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## Employment risks and opportunities for an ageing workforce in the EU

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**Employment risks and opportunities  
for an ageing workforce in the EU\***

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discussion paper



## **Abstract**

The article provides a detailed analysis of the employment situation of older workers (55-64 years) in the EU member states. Using European Labour Force Survey data we systematically discuss the variation in the employment of older workers along the dimensions of gender, sectoral distribution, type of employment, training and flexible work arrangements. We show that and where Germany has to do some catching up if it wants to create a favourable employment context for this age group. Highlighting country differences we draw the conclusions that this labour market challenge can be characterised to a large extent as a gender problem, that labour market policy for an ageing workforce must start much earlier than just with older people and that their employment situation can to a great extent be sought in the general economic parameters and especially in the degree of employment growth in the service sector.

Der Beitrag analysiert die Beschäftigungssituation älterer Menschen (55-64 Jahre) in den EU-Mitgliedsländern. Auf der Basis von European Labour Force Survey Daten diskutieren wir systematisch die Ländervarianz in den Kategorien Geschlecht, Sektoren, Art der Beschäftigung, Aus- und Weiterbildung sowie flexible Arbeitsorganisation. Wir zeigen, dass und wo Deutschland Nachholbedarf hat, einen positiven Beschäftigungskontext für diese Altersgruppe herzustellen. Mit Blick auf die Unterschiede zwischen den Ländern stellen wir fest, dass diese Arbeitsmarktherausforderung in starkem Maße als Gleichstellungsproblem charakterisiert werden kann, dass Arbeitsmarktpolitik für eine alternde Bevölkerung nicht erst mit den Alten beginnen darf und dass die Beschäftigungssituation Ältere wesentlich durch wirtschaftliche Parameter bestimmt wird, besonders durch das Beschäftigungswachstum im Dienstleistungssektor.



## **Context**

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# 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Germany has an employment rate of 52 percent for older workers (defined here as all workers aged 55-64). In recent years, it has been one of the European countries to show favourable developments in terms of the labour market participation of this segment of the population. However, employment risks and opportunities are unevenly distributed within this group. A detailed comparative analysis of the employment status of the ageing workforce in Europe can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the extent of the challenge still facing Germany. It will also highlight the differences found across the European member states with respect to employment risks and opportunities.

Factors such as motivation and state of health and skills are necessary employment conditions, but they are not sufficient for understanding older workers' employment. Grasping the overall labour market situation of the ageing workforce in Europe is central to understanding the hiring and training decisions of employers as well as the retirement decisions of employees. Do other countries provide a more favourable employment context than Germany for both enterprises and employees to operate in when facing the challenge of an ageing workforce? How do countries differ with respect to employment risks and opportunities for older workers? The endeavour to answer these questions is not an end in itself. Bringing to light substantial differences between countries in a comparative analysis of the employment situation of an ageing workforce in Europe represents the groundwork for many further research questions. Can the rate of older workers' participation in the labour market be explained (at least partially) along the same lines as the increased labour market participation of female workers? What role does the growing service sector play - be it in the form of the state providing a range of social services or in the form of private and internationally competitive service providers? Is self-employment relatively more important as a form of older workers' labour market participation? We cannot engage in causal analysis on the basis of only simple, descriptive statistics. Nonetheless, our analysis can provide some evidence related to these questions and we can make some important observations. This work may thus function as a basis for fresh thoughts as to where promising policy measures might start.

We will use data from EUROSTAT's European Labour Force Survey in order to assess the labour market challenge posed by an ageing workforce and to show variations in the extent to which and in the areas where older workers are employed. Unless indicated otherwise, we look at the situation in 2007, but we will also trace changes since the 1980s and 1990s. We limit ourselves to examining employment rates (which do not include the involuntarily unemployed).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Paula Protsch for her excellent research assistance.

<sup>2</sup> The decision to focus on employment rates as opposed to labour force participation rates does not have a significant impact on the results of our cross-country analysis, while there are good reasons to stick to the former

The paper will start with a stylised review of the policy context behind the current employment situation by briefly outlining historical member state policy developments and the recent policy goal of ‘active ageing’ set by the EU (2). We will then provide an analysis of the employment situation of older workers in the different European countries structured along the dimensions of gender (3.1), sectoral distribution (3.2), type of employment (3.3), training (3.4) and flexible work arrangements (3.5). Summarising the differences that emerge will allow us to discuss the factors that might be responsible for the significant variation in the employment of older workers across Europe and therefore enable us to begin to look at what might be required at the level of labour market policy (4).

## **2 The policy context of ‘active ageing’**

In the member states of the EU, the traditional way of dealing with the risks of old age was to arrange for workers to reach a full stop in their employment history at a mandatory retirement age (usually 65 years) and to replace earnings with pensions.<sup>3</sup> Most governments tried to remedy high unemployment in the 1970s by means of early exit programmes – also because these were in line with popular demand, being backed by both employers and employees. This approach represents the opposite of a policy of ‘active ageing’ comprised of measures and instruments aimed ultimately at increasing the employment of older workers aged 55-64 and over. Looking at specific policy measures, some countries within the EU, especially Belgium, Denmark, France and Germany, have used unemployment insurance to relieve the labour market, thereby increasing the incidence of this sort of abrupt, insurance-based early retirement. Other countries, especially Finland and the Netherlands, adopted a similar strategy based on disability insurance (see e.g. Casey 1996; European Commission 2003). By the end of the 1990s, the actual retirement age had declined across the EU to around 60 percent for men in most member states; it also declined in the OECD countries, from 66 percent (1960) to 62 percent (1995) for men, while for women it is well below 60 percent in two thirds of the OECD countries (OECD 1999).<sup>4</sup> Women’s labour force participation in this age group is tending to rise, which further contributes to the narrowing of the gender gap. However, huge differences in the activity and employment rates of older workers persist within and across the EU member states. In almost all member states (and also in other OECD countries), the trend towards declining participation rates has already been

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type of data. First, employment rates are more easily accessible and, second, they are also easier to compare than labour force participation rates, which are still recorded and measured diversely across different countries.

<sup>3</sup> This also holds for the OECD countries; a notable exception is France (where men and women can retire at age 60).

<sup>4</sup> The average figures conceal considerable differences. In Belgium, the average retirement age for men is around 57, compared to 69 in Iceland and 67 in Japan; for women, it is 54 in Belgium, 67 in Iceland and 64 in Japan.



successfully reversed (OECD 2006), while ‘active ageing’ is now a priority issue for national and supranational decision-makers.

Despite the considerable recent improvements, the employment rate of older workers in the EU is still a long way from the target of 50 percent established by the Stockholm Council in 2001. The European Commission estimates that between 2006 and 2010, the employment figures for those in the 55-64 age group would need to increase by around 6 million in order to reach this target. This is equivalent to employment growth of around 5.5 percent per year, compared to an actual average annual growth rate of 4.2 percent between 2000 and 2006 (European Commission 2007: 113). In order to reach this target, the EU has developed a policy of ‘active ageing’.<sup>5</sup> The European Employment Strategy launched in 1997 best depicts what ‘active ageing’ should look like from an EU perspective. Here, older workers were first specifically mentioned in 1999. An explicit link between their employment and social security systems was made in 2000, and this evolved into a fully fledged guideline on ‘Developing a policy for active ageing’ in 2001. In 2003, cross-links such as working conditions and the special importance of health and safety at work, continuous training, elimination of incentives for early exit from the labour market (by reforming early retirement schemes and ensuring that it pays to remain active in the labour market) as well as encouragement of employers to employ older workers were established. In parallel, quantitative targets were adopted: the Stockholm target of 2001 mentioned above and in 2002 the Barcelona target specifying that the average exit age should be 65 by 2010 (for more details see Hartlapp 2007). Although the European level now provides for clearly defined policy goals, most member states are struggling to reach them (see below).

Elsewhere – and going beyond the dominant discourse at EU level - we have argued that ‘active ageing’ is a more encompassing concept than policies aimed only at restoring the pension funds and/or international competitiveness. Based on the theory of Transitional Labour Markets (TLM), we have derived normative criteria for ‘active ageing’, arguing that the possibility of working in the later phase of the life course is a central determinant of quality of life as long as individual freedom in employment decisions, good working conditions and possibilities for combining paid with unpaid work are ensured (for details see Hartlapp/Schmid 2008, forthcoming). Armed with this policy context, we can now turn to examining empirical evidence on ‘active ageing’.

