

Policy Brief: The Rush Hour of Life

Age and Gender Inequalities in Work and Leisure Time

Executive summary

Time devoted to paid and unpaid family work varies considerably among individuals of different age and gender. The age and gender patterns are closely related to the institutional context, such as the availability of childcare facilities and the general attitude towards working mothers. Time diaries data offer valuable information to study individual choices on the allocation of time to work and leisure activities. Our results show that, on average, people aged from 25 to 54 years experience what might be called rush hours of life: they use considerably more time for work than for leisure. However, there are remarkable differences across countries. The amount of time devoted to work is about equal for men and women in Austria. By contrast, the rush hours are more intense for women than men in Italy and Slovenia. The prevalence of full-time dual-earner couples in Slovenia results in a double shift of women, who provide the major part of unpaid work. Italian women are characterised by a large amount of time devoted to unpaid work. This results in a highly unequal gender division of work within couples, with women devoting more time to work than men. Broadening the understanding of the rush hour of life is fundamental for the development of effective work–family reconciliation policies.

Introduction

The last fifty years have brought far-reaching changes to societies, individuals and family lives. One of these changes is the entry of women into the labour market. What happened after this ‘quiet revolution’? With the increase of female labour market activity, work–family reconciliation has become a core issue of contemporary societies. Are families ‘overworked’? Are family and paid-work obligations equally distributed among the genders? Or have these social changes brought a new form of inequality, namely leisure inequality? Answering these questions is of fundamental relevance for today’s societies. Individuals and families face a trade-off between career, income and the fulfilment of their desire for children and family. Ineffective institutional response to competing work and family time demands can result in high costs for individuals and societies at large. Examples are loss of women’s market work, their lower investments in education and career, increasing risk of poverty for households with children and low fertility.

Measuring the Rush Hour of Life

Time use surveys¹ collect information on activities carried out over a time period of 24 hours. We use these data to gain insight into the distribution of work by measuring and analysing total work activities by age and gender (see Zannella, Hammer, Prskawetz & Sambt 2018). Our main objective is to quantitatively assess the rush hour of life (RHOL). That means we identify periods of life when individuals face a heavy workload due to competing work and family demands, and its cross-country variations for men and women. To quantify the rush hour of life, we assume that 8 out of 24 hours a day are spent sleeping. The remaining 16 hours per day can be devoted to ‘work time’ (encompassing paid work, unpaid work and education) and ‘free time’, which can be used for leisure activities or personal care activities including sleep above 8 hours. The ‘rush hour of life’ indicator (or in short *RHOL indicator*) across gender and age groups is calculated as the percentage share of work time in total available time. We define the RHOL as those ages, at which average working time exceeds leisure time, i.e. the values of the RHOL indicator are higher than 50%.

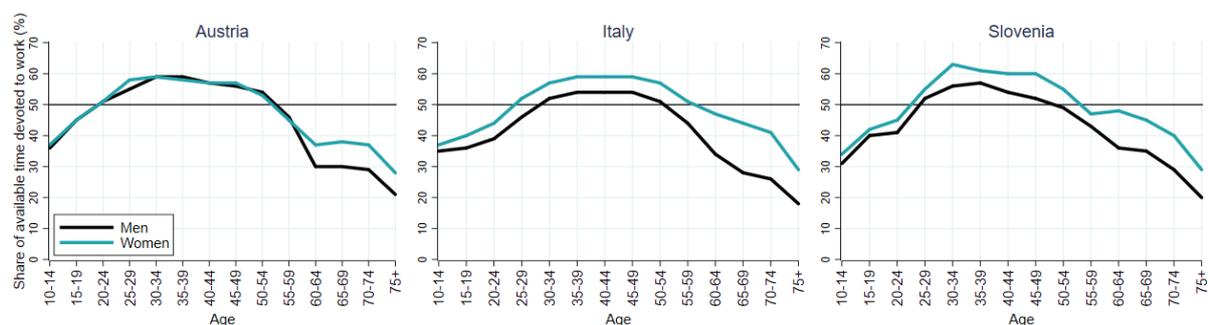


Figure 1: Share of available time devoted to work in per cent (Source: Time use surveys from Statistics Austria, ISTAT and Statistics Slovenia.)

