

A shorter working week as part of a green caring economy

Feminist Green New Deal Policy Paper



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UK Feminist Green New Deal Policy Paper

By Özlem Onaran* and Rob Calvert Jump**

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Executive summary

Britain faces a number of intersecting crises, with inequalities and environmental breakdown at their core. Women continue to work longer hours than men, but men are paid for more of their work, and are paid more for their work. Meanwhile, overwork and overproduction are a direct cause of climate change – a point which is increasingly recognised around the world.

In this brief, we argue that a shorter working week, as part of a wider set of policy changes, can promote gender-equal distributions in paid work, unpaid work, and income, while facilitating a green transition. Even a substantial shortening of paid working time is by no means unrealistic – compared to the 19th century we are all working part-time today.

Shorter hours of work are associated with,

- lower gender gaps in:
 - ▶ unpaid hours of work
 - ▶ paid hours of work
 - ▶ and wages
- lower GHG emissions per capita
- higher productivity.

Time-use data and evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on working patterns suggest the following:

- men increased their unpaid care time during the first phase of the pandemic, faced with a decline in paid work and an increase in care needs, although women still performed most of the unpaid care work.
- the trend of men increasing their unpaid care work reversed in the second phase of the pandemic.

Based on these observations and policy case studies, we make three policy conclusions:

- to ensure that a green transition and shorter working week are equitable, they need to be implemented as part of a comprehensive policy package, including:
 - ▶ strong pro-labour institutions – particularly, strong, well-coordinated trade unions, equal pay legislation, increased job security, permanent contracts, higher minimum wages, and an improved and equitable parental leave,
 - ▶ public investment in social infrastructure to provide universal basic services,
- a shorter working week with no loss in pay will most likely be introduced by the public sector before the private sector,
- careful planning and impact assessment are necessary to avoid shortages of certain types of labour.

With respect to the practical implementation of a shorter working week, we advocate a flexible approach, where a shorter working day as well as a four-day or three-day week can be considered as part of a participatory planning phase considering the needs of various workers, particularly those with different caring responsibilities.

Policy experiments in shorter working hours are ongoing, with trials for a four-day week currently being designed in Spain and Scotland. A shorter working week, in combination with an expansion in public social infrastructure and universal basic services, is an important measure to address the social and political consequences of dysfunctional health and social care systems, extreme inequality, and environmental breakdown.

1. Introduction

Shorter working time, particularly with wage compensation below a threshold level of income, could lead to a substantial restructuring of our economy and society via effects on labour demand, labour supply, social norms, and environmental effects. A substantial shortening of the working week could be a key policy measure towards achieving gender-equal distributions in paid work, unpaid work, and income, while facilitating a green transition. However, as we argue in this paper, shorter working hours alone are not enough. They need to be implemented as part of a comprehensive policy package, including public investment in social infrastructure and strong labour market institutions, particularly, strong, well-coordinated trade unions, equal pay legislation, increased job security, permanent contracts, adequate holiday and sick pay, higher minimum wages at the level of a living wage, and an improved and equitable parental leave, if they are to result in progressive improvements in the working life of women as well as the wellbeing of society as a whole.

On the demand side, shorter working hours, where a given number of hours of employment can be shared among a higher number of employees, ought to increase job creation at a given level of GDP, and thereby support the creation of more employment. As the marginal worker is usually female, this effect could reduce gender gaps in both employment and income.

On the supply side, a shorter working week, particularly when combined with reformed maternity/paternity/parental leave policies, could help to address inequalities in daily care responsibilities and improve work/life balance and encourage a more gender-equal division of unpaid labour in the household.¹ As shorter hours have the potential to increase the time spent on domestic care by men, they could decrease the gender gap in unpaid care work and increase women's participation in the paid labour market. As such, implemented inclusively with the appropriate employee protections and supports, they could lead to a convergence in weekly hours in both paid work and unpaid care work between men and women.

Shorter working weeks can contribute to a green transition as there could be the same number of jobs for lower levels of GDP, which could reduce the impact of economic activity on the environment, but also may facilitate behavioural change by creating time for less carbon-intensive household work, leisure activities or commutes. Finally, changes in working hours and a balanced gender distribution of unpaid care work and paid employment can have crucial effects on gendered social norms, and can transform occupational and sectoral gender segregation as well as the domestic division of labour.

In the next section, we present a cross-country analysis of working hours, gender gaps in paid and unpaid work and wages, as well as greenhouse gas emissions and productivity to shed light on these channels. In section 3, we discuss three specific experiences of country-wide reductions in working hours, in France, Portugal, and the Republic of Korea, and consider their policy implications. Finally, section 4 proposes a policy roadmap to a shorter working week for a green, gender-equal transition.