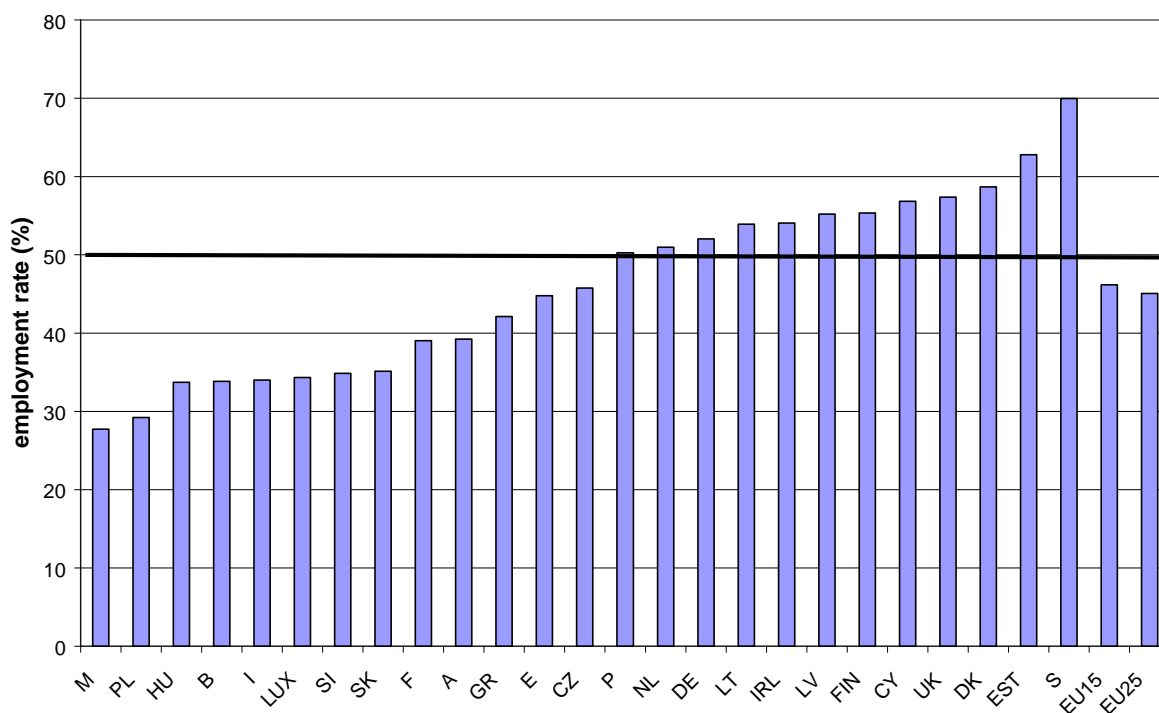
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<sup>5</sup> Reday-Mulvey (2005: 33) traces the origins of this term back to the World Health Organization (WHO), which highlights the close links between activity and health, and thereby the importance of enhancing the quality of life into very old age by maintaining mental and physical wellbeing throughout the life course. This perspective broadens the more narrow term ‘productive aging’ coined in the United States.

### 3 The employment situation of older workers in Europe

A comparison of the labour force participation of older people in the EU member states shows that reaching the EU goal of a 50 percent employment rate of older workers represents a tougher challenge for some countries than for others.

**Figure 1: Employment rates total, age 55 to 64 (2007)**



Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

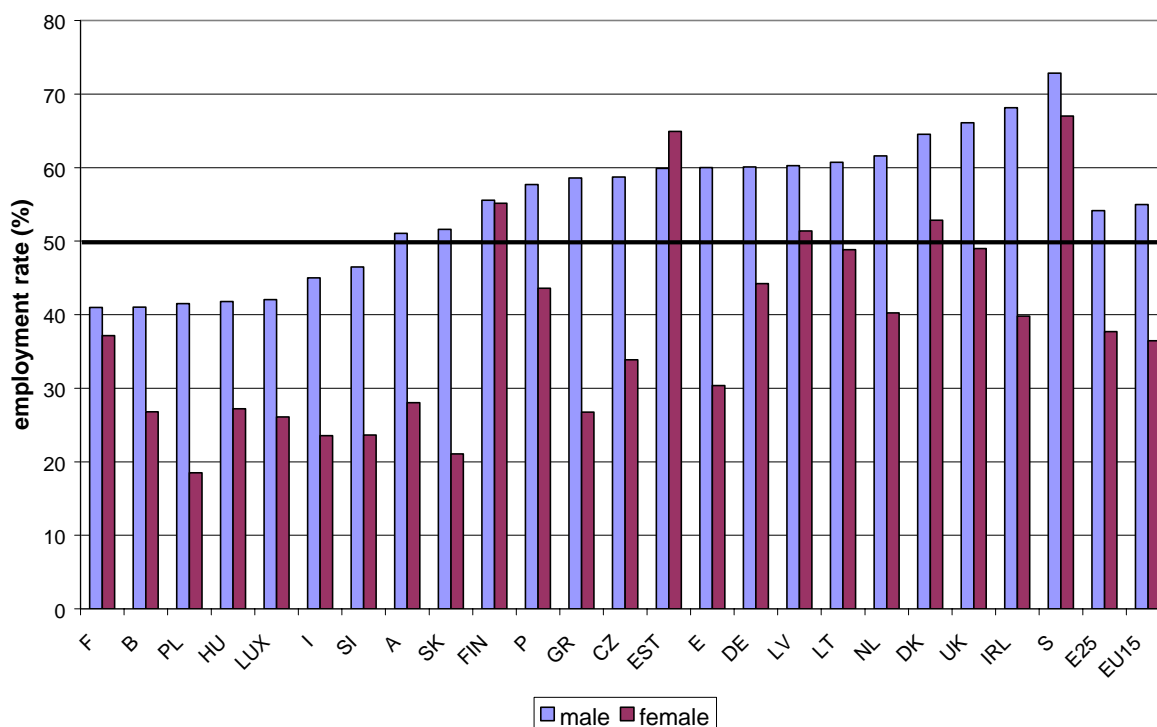
Only two fifths of the countries pass the Stockholm target of a 50 percent employment rate for 55-64 year-olds. Amongst these countries, Scandinavia (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) performs most impressively, along with Estonia and Latvia from the Baltic states, as well as Ireland and the UK. Among the continental member states, only Germany and the Netherlands fulfil the EU target. Some of the countries from this group, notably Belgium, Italy, France and Luxembourg, belong to the group of ‘worst’ performers; they are underperformed only by Malta, Poland and Hungary.

Countries with quite similar employment rates can conceal totally different circumstances for older workers, however, since the labour market situation shows substantial variation from one country to the next. Therefore, in the following we will take a closer look at the data and highlight country differences with respect to the gender, sectoral distribution, type of employment, training and flexible work arrangements of the ageing workforce.

### 3.1 Gender

There are evident differences across EU countries along the gender line. If we look only at men, many countries – especially Scandinavia, Ireland, the UK and Cyprus – have already achieved the European Employment Strategy’s Lisbon target of an employment rate of 50 percent. It is mainly the continental countries (France and Belgium) and the new member states (Poland and Hungary) that lag behind with respect to this indicator. With the exception of a few countries (Portugal and Estonia), the downward trend in the employment rate of older men seen in the 1970s and 1980s turned around again at the beginning of the new millennium. The countries that have made the most progress since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy are Finland, Hungary and the Netherlands. Germany belongs to a group of countries that has made quite remarkable achievements more recently (together with Austria, Latvia, Slovenia and Slovakia).

