

Is the four-day working week warranted in Poland?

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Problem:

Weekly working time in Poland is on average longer than in other EU countries. The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy is considering reducing working time to four days per week, with wages corresponding to five days of work.

Main message:

The introduction of a four-day week would significantly exacerbate labour shortages and reduce the state's ability to provide public services. Better way to improve work-life balance is to increase employees' entitlement to reduce their working hours, with a proportional reduction in pay, and to refuse to work overtime.

Main results

- Women in Poland work 4.6 hours per week longer than women in other EU countries, of which 3.6 hours is due to the lower prevalence of part-time work in Poland. Men work 1.9 hours per week longer, of which 0.8 hours is due to less frequent part-time work and 0.4 hours is due to more frequent self-employment than in other EU countries.
- 7% of employees in Poland work 48 or more hours per week. 45% of them would like to work fewer hours.
- Demographic change will cause a shortage of workers in 21 of the 39 occupational groups in the 2040 horizon. Reducing working hours would create a shortage in all 39 occupational groups, especially in public services.

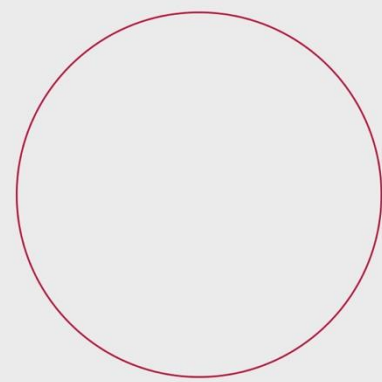
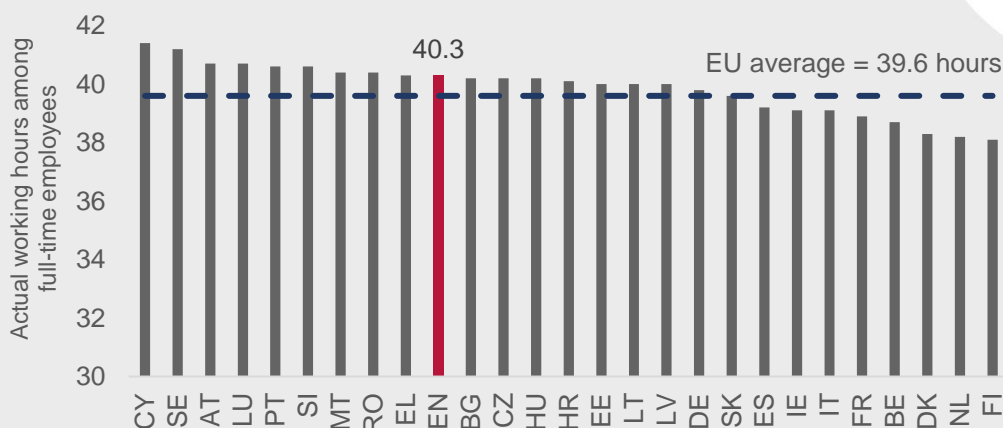


Figure 1: Weekly working time of full-time employees in Poland is similar to the working time of full-time employees in other EU countries



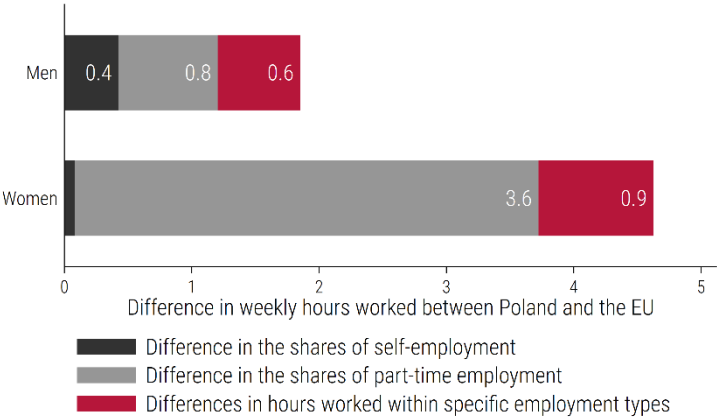
Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data for 2023

Polish women and men work significantly more than people in Western European countries, ranking second in the European Union in terms of working time. This observation led to a proposal for a statutory reduction of working time to four days per week. In this paper, we explain where the differences in working time between Poland and other EU countries come from. We show that introducing a four-day working week would exacerbate the already existing labour shortages. At the current stage of economic development, other government interventions to improve work-life balance are advisable.

What is the reason for the long working hours in Poland?

Men in Poland work an average of 41.5 hours per week compared to the average for the rest of the EU countries of 39.6 (data for 2023). This difference is higher among women: 38.9 hours in Poland against 34.3 in the EU. For both genders, **most of the difference in average working time is due to two factors: i) a lower share of part-time work and ii) a higher share of self-employment in Poland than the EU average** - rather than due to differences in working time among those working in a particular form (Figure 2). In Poland, only 6.3% of working women are employed part-time. In the rest of the EU, this percentage is 27.5%. Among men, the greater popularity of self-employment also plays a role (23.8% in Poland vs. 15.8% in the EU). **In contrast, the weekly working hours of full-time employees do not differ from EU standards in Poland.** They are 0.7 hours higher than the EU average but are shorter than in countries such as Austria, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden (Figure 1).