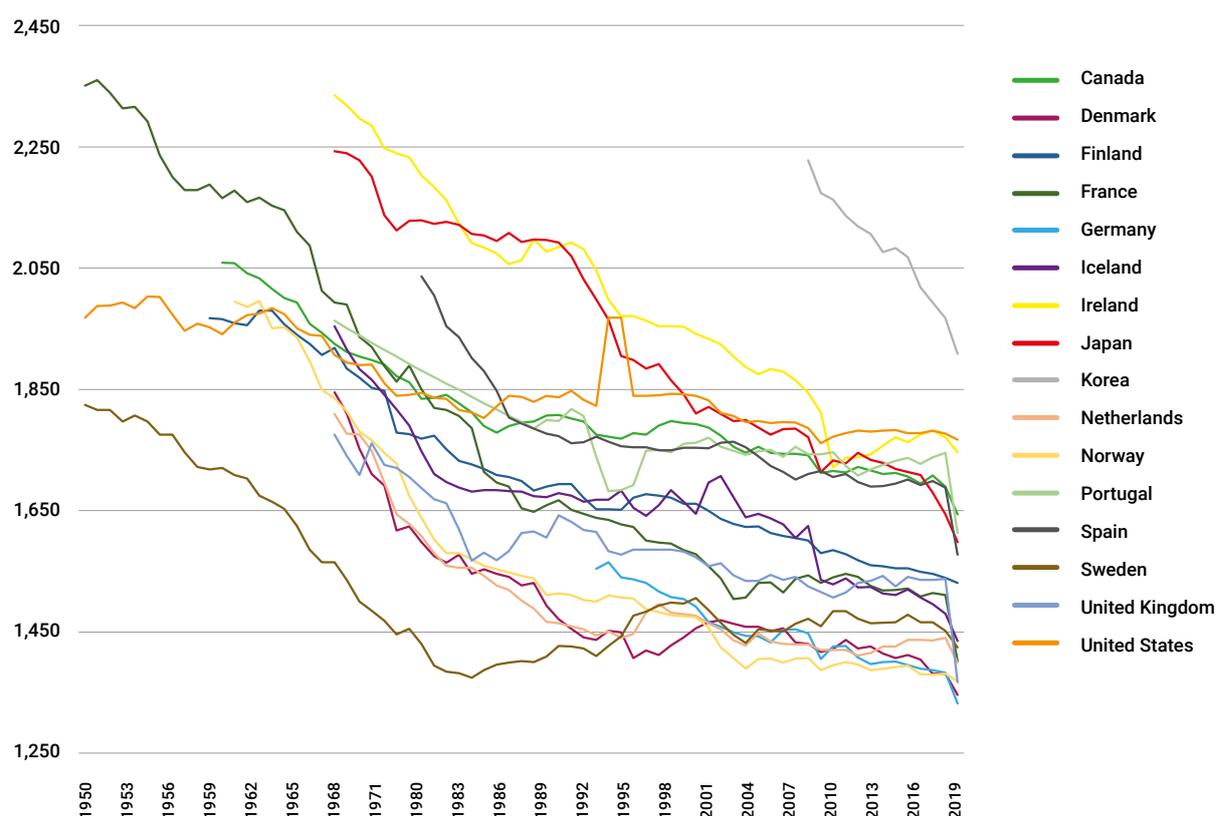
1 For a review as well as estimations for the case of South Korea for supporting evidence, see Ilkkaracan and Memis (2021) Towards a Caring and Gender-Equal Economy in South Korea: How Much Does the Regulation of Labor Market Working Hours Matter? CWE-GAM Working Paper

2. Working hours, gender gaps, greenhouse gas emissions and productivity

2.1 Working hours and gender gaps before the Covid-19 pandemic

A substantial shortening of paid working time is by no means unrealistic – compared to the 19th century we are all working part-time today.² Automation and digitalisation of work, facilitating both working from home in some sectors and job sharing, makes a substantial shortening of the working week even more feasible today. Figure 1 shows the downward trend in average annual hours actually worked per worker (in the paid labour market) in selected OECD countries since the 1950s. In France, average annual hours actually worked have fallen by 35.7% during the period 1950-2019. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden are among countries where average annual hours have fallen by 20-25% as of 2019, compared with 1970. In the UK, average annual hours have fallen by a lower rate of 13.4% as of 2019 compared with 1970, and most of this decline took place between 1970 and 1981.

Figure 1: Average annual hours actually worked per worker, selected OECD countries, 1950-2020



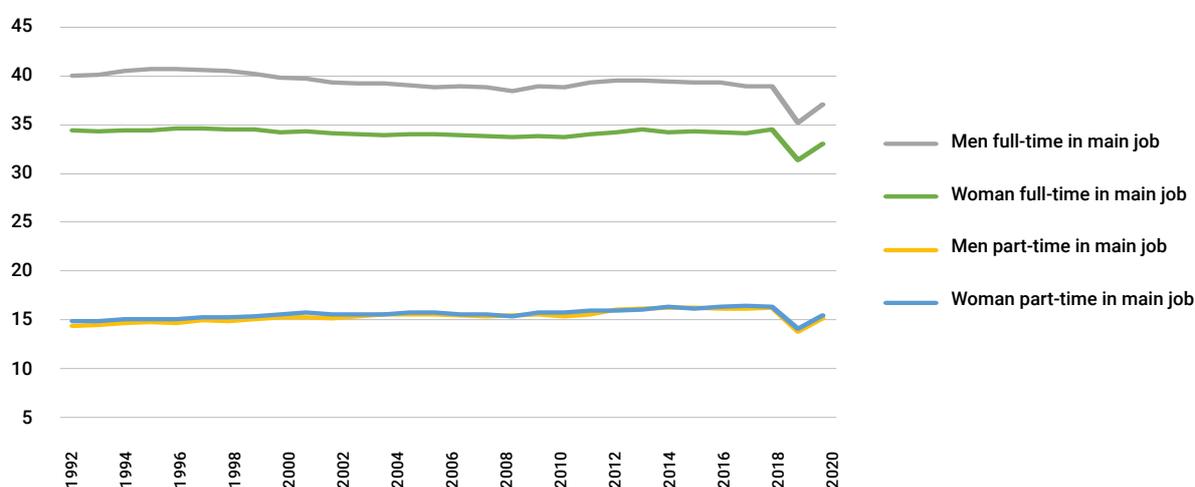
Source: OECD, <https://stats.oecd.org/>

² For historical trends, for the UK see Thomas, Hills, & Dimsdale (2010). The UK recession in context—what do three centuries of data tell us? Bank of England Quarterly Bulletin, Quarter Four; for cross-country comparison see, Bosch & Lehndorff (2001) "Working-time reduction and employment: experiences in Europe and economic policy recommendations" *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 25, pp.209-243.

Men are working fewer paid hours, women are working slightly more compared to 1970s. But the gender gap in paid hours remains significant.