**Figure 2: Employment rates of men and women aged 55 to 64 (2007) \***



\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

Figure 2 also shows that ‘active ageing’ in the sense of greater labour force participation is especially underdeveloped amongst women.<sup>6</sup> Little more than a handful of countries attains the Stockholm goal of a participation rate of 50 percent. This is far from astonishing if we consider that female employment is generally lower than male employment. Apart from the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, women’s employment rates are much more distant from this target than those of men. Germany is ranked at mid-table amongst the member states at 44.2 percent, but many other countries show stronger increases when it comes to growing participation of older female workers. A convincing explanation for Scandinavia is the ‘de-familiarisation’ of care obligations regarding the frail older people. Again, the most work so as to live up to the goal of increasing the employment rate of older workers needs to be done by some of the new member states (Poland and Slovakia) but much also needs to be done by some of the continental countries (Italy and Luxembourg). As already for male workers, amongst women, too, Finland, Hungary and the Netherlands stand out as having made the greatest strides towards achieving the EU’s Stockholm goal. When we are specifically interested in strong increases in the participation of female workers in the labour market, the Baltic states show an impressive performance.

Two forces are driving the female employment rate upwards: the generally increasing labour market participation of women (which should play out even more strongly over time) and the decreasing average age of retirement. In some EU member states, women can still retire earlier than men (at age 60 in Austria and the UK,<sup>7</sup> at age 63 in Belgium) – a privilege thought to compensate for their family duties. This is a declining trend though, not least due to the decisive European Court of Justice ‘Barber’ ruling in 1990.<sup>8</sup>

While male employment rates were in decline in the 1980s and 1990s, the female employment rate has increased in all countries except Poland since 1983, and particularly rapidly so in Finland, Hungary and the Netherlands, as well as more recently in the Baltic countries and Ireland. It seems noteworthy that the increases in the employment of women and men go hand in hand. There is no question of women replacing or displacing men (or vice versa).<sup>9</sup> The countries with high male employment amongst older workers are also the countries with high female employment in this group.

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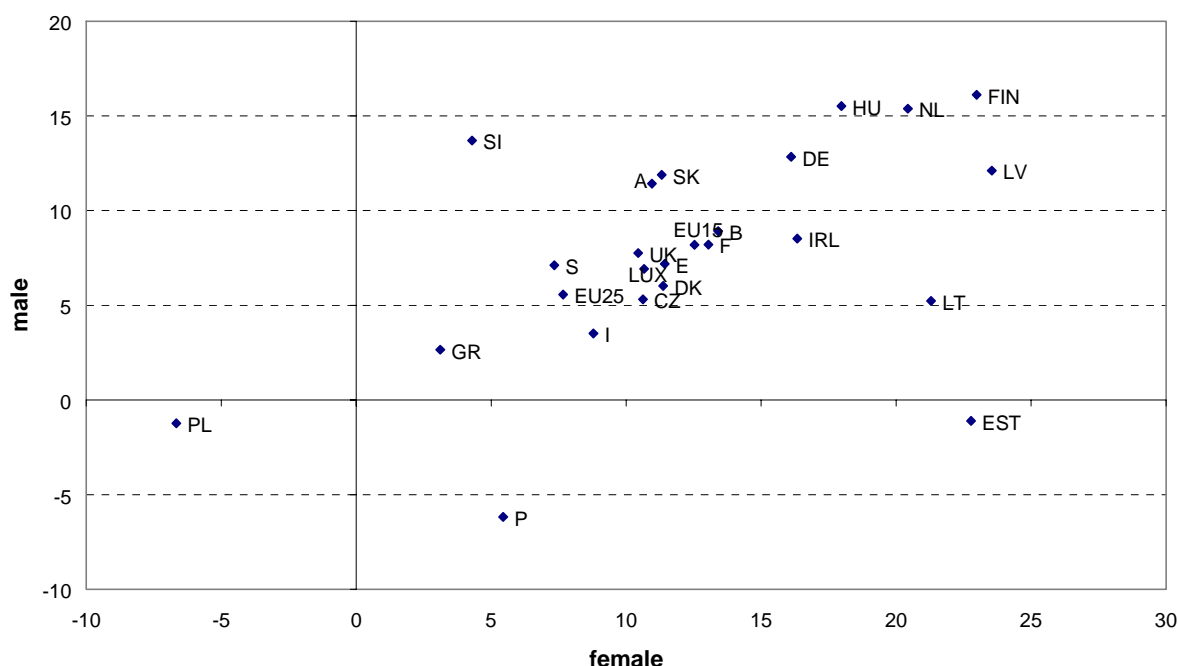
<sup>6</sup> Besides the absolute employment level, several studies have shown that the type of retirement pathway (e.g., part-time retirement, disability retirement, early exit) differs between men and women (Kohli/Rein 1991: 28; Teipen/Kohli 2004:95).

<sup>7</sup> In the UK, retirement age for women will increase to 65 over the period 2010-2020.

<sup>8</sup> With respect to occupational pensions, the Barber (C-262/88) landmark ruling argued that differences in pension age on the grounds of gender contradicted Article 119 ECT on equal treatment. As a consequence, the often lower pension age of women was equalised upwards.

<sup>9</sup> The same holds true for the old (and sometimes still persistent) assumption that early exit of older workers from the labour market would make room for younger entrants. Where the employment of older people has

**Figure 3: Change in the employment rates of women and men aged 55 to 64 (1998-2007)\***



\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings. The change for the EU-25 is calculated for 2002-2007.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

We can conclude that the labour market situation of older workers from both sexes is relatively more difficult in some of the continental and new member states, while the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries provide a more favourable context for an ageing workforce. In many countries, active participation in the labour force even in old age is already quite established if we consider employment rates amongst male workers, and in almost all countries this phenomenon is further strengthened over time. The greatest challenge in this respect is faced by countries with traditionally low shares of female employment. The strong cohort effect – especially for women – suggests that the future direction of active participation in the labour market is already set in the prime-age period of the life course.

This section has shown that the employment situation of older men differs substantially from that of older women. In order not to fall into the trap of mixing assessment and explanation of the employment situation of the two sexes, we provide separate data for them when discussing further issues regarding the ageing workforce in Europe.

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increased, so too has the employment of young people (OECD 2006: 140 reports a clear correlation coefficient of 0.62 for the period 1992-2002).

### 3.2 Sectoral employment

Sectoral employment is the second dimension that highlights major differences between countries. The overall distribution of older employees amongst the different sectors as well as a cross-country analysis of different sectors can contribute to our analysis. To address these two aspects, we use EUROSTAT data referring to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (NACE: a-b agriculture, c-f industry and g-q services).<sup>10</sup>

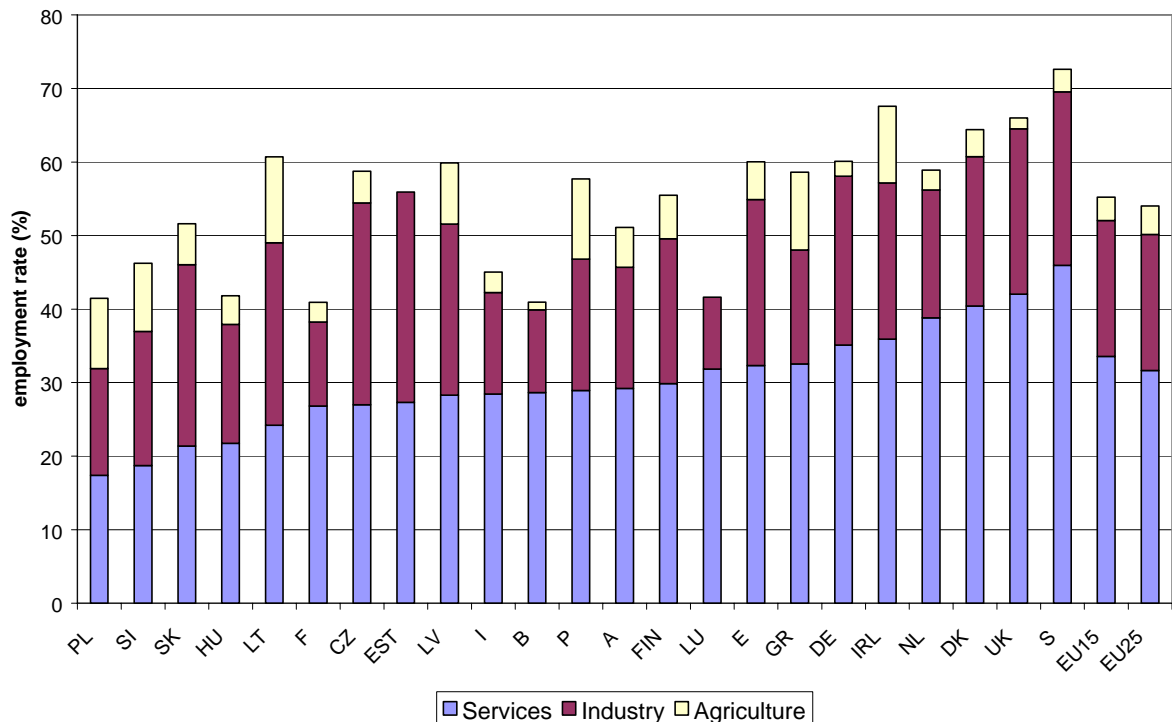
Sectors may differ with respect to overall employment rates, providing more or fewer opportunities generally to find a job or to remain employed. By and large, older people show a similar sectoral distribution to other age groups, with a dominant service sector (30.9 percent), followed by industry (11.3 percent), and agriculture, forestry and fishery (3 percent). When looking at the relative share of older workers, we find that older workers are overrepresented in agriculture, while they are underrepresented in industry and services (albeit to a smaller degree in the latter). Generally speaking, country differences are more pronounced for female than for male workers.

