

Ease of combination for everyone

What if the 30-hour week became the new full-time? How would this affect your life? How would you fill in the extra time? Would you just hang out on the couch with a book or take up new hobbies? Do you see it as an opportunity to better balance work, care and leisure? Or do you think the extra time would absorb you and the new full-time would make your life even busier? Femma has researched this.

17 October 2017. 12 men and women sit down in Ghent for a focus discussion on the combination of work, care and leisure. They work full-time, part-time or are looking for a new job. They are manual workers, office workers or work in a managerial position. They all have children and none of them find it easy, albeit in different degrees, to combine work and care, let alone to have some free time. They report many experiences of loss. Combining takes place at the expense of themselves, the relationship with their partner, their social life and time with the children.

“ **I have flexible working hours and lots of holidays. Yet we still have to hurry to get the children to school and do household chores. This is because my wife has a busy job. She is often home late, so I do many of the tasks. We do not have any free time. No time for hobbies, our own development is on the back burner.**

“ **I constantly feel like nothing must go wrong. Because if that happens, everything goes to hell. Due to the concurrence of circumstances there is no more margin. Moreover, I do the combination of two times 50%, and that is more than 100%. There is no margin, we will not stretch any further.’**

When asked what would help them, it is striking that they mainly propose individual solutions: grandparents nearby, getting buffer time from your employer to take time off for no reason, a shorter commute... Hardly anyone fundamentally questions the way in which we divide work, leisure and care.

Understandable. After all, we are constantly told that the combination of work, care and leisure is a personal issue that we have to solve at our own kitchen tables. ‘You need to plan better.’ Or: ‘You can’t have it all.’

However, the personal is political. The decisions taken at the kitchen table reveal major social inequalities: between men and women, between double-income families and singles, between well-off and less well-off families, between flexible working hours, teleworking opportunities and fixed working hours. Not everyone gets the same opportunities to combine work, care and leisure in a qualitative way. For instance, as a result of gender stereotypes, women, on average, take up most of the household chores and childcare and make greater use of poorly paid care leave or part-time work. This explains to a large extent the gender pay gap, the under-representation of women in top jobs and the over-representation in poverty rates.

What if we not only put the puzzle of work, care and leisure on the kitchen table, but work on an innovative combination model as a society? A model that ensures that everyone is able to combine work, care and leisure in a quality manner. A model that values unpaid labour – such as domestic work, care work and volunteering – as the driving force of our society. A combination model aimed at a balanced distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women.

The new full-time, the 30-hour week, is part of this innovative combination model. Today a full-time job is 38 hours a week. This 38-hour working week is not geared to today’s needs. For many double-income and single-parent families, full-time work is not a viable option. That is why many people – especially women – are already working a 30-hour week today. Only today it is called ‘four-fifths’. Someone who works four-fifths is not seen as the ‘ideal employee’ who is fully committed to his or her career and plans the rest of his or her life around that paid work. Those who work four-fifths have major disadvantages. It is therefore appropriate to question not the motivation of people, but the full-time norm itself.

“ **We have to debias systems
and not start by debiasing mindsets**

Iris Bohnet, behavioural economist
and Academic Dean of Harvard Kennedy School

We consult our Ghent focus group on this. ‘Could a 30-hour week be a structural solution to the combination problems you are experiencing?’ The women and men around the table acknowledge that the 30-hour week could remedy these, but then add a number of remarks. They fear that the new full-time will be ‘like working part-time but still getting a full-time job’. They think the new full-time will not result in a more balanced combination of work, care and leisure. ‘You take on other social obligations. The children start another hobby, the grass needs to be mowed more often, or you take on extra jobs because you want to earn more.’ In other words: the 30-hour week will not make our lives any quieter, our interlocutors suspect. Moreover, people who like their job will not be interested in the 30-hour week and will continue to work overtime, they add. The people in the focus group suffer from the daily rat race, but see no way out. There Is No Alternative.

The focus discussion puts us with both feet on the ground. Theories alone will not get us there. We need to investigate in practice whether an alternative to the rat race is possible.

“ **Taking direct action by occupying a building or street, for example, makes us realise that there are alternatives to the existing situation. It makes us think about how we want to organise ourselves and society. It leads to reflection. When people experiment, they suddenly realise that much more is possible than they initially thought. It opens up perspectives.**

Anthropologist and activist David Graeber.

In 2019 the time has come. For 1 year, the Femma employees will work in the new full-time. To ensure that the workload does not increase and the same objectives are achieved, we have adapted our work organisation and provide replacements (70% of the hours we work less are replaced). We introduce the new full-time maintaining salaries, and we coach employees to consciously manage their time, both at home and at work. Together with researchers from the TOR research group of the Free University of Brussels (VUB) and the research centre Kind & Samenleving we monitor the effects of the 30-hour week on different areas of life: combination of work and family, household, leisure, self-care, informal care, (quality) time with the children, and work.

Our research is small-scale and takes place in an almost homogeneous female (only 1 male participated), rather highly educated population. Nevertheless, it has produced statistically meaningful results¹. Results we are happy to share.

In any case, the 30-hour week provides greater **ease of combination**. Combining work, care and free time becomes noticeably easier. Our employees experience fewer negative impacts of work on their private lives. Satisfaction with their combination increases significantly.

