs that do not necessarily fit with the needs of individuals trying to balance work and family life. Families in Germany do not necessarily have access to these services but the demands of employers to create jobs with working times that deviate from the norm still exist. In fact, pressures to increase the flexibility of working time in Germany may reinforce the gender divisions highlighted in this report.

The trajectory of women's employment makes a return to the traditional model of household organisation impossible as well as undesirable from a social, equality and economic point of view. There are constant demands from employers for flexibility and willingness to adjust to operational requirements in the name of competitiveness. Thus, while the expansion of jobs within the service sector can provide work opportunities as well as services for working families, the potential to erode working-time norms is a risk. The challenge for policy makers and organisations alike is to navigate a way through the demands of working families and organisations. What our study shows is that simple limits on hours provide only a partial solution and, when we consider working time at the household level, the scheduling of time is as important for families seeking to balance work and family life. Thus, the timing of family and work life needs to be considered together with limits on working time if families are to avoid problems in the synchronisation and balancing of work and family life, with their potential negative impacts on children, families and society as a whole.

For more information please contact:

Annette Birkholz
Anglo-German Foundation/Deutsch-Britische Stiftung
Hackescher Markt 1, D-10178 Berlin, Germany
Tel +49 30 2063 4985, Fax +49 30 311 099 20
E-mail ab@agf.org.uk, Website www.agf.org.uk

Dr Frank Bauer
IAB Regional Nordrhein-Westfalen
Josef-Gockeln-Str. 7, 40474 Düsseldorf
Tel +49 211 4306 497, E-mail Frank.Bauer@iab.de or IAB-Nordrhein-Westfalen@iab.de

Dr Hermann Groß
Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Zentrale wissenschaftliche Einrichtung der Universität
Dortmund
Evinger Platz 17, 44339 Dortmund
Tel +49 231 8596 286, E-mail gross@sfs-dortmund.de

Dr Mark Smith
Manchester Business School
Booth Street West, Manchester, UK, M15 6PB
Tel: +44 161 306 3456, E-mail mark.j.smith@mbs.ac.uk

Notes to the editor:

The Anglo-German Foundation contributes to the policy process in Britain and Germany by funding comparative research on economic, environmental and social issues and by organising and supporting conferences, seminars, lectures and publications which encourage the exchange of knowledge, ideas and best practice, both between the two countries and between researchers and practitioners.

Review and reference copies of the report are available from the Anglo-German Foundation. You may also download the report free of charge from the Foundation's website at www.agf.org.uk; hard copies can be purchased and ordered at cost price from the Foundation's website via credit card.

The authors of the report are:

Frank Bauer, IAB Regional Nordrhein-Westfalen; Hermann Groß, Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund; Gwen Oliver, Manchester Business School; Georg Sieglen, IAB Regional Nordrhein-Westfalen; Mark Smith, Manchester Business School.