Even though it is rapidly shrinking, *agricultural* employment still plays a much more prominent role amongst older workers than amongst younger age groups. This sector provides jobs for an average of 3.9 percent of the male and 2.1 percent of the female population aged 55-64. Employment rates for both sexes are low, but for women jobs in agriculture are comparably more important (especially in Poland, Slovenia, Greece and Portugal). While the overall employment of older workers is low in southern and eastern EU member states, they still display high employment rates in the agricultural sector. Rates of 11.2 percent female and 10.9 percent male employment in Portugal and 9.6 percent female and 9.3 percent male employment in Slovenia contrast with substantially lower and often declining numbers in the UK, the Netherlands and Germany.

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<sup>10</sup> We are aware that this poses some problems with respect to the cross-country comparison of the service sector. Looking from a sectoral perspective, Germany appears to suffer from a service-sector gap based on an underdeveloped tertiary sector. Detailed research has revealed that many manufacturing firms in Germany provide services in house, compared to a more extensive use of subcontracting in Anglo-Saxon economies. Hence, jobs classified as service sector in the UK are likely to be categorised as industrial jobs in Germany (e.g. Erlinghagen/Knuth 2003:11).

**Figure 4: Sectoral employment rates of men aged 55 to 64 (2007)\***

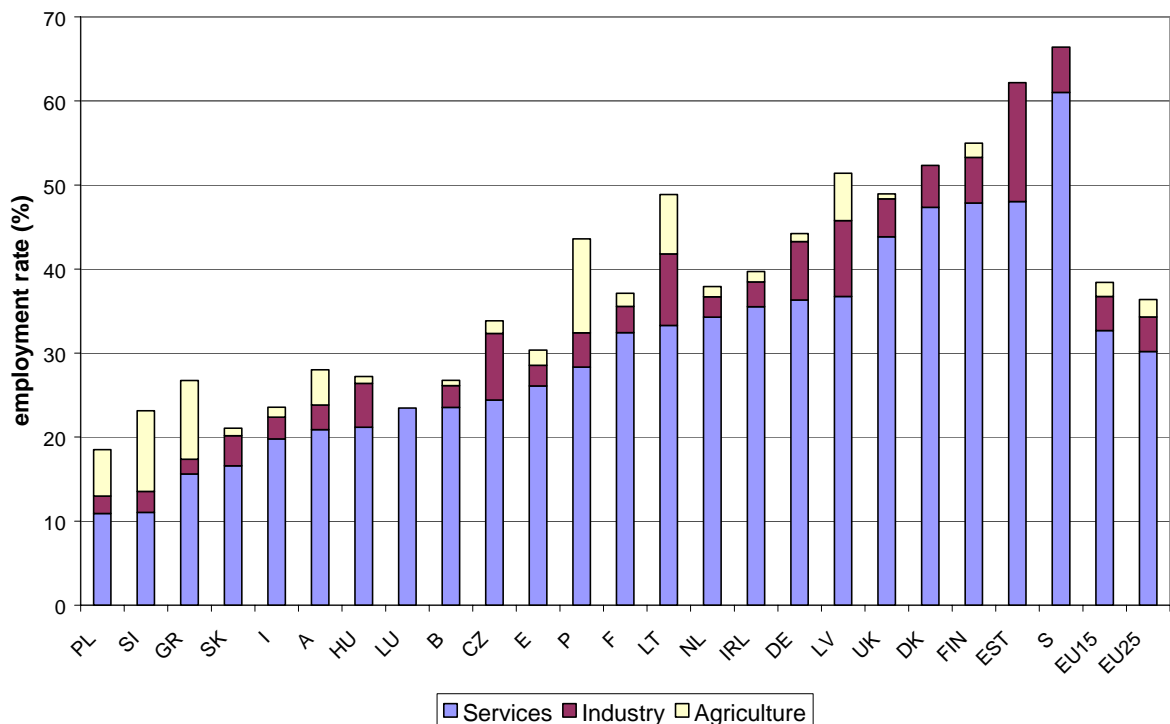


\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings. Data for Lithuania and Luxembourg are not completely reliable.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

More than 10 percent of the population aged 55-64 find jobs in the *industrial sector*. The margin of variation for men is from over 28 percent in Estonia to 11.2 percent in Italy (for women from 9.3 percent in Latvia to 1.7 percent in Greece). In Germany, this sector has relatively substantial importance for both sexes, with 23 percent of older men and 7 percent of older women working in industry. De-industrialisation marks the overall trend in this sector, but the picture is less clear for older workers. Employment rates are still growing in most countries; the UK and Sweden are amongst the rare exceptions. This might be due (at least partly) to the fact that people start working in industry at an early age and then remain in the same sector. At the same time, dismissals in the context of restructuring are often organised according to social criteria. Older employees who are not eligible for early retirement are less likely to be shed than young workers. Industry also shows the most striking sectoral difference according to gender. The male employment rate (18.5 percent) is almost five times the average of the female employment rate (4.1 percent). These are the grounds on which it is often argued that early retirement, most prominent in large industrial firms, is above all a male problem (Blöndal/Scarpetta 1998).

**Figure 5: Sectoral employment rates of women aged 55 to 64 (2007)\***



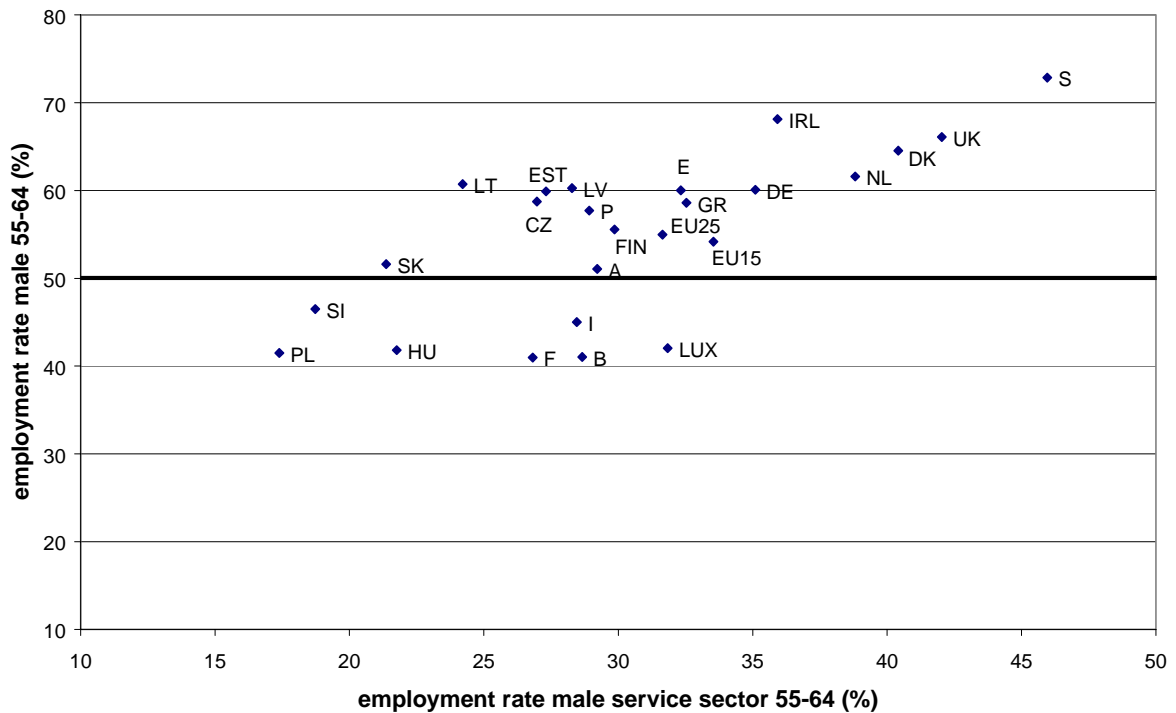
\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings. Data for Belgium, Ireland, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Slovakia are not completely reliable.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