The historical downward trend in hours worked in the labour market is shaped by men's experience, while hours worked in the labour market by women increased slightly during the same period. This led to some convergence, although the gender gap in hours worked remained significant. In the UK during the period 1983-2019, where gendered data is available, average usual weekly hours worked by men decreased from about 45 to 40 hours, while those by women increased from about 30 to 32 hours.³ Figure 2 shows that there are further differences between full-time and part-time workers, with average actual weekly hours of work of both men and women working part-time increasing slightly from about 15 to 16 hours during the period 1992-2019. As of 2019, average actual weekly hours of work by women working full-time in their main job was 34.5, compared with 39 hours by men.

Figure 2: Average actual weekly hours of work, UK 1992-2021Q2



Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey

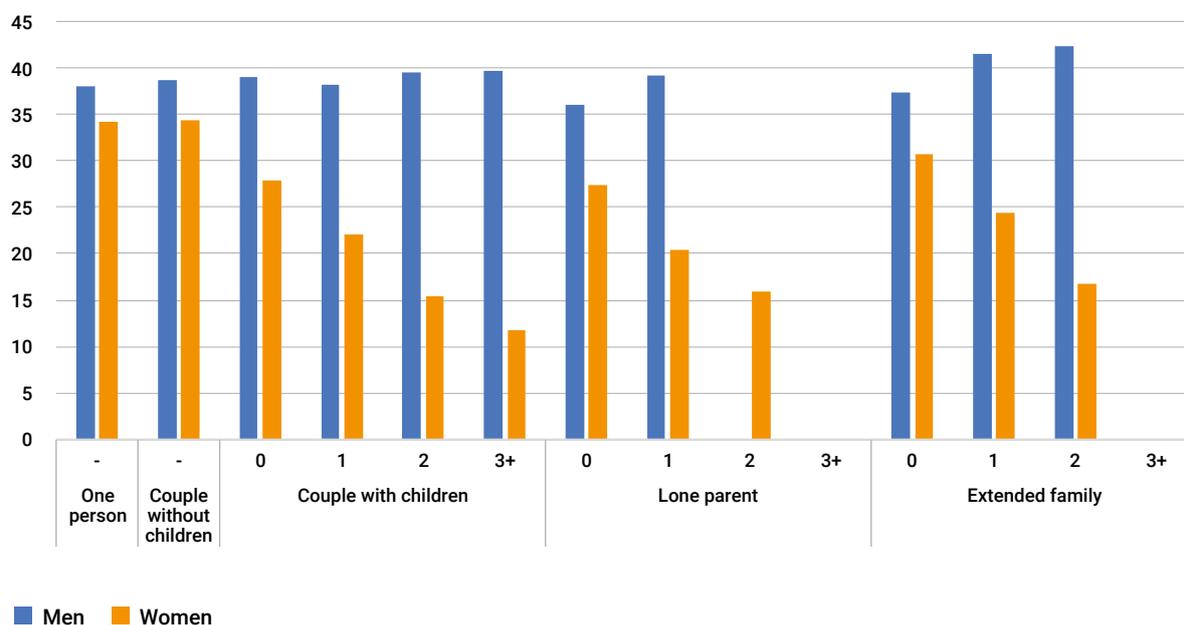
Caring responsibilities in a family are inversely proportional to paid hours worked by women. The opposite is true for men.

There is a significant effect of the domestic care needs of households on the hours of paid work by women. Figure 3 shows the average weekly hours actually worked by prime age employed women and men in different types of households, and the number of children under the age of 6 in the UK in 2019. The hours of paid work by women decreases substantially as the number of children under the age of 6 increases, and is lowest in households consisting of a heterosexual couple with children. The opposite is true for men. Extended family seems to provide some unpaid care support for women, leading to higher hours of paid work. These trends are direct outcomes of the unaffordable childcare system in the UK, which limits women's choice about participating in the paid labour market.⁴ The highest average weekly hours actually worked by prime age women is about 34, in the case of women in households of one person or couples without children.

³ Data provided by OECD, <https://stats.oecd.org/>.

⁴ For a recent analysis, see Reis and Stephens (2021). Childcare, gender and Covid-19, [A pre-budget briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group – October 2021](#)

Figure 3: Average weekly hours actually worked of prime age employed persons by gender, household type and number of children under age 6, UK, 2019



Source: ILO ILOSTAT data tools to find and download labour statistics

Note: Insufficient observations for lone parent and extended family households with 3 or more children under age 6.

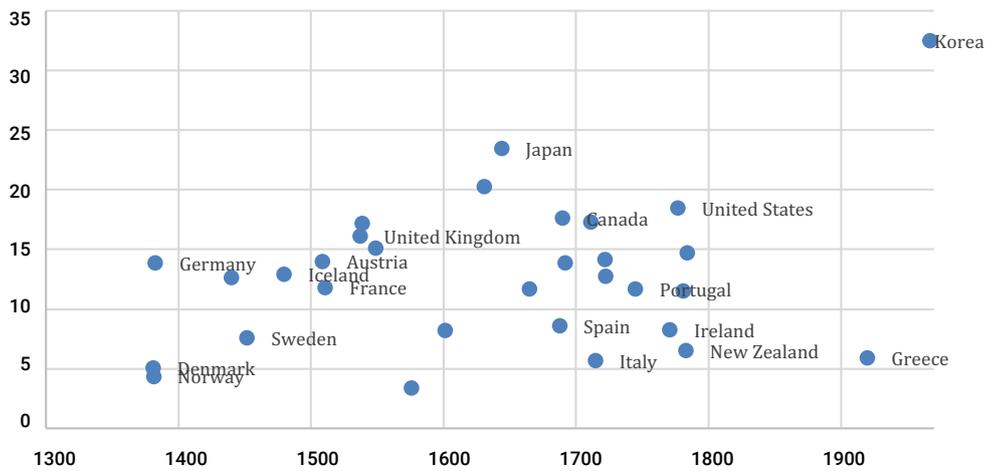
Shorter hours of work in the labour market are associated with smaller gender wage gaps. But equal pay legislation and other labour and social policies make a difference.

