

## Summary and conclusions

### Free and easy?

### Women's free time, time pressure and working hours

Do women have as much free time as men? And is that free time equally 'free'? Does their free time give women as much chance to relax and do what they want to do? If not, this might explain why women experience more time pressure. It could also explain why many women, even those without young children at home, do not want to increase their working hours.

The central focus in this report is on the relationship between free time, time pressure and labour market participation. Raising the labour participation rate and, related to this, making it easier to combine paid work with care tasks, has been the central plank of Dutch emancipation policy for many years (TK2012/2013a). Existing research on choices in relation to work and care often pays scant attention to the possibility of a link with free time. Yet it is plausible that the way this time is used also plays a role: if women have less opportunity than men to really recover during their free time (for example because their free time is interrupted more or is dominated by carrying out activities with and for others), this could have an impact on their perceived time pressure and on whether or not they would like to increase their working hours. That relationship is explored in this report. In carrying out this study, we sought answers to the following research questions:

- 1 Is there a difference in the amount, use and quality of free time between women and men?
- 2 Is there a relationship among women and men between the amount and quality of free time and subjective feelings of being under time pressure?
- 3 What is the relationship between the amount and quality of free time and the number of hours women spend in paid work, including their (lack of) willingness to increase their working hours?

Given the assumed link between free time and paid work, the survey sample was restricted to women and men of working age, i.e. between the ages of 20 and 64 years; full-time students were excluded. In seeking answers to the research questions, we first drew on the 2011 edition of the Time Use Survey (TBO'11)<sup>1</sup>). The TBO contains detailed information on how people spent their time during an arbitrary week in 2011, and with whom they spent that time. We derived three indicators from this which are regarded in international research as indicative for the quality of free time: the degree of *fragmentation*, the degree to which household or care tasks are carried out in free time (*multitasking*), and the extent to which free time is spent in the presence of children (*child-focused free time*). It is assumed that shorter 'segments' of free time, multitasking and child-focused free time suggest less 'good' free time – not necessarily because this free time is by definition less satisfying,

but because it offers less scope for the person concerned to relax and do what they themselves would like.

This quantitative time use data was supplemented by focus group discussions and interviews. These provide an impression of the underlying processes that help determine why women's free time is less 'free' than that of men. To obtain a more in-depth picture of the quality of free time, we used *emotion work* as our analytical framework: which (implicit) efforts are made for the well-being of others and running the household?

This summary presents the main findings from the report, arranged under each research question.

## 1 Is there a difference in the amount, use and quality of free time between women and men?

Women spend less time in paid work than men, and more time on household and care tasks. When everything is added together, women have a total weekly workload of 45 hours, four hours less than men. In addition, women spend slightly more time on personal care. The time that remains once everything that has to be done (paid and unpaid work) or needs to be done (eating, sleeping, showering) has been done, is interpreted as free time. The women in this study have just as much free time as men (both 43-44 hours per week). Parents of young children have the least free time, single men the most. It is only among people living alone that there is a significant difference in the number of hours' free time, to the disadvantage of women.

While women have the same amount of free time as men, the times that they are free differ. Weekends are less relaxing for women than for men; during the daytime at weekends, in particular, men engage in leisure activities more often than women. On weekdays, this situation is reversed, with women more often having free time during the day.

One strategy that partners can use to ensure that they have the same amount of free time together is for the woman to work part-time. Where both partners work the same number of hours, women have less free time than men.

Women and men expect a good deal from their free time. Virtually everyone sees it as an opportunity to rest and do what they feel like doing. Three-quarters – women as often as men – also consider it important to be able to work on their self-development in their free time. The same proportion of men – three-quarters – want to be able to arrange to see friends or family during their free time. A slightly higher proportion of women attach importance to this. Whether the way free time is actually used in practice matches these wishes and expectations is difficult to say. Women and men spend more than a third of their free time watching tv or using a computer. It is unclear whether this is through their own choice, because they are watching together with someone else in the household, or because they have no energy to do anything else. The Time Use Survey also does not record whether they find these activities restful. Women devote more of their free time to social contacts, both face-to-face and by telephone or using social media. This is in line with the slightly higher importance they attach to this activity.

Women's free time is slightly more fragmented, i.e. divided up into more and shorter segments of free time. This applies for parents of young children (0-11 years) as well as for people living with a partner with no young children in the household. Single women have the same amount of free time as men, but broken up into shorter 'segments'. Rather than fragmentation per se, therefore, these women have a smaller 'free time budget'.

Multitasking during free time is not common, or else respondents did not fill in these secondary activities thoroughly enough in the two time use diaries. Women reported slightly more often than men that they did something in the household or performed care tasks during their free time. This difference is only statistically significant for cohabiting women and men without young children.