In all countries, *service sector* employment rates for older workers are growing. An average of 31.7 percent of male workers and 30.2 percent of female workers find a job in the service sector. The service sector is thus of particular interest when it comes to efforts to improve the employment prospects of older workers. This view is supported by the fact that the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries not only show high overall employment rates, but they also provide work in the service sector more often than other countries (42 percent male and 43.8 percent female employment in the UK, 40.4 percent male and 47.3 percent female employment in Denmark and no less than 46 percent male and 61 percent female employment in Sweden). These figures are especially striking in the case of women, whose service-sector employment rates roughly double those of other countries. At the same time, the low employment rates for older workers in many eastern European countries go hand in hand with lower employment rates in services; they are as low as 18.7 percent for men and 11.1 percent for women in Slovenia, or 17.4 percent for men and 10.9 percent for women in Poland. Even in the Baltic states, where overall employment rates for older workers are amongst the highest in Europe, the service sector contributes relatively few employment opportunities.



**Figure 6: Employment rate of men aged 55-64 and employment rate in the service sector of men aged 55-64 (2007)\***



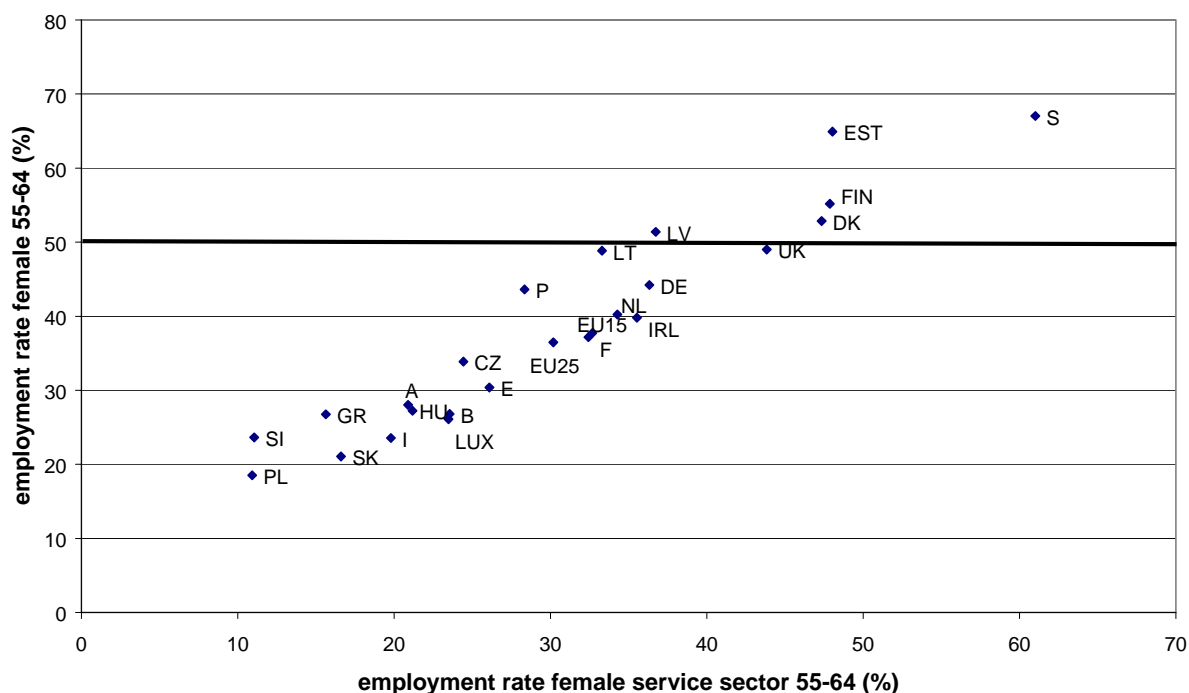
\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings. Data for Lithuania and Luxembourg are not completely reliable.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

The primary employment of older workers in the service sector might be due to the dynamics of the service sector, or it might hint at specific institutional arrangements providing incentives for older workers to become or remain employed in services. Potential explanations can be found in the literature on different worlds of welfare-state capitalisms (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1991). Here, the argument goes that having the state as a provider of (social) services increases the employment chances of workers such as women (Huber/Stephens 2000) and older workers. Another line of reasoning to explain this finding links up more directly with the debate on internationally exposed services such as accounting or transport, on the one hand, and, on the other, sheltered services produced locally and consumed by private households, such as cleaning, kitchen workers or waiters

(Scharpf/Schmidt 2000; Scharpf 2000). Here, too, the employment context for an ageing workforce should be more favourable in countries with big (sheltered) tertiary sectors.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 7: Employment rate of women aged 55-64 and employment rate in the service sector of women aged 55-64 (2007)\***



\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings. Data for Belgium, Ireland, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Slovakia are not completely reliable.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

Yet a different strand of the literature argues that when considering labour demand as a factor impacting on older workers' employment, one has to keep in mind that not all work suits older people. Hard physical work in industry, such as that required in coal mining or manufacturing, is not compatible with the physical capabilities of many older people. However, older workers might be specifically suitable for supplying some of the job requirements of the growing service sector, such as interpersonal relationship skills

<sup>11</sup> Note that we do not posit that older workers are less productive as such. They might become less productive because if they are 'left on the scrap heap' then they are no longer trained. For the argument made here it suffices to accept that employers assume that older workers are less productive and hence they are more likely to be made redundant or to have more difficulties in becoming employed, both of which lead to lower employment rates in highly competitive sectors.

(Illmarinen 1999: 76).<sup>12</sup> This demand factor will have a second pull effect: the availability of these services on the market will allow women, especially, to leave or to stay on the labour market since they will now be able to buy services – by means of either cash or taxes – that they otherwise provide themselves. Taking these arguments into consideration, we have shown elsewhere that the pull of older workers into employment is substantially influenced by the size of the sectors of education, health and social work, community services and private household services. Thus, employment conditions must not be sought mainly in the characteristics of the older workers (for example, their potentially dwindling productivity), but in the general economic parameters: first and foremost, the pace of employment growth in the service sector, be it private or public, internationally competitive or sheltered (Hartlapp/Schmid 2008, forthcoming).

To sum up, while agriculture and industry also show shrinking employment rates for older workers, their employment rates are growing in the service sector. But if the service sector remains underdeveloped, older workers – especially when they have been shed from the industrial sector – are indirectly squeezed out of employment. The comparative perspective clearly shows that employment systems with large service sectors also have relatively high employment rates for older workers. Germany is amongst the countries that need to do some catching up here.