Figure 4 plots median gender wage gaps against average annual hours actually worked per worker for selected OECD countries in 2019.⁵ This provides evidence that shorter hours of work in the labour market could be associated with lower gender wage gaps,⁶ although the direction of causality may work both ways. This is consistent with the convergence in hours of work in the labour market, i.e., falls in hours of paid work by men and increases in hours of paid work by women. It is important to note that differences in labour market institutions, equal pay legislation and its enforcement, education systems as well as social policies all affect the link between working hours and gender gaps, leading to some diversity across countries with similar hours of working week.

⁵ We present the scatter diagrams for 2019 in order to exclude the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

⁶ A linear as well as non-linear regression analysis confirms this association.

Figure 4: Gender wage gap (median) vs. average annual hours actually worked per worker, 2019



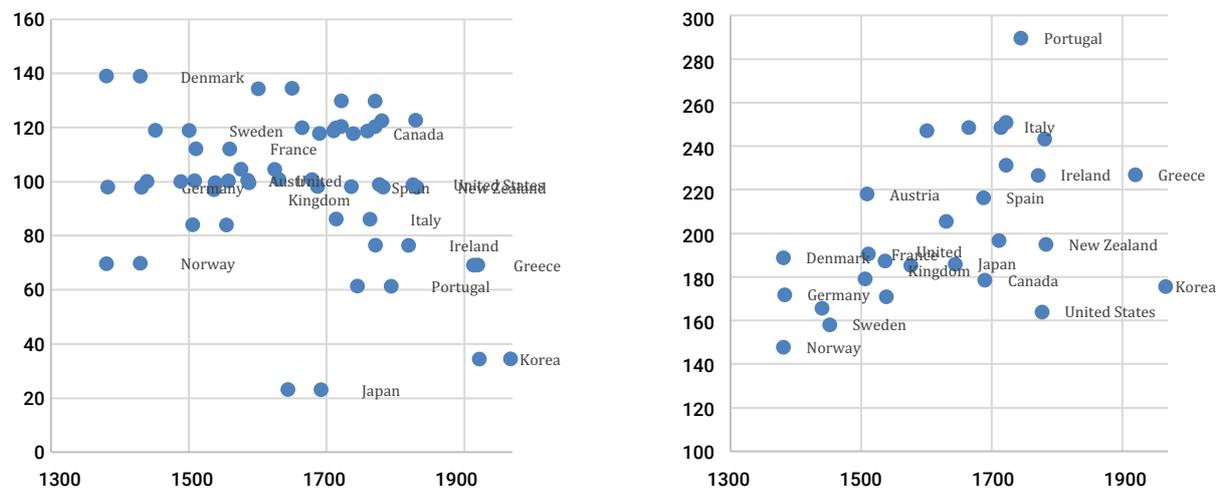
Source: OECD, <https://stats.oecd.org/>

Note: Data on Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States. In Belgium, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland, from 2018.

Shorter hours of paid work in general are associated with men doing more unpaid care work.

There is also evidence that shorter hours of work in the labour market are associated with more unpaid care work by men, including routine housework, and less unpaid care work by women. This can be seen in Figure 5. However, it is important to recognise that a shorter working week may not automatically lead to men performing more unpaid care. Care is more equally shared in countries which have more equitable parental leave policies at the birth of a child, when patterns of paid and unpaid work become established for parents. Therefore, a reduction in the working week should be combined with a reform of parental leave to encourage a more equitable sharing of unpaid care.⁷

Figure 5: Men’s (left panel) and women’s (right panel) unpaid care and routine housework time (minutes, latest year during 2000-19) vs. average annual hours actually worked per worker, 2019



Finally, gender differences in both paid and unpaid hours of work contribute to multiple and related gender gaps in annual earnings, career progression opportunities and working conditions with more women concentrated in lower paid and more precarious jobs.⁸

2.2 Paid and unpaid working hours during the Covid-19 pandemic

All countries experienced a substantial decline in actual paid hours worked during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, with the UK experiencing the sharpest fall in the OECD in average annual hours actually worked per worker, at 11.1%. In 2020, average actual weekly hours of paid work by men working full-time (in their main job) fell to 35.2, and those by women working full-time fell to 31.4, and only partially recovered in 2021 (as of the second quarter). This can be seen in Figure 2, above.

An analysis of time-use surveys before and during the Covid-19 pandemic provides a natural experiment of the effects of reductions in paid working hours on unpaid care work by men. Table 1 compares the time spent on paid work (both from home and at the workplace) and unpaid domestic care work (in childcare and household work) by women and men before and during the pandemic. Men increased their unpaid care time during the first phase of the pandemic, faced with a decline in paid work as well as an increase in care needs, although women still performed the majority (59.4%) of unpaid care work. This trend, however, reversed in the second phase of the pandemic, when men's total hours of paid work recovered, albeit with a higher share of paid work from home. Consequently, their contribution to unpaid care work declined significantly, and women's share of the unpaid care work increased to 62.8%.

The reversal of the trends in men's unpaid care work during the first phase of the pandemic hints at the importance of labour market policies and public investment in social infrastructure in supporting permanent improvements in gender equality.

Table 1: Time spent on paid work and unpaid care work throughout the day, UK

	2014/2015		March/April 2020		Sep/Oct 2020	
	Average daily time (minutes)					
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Working not from home	180.1	120.8	121.1	74.4	131.9	98
Working from home	18.0	11.1	54.7	54.9	88.6	57
Unpaid childcare	17.4	45.0	27.4	42.6	16.9	33.6
Unpaid household work (excluding travel and childcare)	105.3	187.7	117.8	169.7	99.7	163.6

Source: ONS, Time Use Survey data, 5 September to 11 October 2020; 28 March to 26 April 2020; 2014/15

2.3 Ecological effects

Countries with shorter annual hours tend to have lower greenhouse gas emissions per person.