¹ Sources: Statistik Austria, Zeitverwendungserhebung 2008/09; Istat, Indagine Multiscopo sulle famiglie: Uso del tempo 2008/09; Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, Time Use Survey 2000/2001

Most work is done at age 30–45, when individuals often face responsibilities for their children in addition to paid work (see Figure 1). Results of the RHOL indicator highlight an important similarity across countries: in all the considered settings, the population from 25 to 54 years uses more time for work activities than for leisure. In Austria, this period starts even earlier and is most intense between ages 30 to 39. However, we find no gender differences in the length or intensity of the rush hour in Austria. Total work load is relatively equally distributed among genders. In Italy and Slovenia, the rush hour starts somewhat later, which is probably the effect of a delayed transition to adulthood. Furthermore, there are clear gender differences in those countries. For women, the rush hour of life lasts longer than for men—an additional 10 years in Italy and 5 years in Slovenia. Moreover, the rush hour of life is much more intense for women than for men. The share of work time compared to the total time available has its maximum of 54% for Italian men and 57% for Slovenian men. For women, however, it reaches 59% in Italy and even 63% in Slovenia. Thus, in Italy and Slovenia, women sacrifice much more of their free time to provide paid and unpaid work.

Paid and Unpaid Work by Gender and Age

Decomposition of work activities by age and gender in Figure 2 shows the components of total work. Men spend a lot of time on paid work, some time on childcare and very little time on unpaid work. By contrast, women spend much less time on paid work, but a lot of time on unpaid work and childcare. This pattern holds in all three countries analysed. While in Austria the total workload is about equal for men and women, in Slovenia and Italy women work considerably more than men.

The difference across countries in the magnitude of the RHOL indicator for men and women suggests that total work is also affected by institutional arrangements. For example, in Slovenia more young children are enrolled in formal childcare than in Austria and Italy (Eurostat 2016). Despite this support, women in Slovenia face a high total workload: when they finish work in the formal sector they start another ‘shift’ at home. Monetary support of families together with high shares of part-time work of Austrian women facilitates the combination of work and family responsibilities. By contrast, the scarce availability of part-time work as well as of childcare services for children aged 0–3 years, is one of the reasons behind the low levels of female participation in Italy. In both Italy and Austria, low female labour market participation leads to considerably lower pensions for women.

The differences in institutional support and labour market constraints to families are reflected in different breadwinner arrangements prevalent among couples. Dual-earner couples, where both partners work full-time, are the norm in Slovenia. The modified breadwinner arrangement, with women working part-time, is the most widespread solution in Austria. The male-breadwinner model (only the man works in the market) is common in Italy where difficulties in combining paid work and family often force women to drop out of the labour force once they have children. These various breadwinner arrangements can be considered as strategies to deal with the different responsibilities and scarce time resources during the rush hour of life. The time pressure is highest in dual-earner couples. The male-breadwinner arrangement and the modified male-breadwinner arrangement (i.e. the man works full-time and the woman part-time) are strategies to alleviate the work burden.

