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24 HOURS ... BELGIAN TIME. A SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF RESEARCH ON THE BELGIANS' USE OF TIME

Ignace Glorieux et Jessie Vandeweyer, TOR 2001

The survey

As part of the Belgian time budget research, 8,382 Belgians from 12 to 95 years of age kept a diary for two days (one weekday and one weekend day) in which every ten minutes they diligently noted down their use of time. The fieldwork ran from 3 December 1998 to 6 February 2000 and was conducted by the National Institute for Statistics. The design of the databases and analyses are the result of a collaboration between the TOR research group of the VUB and the NIS.

The collective rhythm of the Belgians

The collective cadence in daily life is striking, but not altogether surprising. We sleep at the same time, we get up more or less at the same time, we eat at the same time (to a large extent), and we watch television all together. There is a clear distinction between weekdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Many household tasks are performed on Saturdays, but the weekend above all means a chance to sleep longer and enjoy a good deal of free time. And between the activities which we largely do together and which set the cadence of the social rhythm (the "zeitgebers" or time markers: sleeping, getting up, eating dinner and watching television), most Belgians do work. The kind of work they do varies: men spend much more time on paid labour, while women devote much more time to housework and tasks with and for children.

The different uses of time of men and women

The distribution of work between men and women is the most striking distinction brought out by our analyses. Purely and simply on the basis of the time which someone between ages 12 and 95 devotes on any given weekday to housework, paid work, chores and child care, we can with almost 75% certainty say whether that person is a man or a woman. Per week, women devote an average of almost 9'30" more to housework and 1'20" more to child care and education than men. Men spend a good 8 hours more per week on paid labour. The total workload - i.e. the time

devoted to paid labour, housework and child care & education - is an average of 2'33" per week higher for women than for men. The weekly workload for men amounts to 35'02", while for women it is 37'35". The traditional sex roles clearly continue to dominate the use of time.

Women also sleep somewhat longer than men, on average around 2 hours more per week. Almost 40% of available time goes to sleeping and resting: for women, this is just slightly less than 64'30"; for men, it is almost 62'30". If we add in personal care to this (which includes eating and drinking), then the Belgian devotes almost 50% of his time to maintaining his organism. By contrast, all work activities combined take up 'only' a good 20% of the time.

Women pay for their higher workload and the extra sleeping time with less free time. Men have an average of 30 hours of free time per week, women 4'30" less. If we also include social participation in this (including social contacts and participation in clubs and associations), then for men we come to almost 40 hours of free time per week (or 24% of the time), while women have 35'30" free time per week (or 21% of the time).

These differences between Belgian men and women are all the more striking, since they relate to all men and women between 12 and 95 years of age. Even if we control for age, level of education, working situation, number of children and region, the enumerated differences remain quite stable. This clearly indicates once again that men and women live in two different worlds as far as use of time is concerned.

Families under pressure

The differences between men and women relate above all to the distribution of work, somewhat less to the weight of the workload (even though it is on average 2'30" per week higher for women). The workload of men and women does vary sharply depending on what kind of family they form a part of. On the whole, non-working men have a low workload, regardless of whether or not they have a partner and whether that partner works. Thus the workload of men primarily depends on the quantity of paid labour they perform. Things are different for women. The total workload of part-time working women is hardly any lower than that of full-time working women. We find the highest workload in double-income families. Compared to the other men, men in a double-income family have the highest workload, and the same applies for women. The joint workload of men and women in a double-income family amounts to over 106 hours per week. In a breadwinner's family, that figure is 'only' 93 hours. As the double-income family model becomes ever more widespread - and it is already the dominant type of family among the active population - time pressures will undoubtedly further increase.

The busy age

The workload is highest during the 'busy age' between 26 and 40. Even after controlling for the working situation (full-time, part-time or non-working) and the number of dependent children, this remains the period of life in which the most paid labour and family work is performed. Not only do individuals work more in this age category, it is also at this age that the double-income family is most frequently encountered. This is the phase of life in which careers are built, families formed and

the financial burdens are the greatest. Once the age of 40 has been passed, the individual workload gradually reduces and also at the family level the workload falls, because women in many cases perform less paid labour, and in some cases even withdraw from the job market altogether.

Having children has a major impact on how one spends one's time. The more children there are in the family, the less time is devoted to paid labour (for both men and women). On average, people with dependent children also sleep less and have less free time. Without children, one has an average of around 6'30" per week more free time than if one has 4 or more dependent children. Having children does lead to greater social participation.

Differences between Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels

The regions in Belgium also display different time-use patterns. These differences largely confirm already-existing notions about the cultural differences between Flemings and Walloons. Walloons have more free time, sleep longer, devote more time to housework, social contacts and eating & drinking. Flemings devote more time to paid labour, child care & education and travelling than do the Walloons. People who live in Brussels generally occupy an intermediate position. The different use of time between the regions can be partially explained by a different composition of the population. Thus there are no more differences in the time devoted to paid labour when one controls for sex, level of education, age, working situation and number of children, and the difference in free time between Flemings and Walloons is also smaller after controlling for these population characteristics. That Walloons devote more time to personal care (including eating and drinking), sleep, housework and social participation, and that Flemings devote more time to education and child care is perhaps not to be ascribed to differences in the composition of the population. But even if there continue to exist, even after controlling for a number of population characteristics, striking differences between Flemings and Walloons, the difference in the time-use patterns of Flemings and Walloons is less marked than the differences between men and women. And so it remains difficult, on the basis of someone's use of time, to accurately predict in which region that person lives, whereas the different time-use patterns of men and women do permit rather accurate predictions.

For more information:

NIS: http://statbel.fgov.be/figures/d34_nl.htm

TOR: <http://www.vub.ac.be/TOR>