“ **After trying it out for a month, I am feeling a lot calmer. Calmer in my head, but also in my heart. The extra time available allows me to better organise the household. The care for my children goes a bit more smoothly (i.e. a less stressed mum). And I can also do someone else a favour without having to ignore my own needs.**

The shorter working week increases the **quality** of various areas of life, such as child care, housework and leisure. The better balance between work, care and leisure ensures less household stress and less pressure on leisure time. Parents indicate that the bond with their children has improved. The children also mention this.

In particular, the new full-time means more **autonomy** for adults and children. Having time is a basic condition for autonomy. The 30-hour week creates extra time that our employees can fill in

1 This means that the tendency you see in the sample can be generalised to a population with a similar profile.

as they please. In other words, they make their own mix. And even though the way they actually spend their time sometimes differs from their wishes, the majority are satisfied with how they finally filled in their extra time. The parents' breathing space also gives the children more control over family time. There is more chance to play a game together, or to do homework at home and not at school. Children can also decide more outside the home, for example about their time in care.

“ **Now I can choose when she (mummy) comes to get me. I have football on Friday. So if mummy has to go to work and she comes to get me at a quarter past five, that's a bit short. So it is convenient that she can come and get me at four. Because if I eat shortly before football practice, I sometimes feel bad (during training) because I have eaten just before.**

Daan, 11 years old

The **housework** takes up more time than we think. Although spending more time on the housework is not high on our employees' wish list, a significant part of the time that is freed up is spent on it. This extra time spent on housework does not cause more stress, on the contrary. However, some participants do feel that a lot of household chores end up on their shoulders. After all, their partners have not reduced their hours of paid work. Dissatisfaction among them grows in 2019.

“ **As far as the domestic work and the care work are concerned, the fact that they are less under pressure make them more pleasant, actually. Preparing a meal then becomes something that can also be a Zen exercise”**

The decrease in the general time pressure shows that the 'busyness due to work' was not exchanged for a 'busy schedule in the freed-up time'. There is **more peace**.

“ **Sometimes I would go to the gym or get my hair done or something, but often I would also just take some time to rest. That is something that gives me a huge sense of satisfaction, and this is all thanks to working fewer hours. While in the past I kept running around all the time and then sometimes started work exhausted and without energy on Monday morning. I felt a lack of energy much more often in the old full-time than in the new, in the 30-hour week.**

The 30-hour week **makes work more workable and gives more focus**. In the 36-hour working week, the vast majority of employees indicate that they are not sure they will be able to keep up their work until they retire. In the 30-hour week, the vast majority indicate that they can see themselves working until retirement age. Employees state that they plan their work better, have more

focus, and also work more according to the goals of their team. This is not only the effect of the 30-hour week; they were also coached.

Finally, the 30-hour week means that fewer employees have to **compromise between time and money**. Every year, Femma employees take parental leave or time credit. Types of leave not everyone can take because they are poorly paid. No need for this in 2019. All employees are entitled to a high-quality combination of work, care and leisure, regardless of their financial means.

“ **I lovingly cared for my elderly mother in 2019. Then I was told that this is a very gender-stereotypical use of my time. That may be, but at least I did not have to take poorly paid leave**

“ **Before the 30-hour week, household chores took up the entire weekend. I cleaned, went grocery shopping, did the washing and the ironing. I now do all those things on Fridays, the day I do not work. Suddenly there is room during the weekend for spontaneous trips, for example. Or time to read. I am single. With a mortgage to pay off, I cannot afford to work part-time after the 30-hour week. If it were financially viable, I would choose it.**

What is more, for some employees the new full-time means that they will be working more hours. This is because employees with a part-time contract of 28 hours were given the opportunity to switch to the new full-time. Four out of seven took this opportunity to accrue more social security rights.

“ **If you work 4/5ths, you actually cut off a day, and yes, you work less than others. Now it was just everyone the same, so you were actually working full-time, because I think that is important. I also got that from home: as a woman, you work full-time so you do not get in trouble later on. So yes, I liked that very much, the fact that you are still doing very meaningful work within the organisation, but you also have the peace and quiet of home. I hope Femma will do this again next year. Yes, I think that was the most important thing.**

With our action research, we investigated only a fraction of the impact the 30-hour week has on people, organisations and society. Our results show the potential of the 30-hour week for combining work, care and leisure in a balanced and quality way. They show that structural frameworks strongly determine our individual freedom and capacity to act.

The 30-hour working week deserves further research into its expansive social effects. What would it be like if not only you but also your partner worked in the new full-time? And not for one year but permanently? Would that mean fewer women would need to work part-time? Would we divide the tasks more evenly at home? Would shops need to be open for less time, which would shorten the long working hours of many self-employed? Would our community life benefit from it? Would it lead to a more sustainable lifestyle? Does the new full-time also distribute labour in a more equitable way? Does it create more jobs?

We hope that our action research will inspire many people: women and men, employees and employers, and of course our policymakers. We also hope that it will motivate many people to try it themselves. In any case, Femma will not let go of the new full-time.

On gerichtopevenwicht.be you can continue to follow our initiatives. We are launching the 'Own Mix' campaign and will be discussing a sustainable reduction of working hours ourselves in 2021.