Women spend a greater proportion of their free time in the presence of children (child-focused free time). This refers to children in the same room; the Time Use Survey does not collect information on children who may be upstairs sleeping or (purportedly) doing homework. In particular, women spend more of their free time alone with children. This again is related to the fact that they frequently work part-time. Young children, especially, have to go to bed early in the evening, as soon as their father's home. The difference in this child-focused free time is particularly wide between women and men with children aged up to 3 years.

It emerged from the focus groups and interviews that women feel more responsible than men for looking after the household and caring for their children, and that this often intrudes into their free time. Women more often reported that they find it difficult to relax if there are things that have to be done. These need not be specific household or care tasks, but can also involve keeping an eye on whether everything is in order and ensuring that everyone feels content. For example, one woman stated that, as long as the children were not yet in bed, she always had the feeling of being 'on duty'. Many women feel that they are much more pressured than their partners and feel more tired at the end of the day, a picture that appeared to be confirmed by the interviews with men (who were not the women's partners). Men, for example, appear to have no problem with doing something for themselves even though the house has not been cleaned or tidied. They also feel that children should be given space to experiment, and do not feel it is necessary to watch over them the whole time.

## 2 Is there a relationship among women and men between the amount and quality of free time and subjective feelings of being under time pressure?

The majority of women and men prefer a quiet life, but often feel that their lives are fairly busy. Women feel this more often than men, in particular more often feeling under pressure of time. They do not feel that they fall short at work or at home any more often than men, and just as often think they have enough free time. We amalgamated all the questions to the respondents that focused on time pressure and falling short to create a scale measuring the degree of time pressure. Fathers and mothers of young children scored equally high on this scale. Men without young children score much lower, while women without young children score somewhere between the two. After controlling for their age,

education level, life situation and labour market participation, however, women score significantly higher on this time pressure scale. Working hours are particularly relevant. If women were to work full-time or almost full-time, as men do, they would therefore experience much more time pressure. By not doing so, they end up in roughly the same position as men in this regard.

The time pressure experienced by men and women is related to the number of hours' free time they have. Those with little free time more often feel under time pressure, with this applying more for men than for women. For men, time pressure is associated more than for women with a genuine shortage of free time. Other research has also found that time pressure is related to a shortage of free time for men but not for women. It is assumed that this is due to the poorer quality of women's free time. In our study, however, we did not find a stronger relationship between these free time quality indicators (fragmentation, multitasking and child-focused free time) and time pressure – at least, not after controlling for whether or not there are children in the household. Men with and without young children and mothers with young children do not feel under more time pressure as their free time becomes more fragmented and/or they spend more time multitasking or in the company of children. Only women without young children attach importance to this quality of free time: the more fragmented their free time is, the more they feel too busy or pressured. The interviews and focus groups show that if this question is framed within the more hidden efforts involved in emotion work, there are indications of a relationship between the quality of free time and generally perceived time pressure.

### 3 What is the relationship between the amount and quality of free time and the number of hours women spend in paid work, including their (lack of) willingness to increase their working hours?

A quarter of women (and 15% of men) do not work, and three-quarters of women who do work are in part-time jobs, compared with 15% of men. Among working women, those who would like to work more hours and those who would not are in balance, which means that the desired working hours are the same as the actual working hours. Almost half of non-working women would like to work an average of two and a half days per week.

The main wish of working men is to reduce their working hours (increasing their working hours is in fact often not an option, since most of them already work full-time). On average, they would like to work two hours per week less.

Women would like to increase their working hours more often than men, but this is a distorted picture because men often already work full-time and do not have the option of working more hours. Where men and women's working hours are the same, it is actually women who would more often like to work less. In particular, women living with a partner (including those without young children at home) would relatively often like to reduce their working hours.

For men without young children, there is no relationship between subjective feelings of being under time pressure and a wish to work more or fewer hours. This relationship is also not found for mothers of young children. The fact that they do not want to increase

their working hours is therefore not linked to time pressure, whether or not that time pressure is related to having too little or poor quality free time. By contrast, this relationship does exist for women without young children. Those who say they feel under great time pressure are less inclined to want to increase their working hours and would in fact more often like to cut their hours. Two-thirds of women in the potential labour force are in this group. They work part-time almost as often as mothers of young children, and work hardly any more hours than those mothers. This study shows that for these women without young children, this is due among other things to time pressure, which in turn is related to having too little (and too fragmented) free time.

### Note

- 1 For more information on this study (in Dutch), see [www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte\\_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Tijdsbestedingsonderzoek\\_TBO](http://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Tijdsbestedingsonderzoek_TBO).