

# Wages and working conditions in the social services

Summary of the [WICARE](#) project<sup>1</sup>, February 2015

## Introduction

The WICARE project aims to improve trade union information on wages and working conditions in the social services sector across Europe. It is a joint initiative of EPSU and two research institutes – AIAS at the University of Amsterdam and CELSI in Bratislava – along with the WageIndicator Foundation. The project covered all 28 EU countries as well as six former Soviet countries (CIS). In 2014, in the EU28 the social services employed nearly 10 million people in the two sub-sectors, Residential care and Social work activities without accommodation. From 2008 to 2014, employment increased by 1.6 million. In total, 82 percent of the current social services workforce in the EU is female. The average age of the workforce can be estimated at 43.

## Data collected through web survey and print survey

Core of the WICARE project are the analyses on the data from the continuous [WageIndicator](#) web-survey on work and wages. Visitors of the national WageIndicator websites are invited to complete this survey. For the analysis, the survey data is used from workers in the residential care activities and the social work activities without accommodation, collected between 1/1/2013 and 31/9/2014<sup>2</sup> from the web survey and a printed version of the survey, which was distributed by national affiliates of EPSU. Data was collected in 34 countries, but with less than 20 completed questionnaires in 11 countries the response was too low to be included in the analyses. The remaining 22 countries are included in the analyses, of which 10 countries from the EU15, 8 from the newly accessed countries and five from the Russian Federation and former Soviet

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<sup>2</sup> AZE, BEL BLR, KAZ, RUS, UKR: 31-Jan-2015

countries. Across countries the number of observations ranges from 20 in Bulgaria to 2,911 in the Netherlands. In these countries, 9,143 workers started the questionnaire. Valid *wage* data of 4,413 respondents could be used. The findings reflect what workers think about their pay and conditions. This may not correspond to what trade unions perceive to be the case based on the agreements that they have negotiated. Differences may evolve because employees are unaware of the provisions of collective agreements or because collective agreements may not be implemented properly at local level. In addition, it is also important to take into account that existing legislation and regulations in place, for example on health and safety, might not be (fully) complied to “in real life”.

A final comment concerning the data relates to the fact that the survey is completed on a voluntary basis. This implies that the data are not representative to the total workforce in the social services, because that assumes a randomly sampled survey. Hence, the interpretation of the findings should be done with caution.

### *Employment characteristics*

In all but two countries more than seven in ten respondents are employees. Self-employment in the social services mostly covers very small shares. In 12 out of 22 countries majorities are working in a public sector organisation; in three countries more than five in ten workers are employed by a private sector organisation, and in one country in a not-for-profit organisation. The share of those having a permanent employment contract vary widely across countries, from 43 to 96 percent.

Concerning years of service, in a few countries four in ten workers have worked less than five years, whereas in a few other countries the same share worked for over 30 years. In most countries, differences in average years of service for men and women are rather limited.

### *Occupational structures and skills*

The survey has a question ‘What is your occupation?’, and for response a choice was given from a list of approximately 130 occupational titles. Early in the project it turned out that arriving at a list of relevant occupations was particularly difficult in some countries, delaying the launching of surveys and/or hampering to encourage workers to respond to the survey. A problem mentioned by several EPSU affiliates was that the list did not correspond to national categorisations of professional groups and that professions were not well recognisable due to the terminology used. A related problem was that the boundaries between residential care, social work and healthcare are not

similar across countries. A suggestion was to work with a list of 20 to 30 key professions (instead of 130) and to leave space to insert his/her profession. However, the coding job titles in the languages of 34 countries was considered a too difficult undertaking.

Our study explored occupational structures and skills in the social services. Regarding the occupational composition in the social services we found large differences across countries. The care workers, including personal care and child care workers, form the largest occupational group in almost all countries. Except for two countries, about three in ten workers are in nursing and other health professional occupations. In almost all countries at least two in ten workers in social services have received any training. Employer-provided training scored low in Austria, Italy, Luxembourg, and Portugal.

Six to eight in ten workers perceive that they have the right skill level for their current job. Between two and four in ten workers perceive to be overqualified. By contrast, underqualification is hardly a problem in the social services.

### Remuneration

In all countries the mean wages are higher than the median wages, implying that there is a relatively large group at the bottom of the wage distribution and a smaller number of respondents earning high(er) wages. Notably in five countries (Portugal, the UK, Czech Republic, Lithuania, and Belarus) wage differences between professionals and housekeeping and care workers are considerable.

As for the proportion of respondents earning gross hourly wages above or below the low-wage threshold (two-thirds of the national hourly median wage), in Eastern Europe the share of those below the threshold was very low. By contrast, in most Western European countries considerable shares earned below the low-wage threshold. In Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands the proportion of low-paid was over 30 percent, and among women workers even somewhat higher. Overtime payment included in the last pay turns up rather seldom, mainly in Austria and Lithuania. Overall, performance-related pay is even less reported.

### Workers' representation

We find that in the majority of countries four to seven in every ten workers in social services are covered by a collective bargaining agreement. In Netherlands, and Slovenia this share is even slightly higher. Overall, large shares of workers do not know whether

they are covered by collective agreement; this is notably the case in Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and the UK.

From the survey, union membership rates show up as very high in Austria, Slovenia and Belarus, and rather high in Belgium, suggesting that in these countries trade unions have been actively involved in disseminating the WICARE survey.

### *Working hours*

Working weeks of 32-40 hours show up as most common in most countries for social service workers. Very long working hours, more than 48 hours per week, are found in Slovakia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan where slightly less than two in ten reports to be working in this hours' category. Shift work or irregular hours are widespread in social services. They are most often reported in France, Italy, Netherlands, and Bulgaria, but are also experienced by at least four in ten workers in all other countries.

### *Working conditions*

Concerning work-related stress, we can conclude to rather diverse outcomes on the questions asked. In almost all countries around three to five of ten workers find their job daily stressful. In the ten countries where scores on 'finds job mentally exhausting' and 'finds job physically exhausting' are measured, two to five in ten workers finds their job daily so.

### *Job satisfaction*

In all but two countries satisfaction with pay receives the lowest rating of the five satisfaction measures questioned. The rating 'highly dissatisfied with pay' is ticked often, in particular in Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, and Ukraine. Satisfaction with the job, job security and working hours receive higher ratings in all countries.

### *Socio-demographic characteristics of the workers in the social services*

The average age of the respondents varies considerably, with relatively young respondents in notably Portugal. As for gender, the vast majority is female in all but Italy. The educational levels of the workers in the social services vary immensely across countries, with large shares of highly educated notably in the Russian Federation.

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