### **3.3 Type of employment**

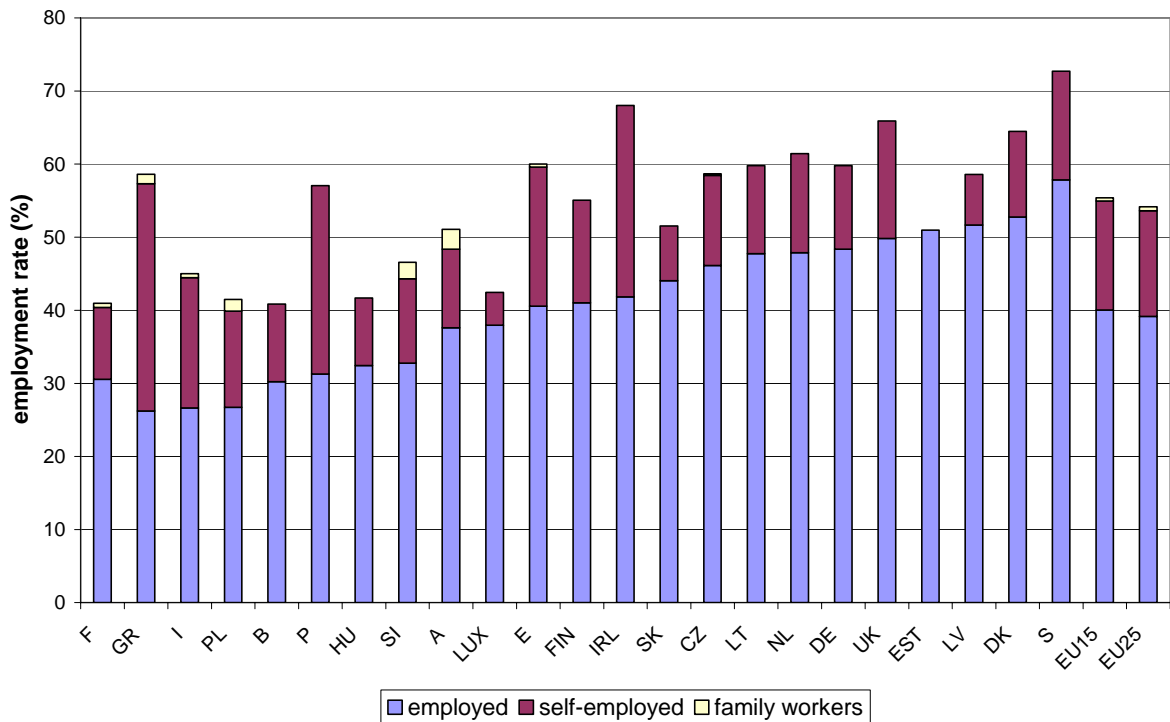
In a comparative analysis of the employment situation of older workers, another important aspect is whether those working are doing so as employees, in self-employment or as family workers. The overall distribution of older employees amongst the different types of employment as well as a cross-country analysis of different types of employment can contribute to our understanding of the situation.

Generally, the self-employed are overrepresented amongst older workers. While employees show declining labour market participation rates in old age, self-employed people often work until statutory retirement or even beyond. Recent, empirically based insights suggest different reasons may account for this tendency. Even after controlling for personal and occupational characteristics, the self-employed are on average much more satisfied with their jobs and perceive the quality of their working tasks more positively than do employees (Protsch 2006). Moreover, difficulties in finding a suitable successor and (over-proportionally so in some countries) economic necessity may come into play (Schulze Buschoff/ with the collaboration of Claudia Schmidt 2007).

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<sup>12</sup> For a critical perspective highlighting the need to adapt to changing work requirements and to be regionally mobile in order to perform in (low-skill) service sector jobs, see Erlinghagen (2006: 8).

**Figure 8: Rates by type of employment of men aged 55-64 (2007)\***



\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings. Data for France, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Czech Republic and Latvia are not completely reliable; data for Germany are preliminary.

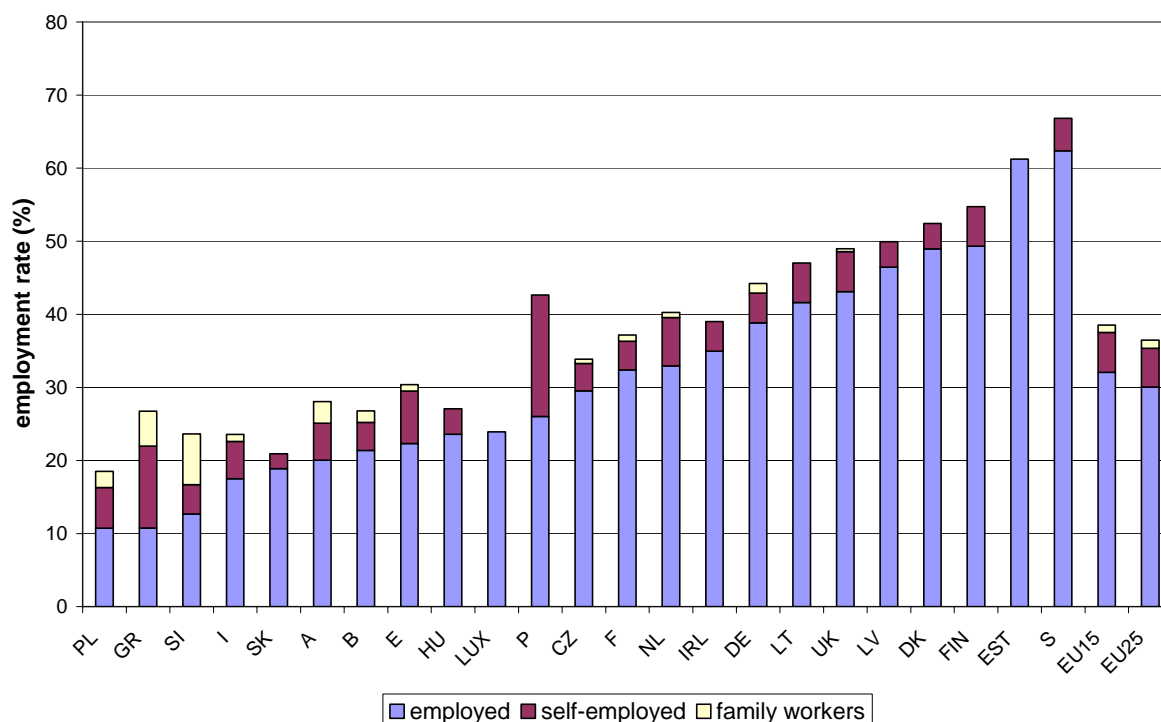
Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

As already seen for the other dimensions discussed so far, the gender differences are substantial. Working as an employee is the most important type of employment for both men and women. In addition, many older workers are active as self-employed. This plays an especially important role in the southern European member states and in Ireland, with the respective employment rates as high as 31.1 percent in Greece, 25.8 percent in Portugal and 26.2 percent in Ireland. Some of the countries with especially high employment rates for older workers even show increasing rates here (the Netherlands and the UK). Also, in countries showing comparable employment rates for older workers, relatively high (UK) or low (Germany) shares of older self-employed provide for quite different labour market contexts for this age group.

Turning to the employment context of older female workers, we see that here the picture is largely driven by the dependent employed. Self-employment, contrary to the situation for men, is of little importance. The two notable exceptions are Portugal and Greece (16.6 percent and 11.2 percent self-employment, respectively). In the latter country, the self-employed even outnumber the employees amongst the older women. Economic necessity might be a driving force to explain the over-proportionally high numbers of older workers from both sexes in this type of employment. Interestingly, working in a family undertaking plays a relatively more

important role for women, and especially so in some countries with very low employment levels for older women, such as Greece (4.8 percent) and Slovenia (6.9 percent). We note that these figures go hand in hand with an important agricultural sector in these countries.

**Figure 9: Rates by type of employment of women aged 55-64 (2007)\***



\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings. Data for Slovenia, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Latvia and Lithuania are not completely reliable; data for Germany are preliminary.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

We can conclude that for Germany as well as for the other member states, being an employee is the most important type of employment for both older men and older women. However, with respect to labour market opportunities, it seems noteworthy that some of the countries with high and growing employment rates amongst older workers in general also display high shares of self-employed men in this age group, an evident example being Ireland. On the other end of the continuum, countries with generally low participation rates for older workers tend to have many of them working in family undertakings (e.g., Slovenia or Poland).

### 3.4 Education and training

In the group of the highly skilled, all EU member states have surpassed the Lisbon goal of 50 percent employment amongst older people.<sup>13</sup> About 85 percent of highly skilled older men and women in Sweden are still working. In Germany and in the Netherlands, the figure is about 65 percent. For the low-skilled, however, only Sweden, the UK and Portugal surpass the Lisbon goal. Even Finland, the model country for ‘active ageing’ policies as promoted by the EU, has some catching up to do if it is to exceed the Lisbon benchmark of 50 percent. Thus, mainly low-skilled workers have problems reaching the envisaged retirement age of 65 (Schmid forthcoming).