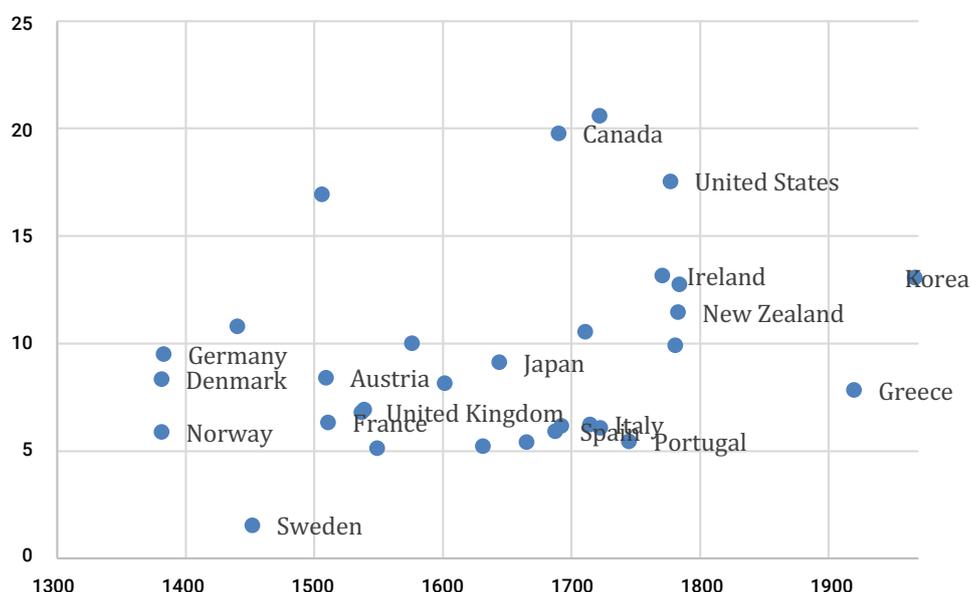
There is evidence that suggests a shorter working week is associated with environmentally progressive outcomes. Figure 6 shows that countries with shorter average annual hours actually

8 See Abid (2021). Women and employment in the recovery from Covid-19, [A pre-budget briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group – October 2021](#)

worked per person have lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per capita, as of 2019. Shorter working hours could allow for lower levels of GDP at a given amount of employment, thereby reducing GHG emissions and the overall impact of economic activity on the environment, and changing the level as well as the composition of consumption.⁹ Research on the effects of shorter working weeks on consumption patterns also highlights that having more time may facilitate behavioural changes, which can lead to greener ways of living with less carbon-intensive, more labour- and time-intensive household work and leisure activities, as well as effects on commutes to work, e.g., cooking with fresh and/or local ingredients rather than heating ready or frozen food, growing your own food, washing reusable rather than disposable textile goods, walking/cycling rather than driving as well as commuting less, or more time on personal education, reading, community interaction, socialising or exercising rather than material consumption.¹⁰ The pandemic provides further evidence that shorter working hours and less commuting are associated with lower GHG emissions – a trend which is currently being reversed with the existing mode of economic recovery. However, the move to greater home-working as a result of Covid may reduce the potential for reductions in commuting with a shorter working week.

A shorter working week alone does not guarantee lower GHG emissions. Other areas of policy, in particular public spending in green renewable energy, public transport, social housing and insulation, are expected to be key to determining the pace of transition to a green economy, and will be crucial in defining the link between working hours and GHG emissions across countries.

Figure 6: GHG per capita vs. average annual hours actually worked per worker, 2019



Source: OECD, <https://stats.oecd.org/>

Note: Korea GHG data is 2017

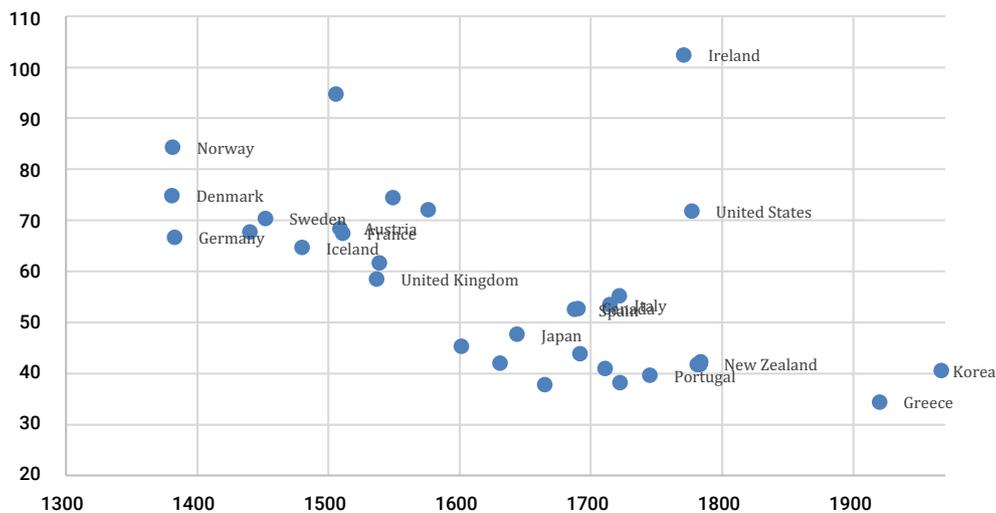
- 9 Wage compensation, i.e., an increase in hourly wage rates along with a decrease in hours of work while maintaining a constant income, is likely to apply to a group below a threshold level of income, subject to negotiations between trade unions, employers and the government, while workers with a higher income may be willing to accept shorter working hours at their given hourly wage rate. This may lead to a decline in the level of aggregate consumption. Price rises would achieve the same effect at constant nominal wages.
- 10 Coote, Franklin & Simms (2010) 21 Hours: the case for a shorter working week, New Economics Foundation, London; Devetter & Rousseau (2011) "Working hours and sustainable development", *Review of Social Economy*, 69(3), pp. 333–355; Kallis, Kalush, O'Flynn, Rossiter, Ashford (2013) "Friday off: reducing working hours in Europe" *Sustainability*, 5, pp.1545-1567; Knight, Rosa & Schor, (2013) "Could working less reduce pressures on the environment? A cross-national panel analysis of OECD countries, 1970–2007", *Global Environmental Change*. 23(4), pp.691-700; Nässén & Larsson (2015) "Would shorter working time reduce greenhouse gas emissions? An analysis of time use and consumption in Swedish households", *Environment and Planning C*, 33, pp.726–745; Stronge & Harper (eds) (2019) *The Shorter Working Week*, Autonomy.