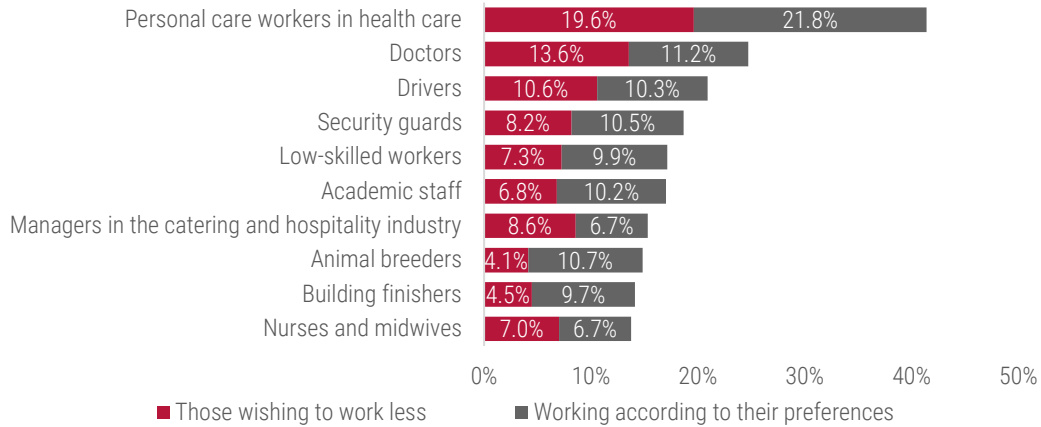
Figure 2: Differences in weekly working time between Poland and the EU are mainly due to differences in the structure of forms of employment - low percentage of full-time workers and high percentage of self-employment in Poland



Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data for 2023

A significant problem is the considerable share of people with very long weekly working hours: **7.4% of full-time employees declare weekly working hours of 48 or more** (Figure 3, data for 2022). The highest proportion of people with long weekly working hours, over 40%, was among personal care workers in health care. Other occupations with long working hours included doctors, drivers, and security guards. Importantly, 55% of workers with long working hours work according to their preferences, while 45% would prefer shorter hours. Polish law allows working hours to be extended up to 48 hours per week when there are 'special needs of the employer'. Although employees are entitled to special pay bonuses for overtime, they may lack control over their working hours.

Figure 3. Most employees with working hours of 48 or more per week work in line with their preferences



Source: Own compilation based on EU-LFS data for 2022

A four-day week would exacerbate labour shortages

Productivity gains compensating for reducing working hours to four days a week are unrealistic to achieve in most industries and occupations. Although better organisation of work following a reduction in the working week may allow productivity to increase in some office jobs, workers in most types of service and industry jobs are not able to do their work 25% faster. This is especially true for occupations that require manual tasks or spatial mobility, such as hairdressers, drivers or nurses. In order to maintain GDP at the same level, it would be necessary to employ additional workers. Without this, a reduced working time would translate into lower production, total income, and wages.

In most occupations, a 20% reduction in working time, from five to four days a week, would require an additional 25% of employees to do the same work while maintaining the same productivity. This is because newly hired employees would also work four days a week.

For demographic reasons, there will be a growing shortage of workers in Poland, even if the five-day working week is maintained. Forecasts of the employment structure predict a shortage of workers in 21 out of 39 occupational groups in the 2040 horizon. Reducing working hours would create a shortage in all 39 occupational groups, especially services (Table 1) [1]. In the private sector, drivers and construction workers would be most in short supply. In services, in which the state plays a vital role, deficits are expected among health professionals and associate professionals, among others. The introduction of a four-day working week would multiply the upcoming staff shortages. For example, the expected shortage of nurses, midwives and paramedics would increase by more than 3 times, doctors and medics by 4 times, drivers by 4.5 times and construction workers by 6 times. Technological advances, including the development of AI technologies, could reduce labour intensity and labour demand in many occupations in the future, but especially in office and cognitive-based occupations, i.e. generally other than those where a reduction in working hours would exacerbate labour shortages.

Reducing working hours to four days a week would make it impossible to deliver high-quality public services in Poland now. There are 93,000 police officers on duty in Poland, and the number of unfilled vacancies is 16,000 [2]. A four-day working week would mean that the number of vacancies in the police would rise to around 43,000. In health care, the shortage of workers is also apparent, with 72% of hospitals declaring a shortage of nurses [3]. Moreover, the age structure of nurses is very unfavourable. In 2022, 20% of working nurses have reached retirement age (60 years), and another 40% were at least 50 years old. Reducing

working hours to four days a week would require another 49,000 nurses to maintain service levels at current levels.

Table 1. Reducing working hours to four days a week will cause a shortage of workers in all occupational groups in 2040, especially in services (in thousands of workers)

Staff shortages resulting from:	Health Professionals	Health Associate Professionals	Sales Workers	Business and Administration Associate Professionals	Building and Related Trades Workers	Drivers and Mobile Plant Operators
Structural and demographic change	-77	-46	39	-56	-78	-133
Reductions in working time	-215	-107	-253	-328	-393	-468
Total shortfall	-292	-154	-214	-384	-471	-601

Source: Own elaboration based on Polish Labour Market Forecasting System data. Table reports data for selected occupational groups.

Introducing a 4-day working week in Poland would be clearly a premature decision. It would lead to a decline in Poles' income and serious problems for the government in providing public services. Instead, government interventions could help reduce the working time of employees who wish to work fewer hours than their employer expects. Employees' rights to refuse overtime should be strengthened, and the competencies of the State Labour Inspection regarding overtime enforcement should be enhanced. Furthermore, the rights of employees to reduce their working hours could also be increased.¹

Bibliography: <https://ibs.org.pl/publications/is-the-four-day-working-week-warranted-in-poland/>

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¹ Currently, employers must agree to a reduction in the working hours of parents of children under 6. In some EU countries, other groups of employees also have rights to decide on their working hours [4,5].