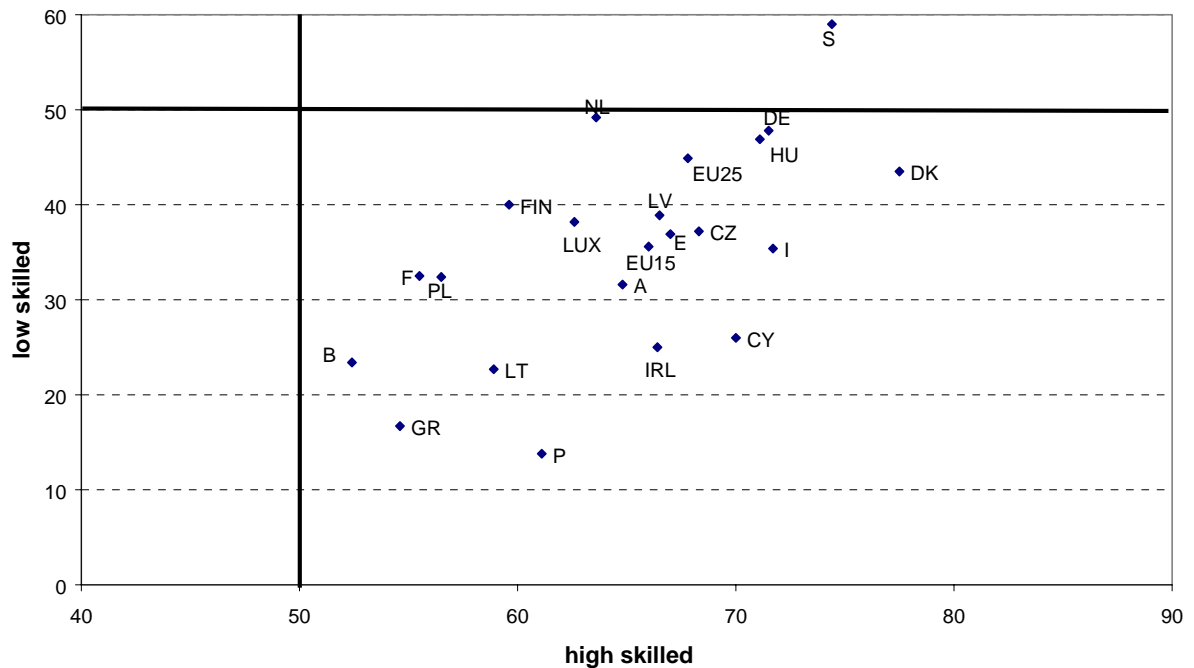
In Germany, the difference in the employment rates of the high skilled and low skilled amounts to more than 30 percent; little over a third of those with low skills and aged 55-64 are still employed. All others are unemployed, working informally or even illegally, or obtaining early or disability pensions. If employment in old age is to rise, then there is a great need to better qualify the older workforce or – if this is not possible – then there is great demand for more low-skilled work places. Where does Germany stand in its effort to (continuously) train older workers in order to counterbalance the deficits of initial education?

Skills erode or are outmoded with age, thus they have to be refreshed or replaced regularly over the life cycle. It is therefore crucial to note that the countries studied differ with respect to participation in continuous training. Training empowers individual workers to make employment decisions by equipping them with new skills and up-to-date knowledge. Training increases their value for the employer, while at the same time carrying costs. Besides, training is necessary to reach the policy goal optimistically formulated at a Meeting of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000: Europe needs to be transformed into ‘the world’s largest knowledge-based economy by 2010’.

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<sup>13</sup> Under the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), these are people who have completed third-level education (ISCED 5 and 6).

**Figure 10: Employment rates of workers aged 55–64 by skill level (2007)\***

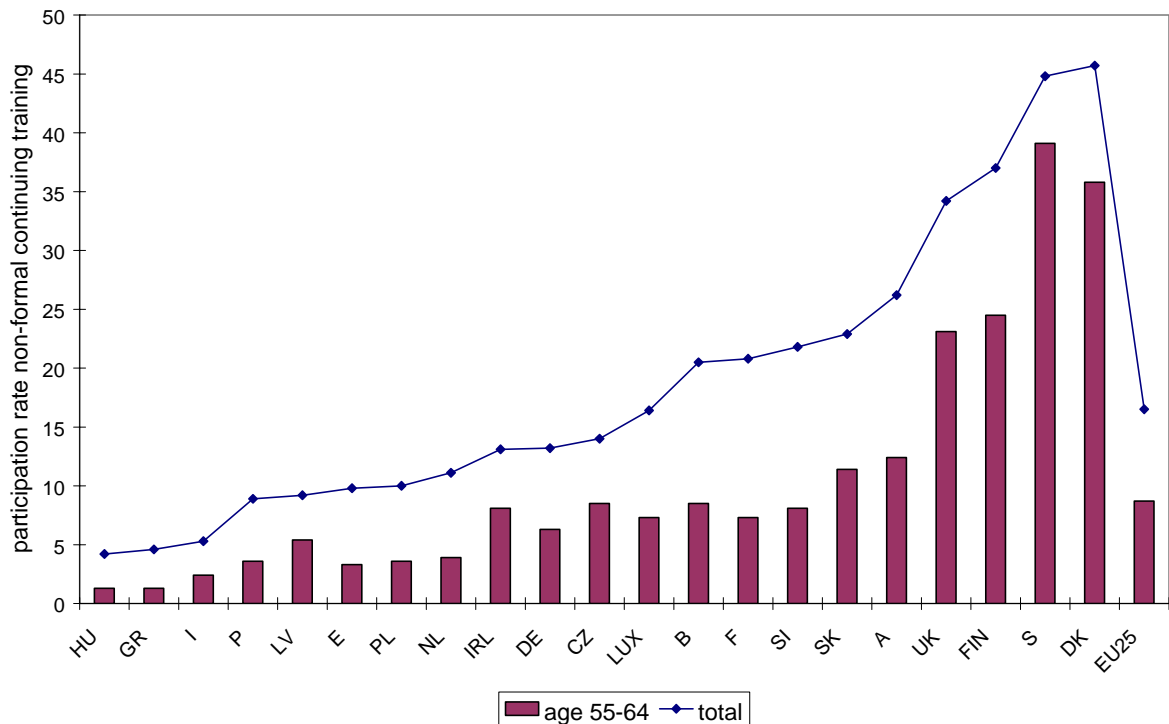


\* Low skilled: ISCED 0–2; high skilled: ISCED 5–6.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

Figure 11 shows that male participation in non-formal continuous education and training varies between 4.2 percent and almost 46 percent across European countries. In 2003, Hungary, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Poland and the Netherlands constituted the group where older workers were least trained, but the picture in Germany is little better. The relative difference between older workers and all workers is most pronounced in Spain, Poland, the Netherlands and France. High participation in training for all age groups, including older workers, is common in Denmark and Sweden, as well as in Finland and the UK.

**Figure 11: Male participation rates in non-formal continuing education and training (2003)\***



\* Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania and Malta are excluded by data shortcomings.