Shorter hours of work tend to be associated with higher labour productivity.

Finally, there is evidence that shorter hours of work are associated with higher labour productivity (GDP per hour of work), as can be seen in Figure 7. The scope for productivity gains may differ across sectors, e.g., manufacturing versus service sectors such as health and social care, where women constitute the majority of the workforce.¹¹ If planned carefully to avoid labour shortages, shorter working hours may improve health and well-being at work, reduce staff turnover by reducing stress, and thereby improve productivity even in service sectors such as education, health and social care. Overall, shorter working hours appear to be associated with increases in aggregate productivity, which in turn creates space for further reductions in working hours, particularly if this is adequately supported by public spending and planning, as we emphasise below.

To summarise, shorter hours of work could be implemented alongside other policies mentioned in this briefing to support lower gender gaps in unpaid and paid hours of work and wages, lower GHG emissions per capita, and higher productivity. Overall, if done inclusively, with significant employee protections, and a robust social infrastructure to support it, a shorter working week is consistent with a fair, caring, and nurturing society.

Figure 7: GDP per hour vs. average annual hours actually worked per worker, 2019



Source: OECD, <https://stats.oecd.org/>

11 For a sectoral analysis of the potential effects of shorter working week on profitability, see Calvert Jump & Stronge (2020), The Day After Tomorrow: Stress tests, affordability and the roadmap to the four-day week. Autonomy Discussion Paper.

3. Case studies

3.1 France

One of the best-known examples of a legislative reduction in working hours is the 35-hour week in France, which was introduced between 1998 and 2002 by the Socialist Party. This involved a reduction in the standard working week for large firms in 1998, and small firms in 2002, with the government stating that monthly earnings should remain constant. In return for the implied increase in labour costs, payroll taxes were cut. In addition, firms were permitted to allocate weekly hours flexibly, so workers could work more than 35 hours in some weeks and less than 35 hours in other weeks without receiving overtime pay.¹²

There is robust evidence to suggest that the 35-hour week led to a significant, lasting increase in both job and leisure satisfaction among affected workers in France.¹³ However, the absence of an effective union presence at the firm-level made negotiations over the specifics of working time reductions very difficult, and led to a highly complicated set of regulations. The definition of normal work hours was contested, a variety of minimum wages were created as a by-product of the legislation, and the public sector was not covered. Notably, while a new Conservative government started to dismantle the regulations after 2002, companies that had already adopted a 35-hour week appear to have maintained the practice.¹⁴

The impact of France's 35-hour week on gender inequality is complicated. On the one hand, the impact on wellbeing appears to have been similar for men and women, and women in lower-paid jobs often experienced 'imposed flexibility' as a result of the regulations. The lack of medium-term planning to address staff shortages in sectors such as healthcare does not appear to have helped. On the other hand, there is some evidence that women working longer part-time hours prior to the regulations found it easier to transition to full-time work as a result of the policy, allowing them to increase their earnings without taking on extra days.¹⁵ Moreover, Sarkozy's policies to discourage the 35-hour week after 2007 led to a decline in the paid hours worked by part-time women, suggesting that the 35-hour week was not gender-neutral with respect to labour market inequalities.¹⁶ Finally, it is also worth pointing out that parents with young children were overwhelmingly in favour of the legislation.¹⁷

3.2 Portugal

In 1996, to encourage a convergence of working hours to the European norm, the Portuguese government introduced a law to reduce the normal work-week from 44 hours to 40 hours. The regulations were imposed gradually, and all work-weeks had to respect the 40-hour threshold by the end of 1997. As with the French 35-hour week, monthly earnings were supposed to remain constant despite the reduction in hours.¹⁸ A degree of flexibility was also built into the

12 Lepinteur (2019), "The shorter workweek and worker wellbeing: Evidence from Portugal and France", *Labour Economics* 58, pp.204-220.

13 Lepinteur (2019), *ibid.*

14 Askenazy (2013), "Working time regulation in France from 1996 to 2012", *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 37, pp.323-347.

15 Askenazy (2013), *ibid.*

16 Askenazy (2013), *ibid.*

17 Coote, Harper & Stirling (2021), *The Case for a Four Day Week*, London: Polity.

18 Lepinteur (2019), *ibid.*; Raposo & van Ours (2010), "How working time reduction affects jobs and wages", *Economics Letters*, 106(1), pp.61-63.

Portuguese regulations, although to a lesser extent than in France, and tax breaks were not relied upon to maintain private sector profitability.

