

New study reveals surprising gender disparity in work-life balance

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The concept of work-life balance and its relation to the satisfaction that individuals and groups express regarding the quality of their lives have attracted the attention of policy makers, labor economists, and others. Life satisfaction is central to the general happiness and health of a society or nation. A new study published in *Journal of Happiness Studies* examined data from 34 Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and appraised the effects of different factors on the life satisfaction of both women and men in an effort to close some of the gaps in the existing research on the topic.

In recent years, work-[life](#) balance has become a major focus in industrialized economies for both organizations and their employees. In a brief survey of the existing literature, Prof Hideo Noda points out, "Many of the existing studies on work-life balance issues have used micro-level data," whether in terms of company size, gender, management level, stages of individuals' career, and so forth. He adds, "Because the implementation of work-life balance policies is an international trend in many 'developed [countries](#),' identifying common characteristics across developed countries using internationally comparable data has the potential to yield findings that are beneficial for many countries, rather than being limited to just a few countries."

Accordingly, Prof Noda assembled data from the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index in an effort to develop a "macro-level" perspective on "[life satisfaction elasticity](#)," which is a measure of changes in life satisfaction resulting

from changes in efforts to improve work-life balance. Over a database representing both women and men in 34 OECD countries, Professor Noda analyzed the effects of other factors: self-reported health, long-term unemployment, and income inequality.

Prof Noda mentions that previous studies have taken an economic approach and have concluded that, in manufacturing firms, for example, efforts to improve work-life balance, including the introduction of "family-friendly" practices, correlated with improved productivity and life satisfaction. One sociological study using data from European countries found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that working hours correlated with "work-life conflict" or "work-family conflict." A similar European study found a similar impact of working hours, with Norway and Finland exhibiting the lowest levels of negative impact. Another, larger study of 25 European countries found that workplace autonomy and flexibility varied widely in the impact on work-life with most negative impact in Eastern European countries, along with the UK, Ireland, Spain, and Italy. Finally, several legal studies have described a wide variety of work-life-related practices: family leave, childcare, and labor standards are most favorable in Canada and the European Union; and Japan has an extensive legal framework that supports families, but has yet to address the traditional division of labor according to sex, with men working and women tending to domestic responsibilities.

Prof. Noda sought to increase the number of countries included in his study sample and chose the following measures: Leisure and personal time; self-reported health; and long-term unemployment. Respondents were asked to score their quality of life on a scale of 0 (worst possible) to 10 (best possible). The data generated were analyzed separately for women and men.

Leisure and personal time—the indicator for work-life balance—was highest among European Union member countries, with Norway and

Denmark scoring notably high on life satisfaction as well as leisure and personal time. Over all 34 countries, scores were similar for women and men.

Prof. Noda also found a rough correlation between GDP and life satisfaction in higher-GDP countries, e.g., EU countries, New Zealand, Australia, Israel, Canada, and the United States.

Noda then turned to income inequality, as measured "within-country" or domestic (among the residents of individual countries) and "between-countries," i.e., international (comparing individual countries with the OECD aggregate). From 2002 to 2005, between-country inequality increased somewhat while within-country inequality showed a more significant increase, leaving Prof Noda to conclude that the rise in international inequality was largely the result of increasing within-country inequality. When income inequality is included in the analysis (Noda's "extended model") the additional factor did not have a meaningful impact. While it is perhaps obvious, as Prof Noda writes, "For people with low levels of happiness... income inequality is a serious problem... we may not find a significant association between actual income inequality and life satisfaction."

One surprising finding of Prof Noda's study is that although [work-life balance](#) accommodations are usually aimed at women's concerns, men, in fact, demonstrate a higher elasticity, especially for personal and [leisure time](#). This suggests that the time devoted to leisure and personal care is more important to men than it is to women.

In the future, policies that enhance individuals' life satisfaction can play a major role in improving both productivity and the general well-being of a population. Prof Noda maintains, "The findings of this study could provide useful suggestions for labor policy design in OECD countries." On the other hand, although [income inequality](#) did not register as

statistically significant, more research, accounting for additional variables, may be necessary.

More information: Hideo Noda, Work–Life Balance and Life Satisfaction in OECD Countries: A Cross-Sectional Analysis, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s10902-019-00131-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00131-9)

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