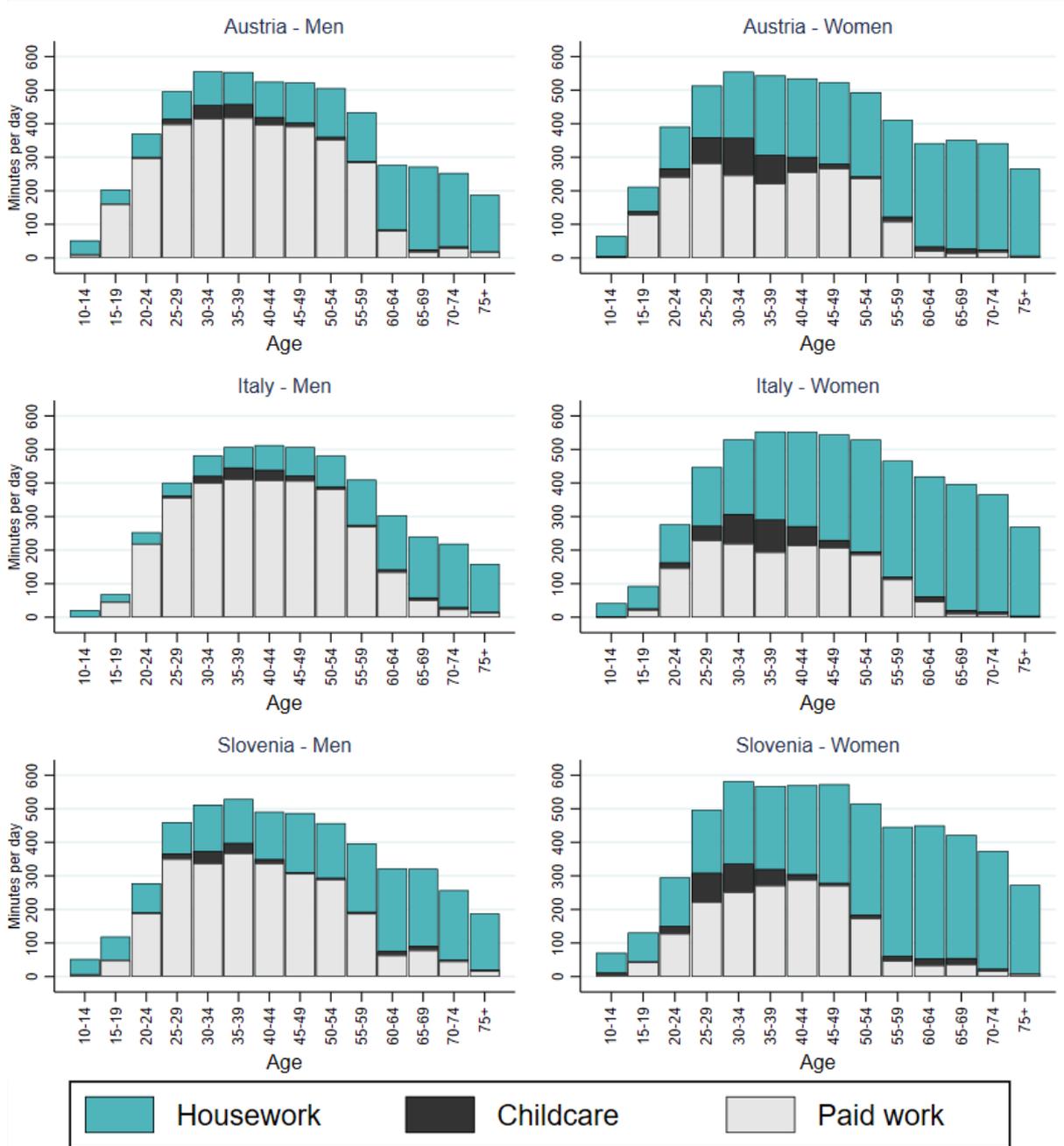


Figure 2: Production Activities by Age and Gender in Minutes per Day (Source: Zannella et al. 2018)

Conclusion

Work is highly concentrated at age 30–45, when a large share of the population carry out childcare and housework in addition to their involvement in paid work. Understanding the components and gender-specific differences of the rush hour of life is fundamental for the development of effective policies aiming at work–family reconciliation. Such policies are inherently relevant for contemporary welfare states. Abstaining from having children or from having a career are potential strategies to deal with the family–work conflict but both of these options can result in high costs for individuals and to the society. Reforms of the welfare system should take into account their effects on the time squeeze for the population in these age groups which play such an essential role in forming the human capital of the society and also in providing funding for the social systems. With the emergence of ageing societies, increased female participation in the labour market and human capital is key to ensuring the future sustainability of welfare states.

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