Interestingly, despite the fact that job creation was not an explicit aim, the policy appears to have increased employment via a reduction in job destruction.¹⁹ Monthly earnings do appear to have remained roughly constant, in line with the policy, resulting in an increase in hourly wages. As in France, there is robust evidence to suggest that the 40-hour week led to a significant, lasting increase in both job and leisure satisfaction among affected workers in Portugal, with the effects on normal hours, employment, and wellbeing lasting well beyond the initial policy implementation.²⁰ Interestingly, attempts to increase the standard work-week of public sector employees in Portugal were defeated by industrial action in 2016.²¹

In terms of wellbeing, the effects of Portugal's 40-hour week on gender inequality are relatively straightforward: women appear to have enjoyed greater increases in wellbeing than men as a result of the policy.²² While we know less about the effects of the policy on women's employment opportunities and working time, the European Trade Union Institute has observed that the Portuguese working hours reduction had, "beneficial effects, especially for women and employees with a heavy burden of family obligations."²³

3.3 Korea

Our final case study is the Republic of Korea, in which the most recent legislated reduction in working hours (for which we have preliminary evidence) has taken place. This was an amendment to the South Korean Labour Standards Act to limit maximum working hours (i.e., normal hours plus overtime) to 52 hours per week, down from 68.²⁴ The amendment was made in 2018, and smaller businesses became subject to the regulations in July 2021. This follows a legislated reduction in normal hours from 44 to 40 between 2004 and 2011; the current reform is, therefore, mainly a limit on overtime work.

Average working hours are very high in South Korea. Preliminary evidence suggests that the most recent work-time reduction in Korea did reduce the number of people working more than 52 hours per week, but the incidence of long hours remains stubbornly high. Notably, more than two in five Korean workers are exempt from the 52-hour limit.²⁵ As well as continued incentives for businesses to demand long working hours, the OECD has observed that in-work poverty and inadequate pension provision are important supply-side reasons for long working hours in Korea. Clearly, more work needs to be done to reduce working hours in Korea to (or, ideally, below) the OECD norm.

As in France, the Korean reduction in working time appears to have had limited positive impacts on precarious workers – a group in which women are over-represented. In fact, outpatient visits and spending on healthcare substantially increased among precarious employees following the policy implementation, although this effect seems to be larger for precarious employees

19 Raposo & van Ours (2010), "How a reduction of standard working hours affects employment dynamics", *De Economist*, 158(2), pp.193-207.

20 Lepinteur (2019), *ibid.*

21 De Spiegelaere & Piasna (2017), "The why and how of working time reduction", European Trade Union Institute.

22 Lepinteur (2019), *ibid.*

23 De Spiegelaere & Piasna (2017), *ibid.*

24 Hijzen & Thewissen (2020), "The 2018-2021 working time reform in Korea: A preliminary assessment", *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 248.

25 Hijzen & Thewissen (2020) *ibid.*

in industries exempt from the working-time reduction. While employment appears to have increased following the regulation, this also appears to have been dominated by less stable, part-time, temporary, and low-skilled employment – i.e., precarious work.²⁶

With respect to effects on the distribution of unpaid work, research suggests a positive impact of shorter paid working hours on men's unpaid domestic care work, and consequently a reduction on women's unpaid care work with a positive impact on women's participation in the labour market.²⁷

3.4 Policy implications

We can draw two important policy implications from these case studies. First, **strong pro-labour institutions – particularly, strong, well-coordinated trade unions – appear to contribute to the success of work-time regulations.** A lack of firm-level union representation made firm negotiations over the implementation of a 35-hour week difficult in France. In Portugal, a social pact between the government, trade unions, and other social partners to facilitate the country's entry into the European Monetary Union was an important contributory factor to the success of their 40 hour week.²⁸

Second, **the differentiated impact of reduced working hours on different types of workers needs to be carefully managed if a reduction in work-time is to promote gender equality** in paid and unpaid work. There is evidence from both France and Korea that legislative reductions in working hours can exacerbate inequalities between workers in stable and precarious contracts, the majority of which are women, and can actively harm the wellbeing of the latter. In particular, as evidenced in France, women in lower-paid, precarious employment can experience 'imposed flexibility' as a by-product of work-time regulations. A corollary of this is that careful planning is necessary to avoid shortages of certain types of labour, to allow as many workers as possible to take advantage of reduced working hours.

Policy experiments in shorter working hours are ongoing. To take one example, trials for a four-day week are currently being designed in Spain – one of the first countries in Europe to introduce an eight-hour day – and Scotland.

In summary, labour market policies leading to stronger trade unions and higher collective bargaining coverage are crucial to the success of shorter work-time policies. Enforcing equal pay legislation, aiming at higher rates of pay in occupations at the bottom end of the pay scale (where women constitute a large share of the workforce), increases in the minimum wage to the level of a living wage, increased job security and a move towards permanent contracts with adequate sick and holiday pay, and banning zero-hours contracts can ensure that the gains of shorter hours are equally shared, while unfavourable effects on workload and stress are mitigated.

In addition, it is important to recognise the impact of parental leave policies at the birth of a child on the subsequent working patterns of mothers and fathers. Long periods of leave for mothers with minimal leave for fathers can establish patterns of responsibility for care that are hard to shift. A shorter working week therefore needs to be combined with changes to parental leave policy if the potential for greater sharing of unpaid care is to be realised.

26 Park & Ho (2020), "Intended and Unintended Consequences of a New Limit on Working Hours in South Korea: Implications for Precarious Employment", *Stanford University Working Paper Series on Health and Demographic Change in the Asia-Pacific*.

27 Ilkkaracan & Memis (2021), *ibid.*

28 International Labour Office (2019), "The Reduced Standard Work Week in Portugal", Briefing Note available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/---sro-santiago/documents/genericdocument/wcms_727183.pdf

4. Roadmap to a shorter working week

As Will Stronge and Kyle Lewis argue in their recent book on the working week,

“A shorter working week is not just an intervention on work alone, it is also a feminist issue - helping to equalise the distribution of both paid and unpaid, usually feminised, labour in the household - as well as a green policy: by working less we can provide one pillar for the rapid decarbonisation of our economy, and it could have profound effects on many other areas as well.”²⁹

Shorter working hours can, and indeed ought to be, a key policy measure to maintain gender-equal distributions in paid work, unpaid work, and income, while facilitating a green transition. However, **shorter working hours need to be implemented as part of a comprehensive policy package, including strong labour market institutions**, if they are to result in progressive improvements in the working life of women.

While stronger labour market institutions are a necessary component of shorter work-time policies, however, they are by no means sufficient. In order to be socially and politically feasible, a reduction in weekly working hours needs to take place without a reduction in living standards, in particular in the case of low/median wage earners. Public investment in social infrastructure to provide universal basic services is a second key policy to ensure that a green transition and shorter working week are equitable.

For a just transition, public investment is crucial to fill the gaps in social infrastructure with public provision of universal basic services in healthcare, education, childcare, and elderly care, which cannot be adequately provided by private investment and the profit motive. A policy of shorter working hours with wage compensation in the care sector makes public investment all the more urgent, as private providers are likely to fail to meet the extra staffing and training needs. To avoid these bottlenecks, a rise in public spending in social infrastructure is required. This will help to increase women’s ability to take up the new job opportunities created by the shorter working week, if they choose to do so, while at the same time increasing the demand for women’s labour in the paid care sector. Public investment in social infrastructure is also a vehicle for generating more employment for a given level of output due to its high labour-intensity – a target more consistent with low GHG emissions.³⁰

In the medium term, care jobs need to be made attractive to both men and women, by improving pay and working conditions in these industries and transforming gendered occupational segregation, while offering an alternative for the redeployment of ‘brown’ jobs in polluting industries. Decent care jobs are also green jobs. This requires recognising the value of the care economy as a type of social infrastructure with substantial effects on productivity in the rest of the economy³¹, and providing adequate career pathways and prospects for care workers to improve pay and working conditions in the care economy. Connected to this point, together

29 Stronge and Lewis (2021), *Overtime*, London: Verso.

30 For an analysis of the job creation potential of social infrastructure, see Onaran, Oyvat, Fotopoulou (2021) “A macroeconomic analysis of the effects of gender inequality, wages, and public social infrastructure: the case of the UK” *Feminist Economics*, forthcoming; and De Henau and Himmelweit (2021) A Care-Led Recovery from Coronavirus, [Women’s Budget Group Briefing](#). Onaran, Oyvat, Fotopoulou (2021) further analyses how public investment in social infrastructure can be funded with progressive taxation of income and wealth.

31 For an analysis of the macroeconomic and productivity effects of social infrastructure see Onaran, Oyvat, Fotopoulou (2021) “A macroeconomic analysis of the effects of gender inequality, wages, and public social infrastructure: the case of the UK” *Feminist Economics*, forthcoming

with a universal public childcare system and parental leave policies – and more generally, leave for domestic care – with equal incentives and income support for both men and women are crucial to an equitable distribution of unpaid domestic household care time, as well as paid work in the context of a shorter working week.³² A substantial and more equitable parental leave is likely to increase men’s contribution to unpaid care as they are actively involved in the early stages of a child’s life.

With respect to the practical implementation of the shorter working week, we advocate a flexible approach, where a shorter working day as well as fewer days at work, e.g., a four-day or three-day week, can be considered as part of a participatory planning phase taking into account the needs of different workers, e.g., with different caring responsibilities for younger versus older children, disabled or elderly people in the same location or a distant region, as well as users and consumers of care services.

Is there a straightforward roadmap to a shorter working week? Research suggests that a shorter working week with no loss in pay will most likely be introduced by the public sector before the private sector, given that unionisation is clearly crucial to successful implementations of shorter working hours, and the public sector is the most unionised part of the UK economy.³³

At every stage of design and implementation of policies for a shorter working week, Equality Impact Assessments and a disaggregated analysis are crucial to check the distributional impacts of the policies and ensure they do not cause further negative effects on women, ethnic minorities and other precarious, disadvantaged groups of workers.

In summary, we make three policy conclusions:

- to ensure that a green transition and shorter working week are equitable, they need to be implemented as part of a comprehensive policy package, including:
 - ▶ strong pro-labour institutions – particularly, strong, well-coordinated trade unions, equal pay legislation, increased job security, permanent contracts, higher minimum wages, and an improved and equitable parental leave;
 - ▶ public investment in social infrastructure to provide universal basic services;
- a shorter working week with no loss in pay will most likely be introduced by the public sector before the private sector;
- careful planning and impact assessment is necessary to avoid shortages of certain types of labour.

A shorter working week in the public sector, in combination with an expansion in social infrastructure and universal basic services, clearly constitutes an important measure towards public goods that has little precedent in Britain, at least in the last four decades. Nevertheless, the social and political consequences of dysfunctional health and care systems, extreme inequality, and environmental breakdown have to be faced. The fact that this is beginning to be realised is apparent from changes in the rhetoric of the major political parties in Britain over the last decade, if not (as of yet) their actions. We argue that a shorter work week is central to their solution.

32 See Allen (2021) Maternity, paternity and parental leave, [A pre-budget briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group – October 2021](#); Rønsen and Kitterod (2015) “Gender-equalizing family policies and mothers’ entry into paid work: recent evidence from Norway” *Feminist Economics*, 21(1), pp.59-89.

33 Calvert Jump & Stronge (2020), *ibid.*

The Feminist Green New Deal is bringing a gendered and intersectional approach/ perspective to the Green economy/Green Recovery - ensuring that the voices of women, people of colour and other marginalised groups are heard during environmental and political debates.

Through a programme of nationwide grassroots workshops and policy roundtables a Feminist Green New Deal Manifesto will be created and launched in 2022.

This Project is a collaboration between Wen (Women's Environmental Network) and the Women's Budget Group (WBG).

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