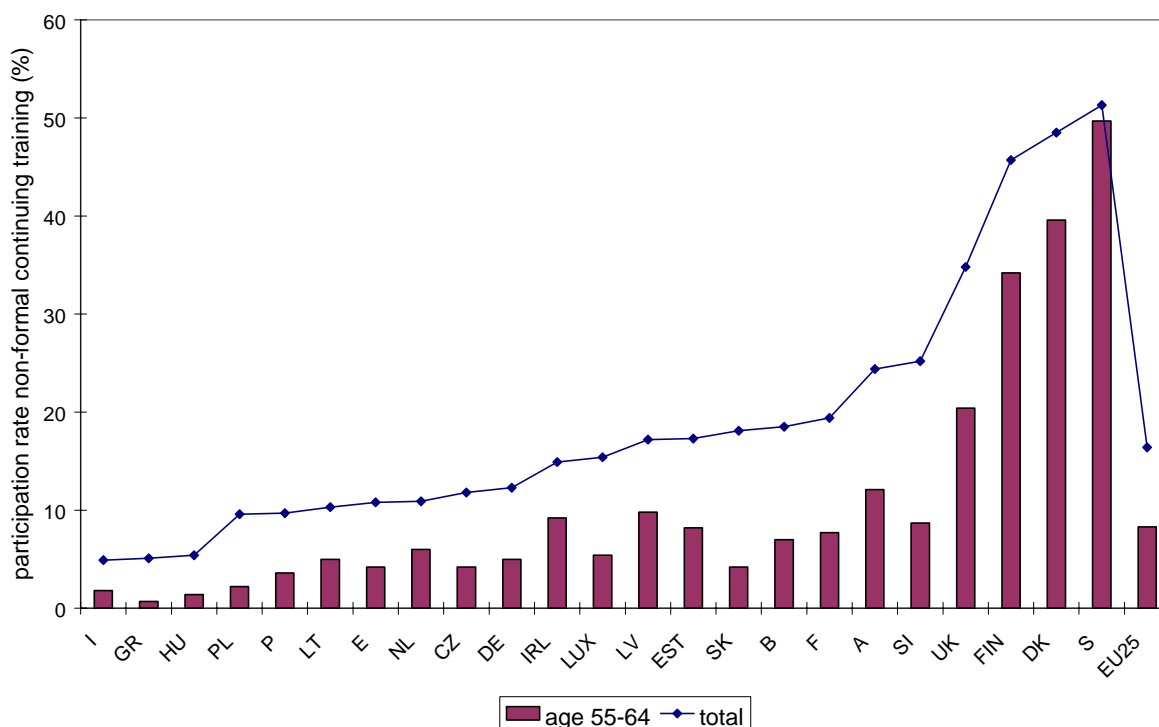
Source: OECD (2005).

Besides age, basic educational level and gender are also important factors in explaining participation rates. Depending on these factors, variation with respect to training is greater within the age groups themselves than between age groups. This is confirmed by a look at female participation rates in continuing training, to which we now turn.

For women, the participation rate in non-formal continuous education and training shows a range of variation from 4.9 percent to 51.3 percent in the EU member states. Here, older workers are least trained in Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Portugal. Germany is again amongst the low performers. The gap between the total rate of women participating in continuing non-formal training and the participation of older women is particularly worrisome in many of the eastern European member states, notably the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland and Hungary, but also Greece. As for men, the Scandinavian countries stand out with high participation rates both for the total labour force and for older workers.



**Figure 12: Female participation rates in non-formal continuing education and training (2003)\***



\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings.

Source: OECD (2005).

These findings are supported by multivariate studies showing a clear negative effect of age on participation in continuous training for some countries (OECD 2005: 314). This is easy to explain from a demand-side perspective. With greater distance from primary education, qualification is more likely to be outdated or inadequate. Providing costly training to older workers is a risky strategy for employers for two reasons. First, it is often believed that the learning ability of older workers is low, resulting in lower returns for investment. Second, the time to benefit from the workers' increased abilities, for instance in the form of higher productivity, is relatively shorter than for younger workers – especially in situations where the workers might be susceptible to the incentives provided by multiple exit options. Expectations that mature workers will retire early lead to reluctance vis-à-vis hiring and training, which in turn feeds back into the real world. Hence, the lower qualification of older workers becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>14</sup> However, such a perspective disregards the

<sup>14</sup> The problem can even be shifted further down the age ladder. In most EU countries, even workers aged 45-54 participate less often in training measures than their younger colleagues (OECD 2005: 325). People begin to be considered phase-out models while still in their mid-40s.

value of expertise gained through experience in working life, be it latent or explicit knowledge.

To sum up, participation in the labour market in old age varies not only with the level of education attained. We also see that in the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries, which are well known for their high employment rates amongst the older population, continuing training throughout the life course, also for older workers, is a widespread phenomenon. At the same time, in many countries with low employment rates, the gap between continuing training of older workers and workers of younger age groups is particularly worrisome.

### **3.5 Flexible work arrangements**

While in many member states (except for the Nordic countries), rights for older workers are currently still ‘intended as the right to early exit’ (Mirabile 2004: 282), the notion of ‘active ageing’ should really lead to the development of a range of options for combining paid work with other useful activities or with leisure.<sup>15</sup> The removal of the (artificial) age limit would reduce age discrimination and help to justify human capital investment for older people. We argue that in this sense, living up to the concept of ‘active ageing’ should manifest itself in (at least) two separate empirical phenomena: flexible work arrangements amongst older workers (volume and time) as well as diversity in the individual exit age showing as an increase in the employment rate of people aged over 65.

The proportion of older people working *part time* is probably the best available indicator to reflect flexibility in work arrangements at the end of the working career. Of course, part-time work is often contingent on income levels and might go hand in hand with high job insecurity and/or poor access to training.<sup>16</sup> However, starting from the assumption that there is a need to increase flexibility at the end of the working career, we believe that growing part-time participation is conducive to improving the general labour market situation of an ageing workforce.

Overall, there has been a slight increase in part-time work amongst the older EU population (with the exception of men in Poland and the Czech Republic and women in Sweden and Portugal). The variation in this measure is enormous across Europe. It ranges from 49 percent of older people working part time in the Netherlands to only 5 percent in Greece. As is well known, the differences between men and women are even greater.

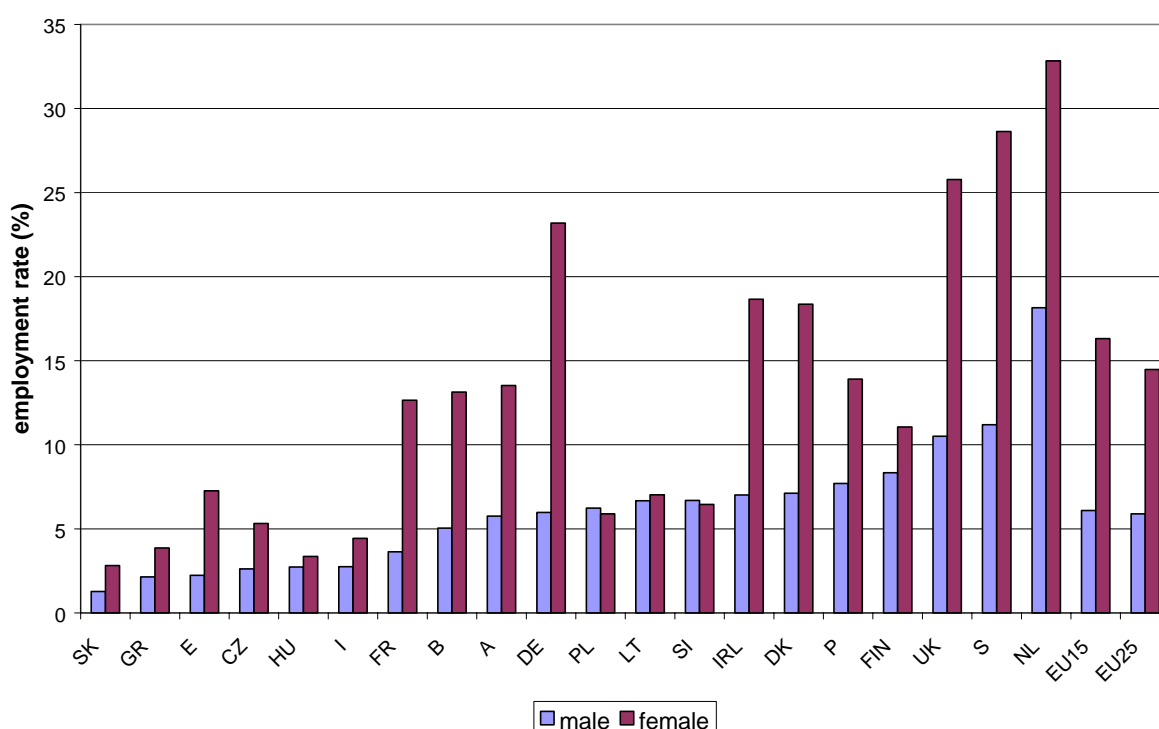
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<sup>15</sup> We are well aware of the political salience of this issue. The argument to first close the gap between the existing statutory and the factual retirement age is compelling. However, we consider the possibility of working in the later phase of the life course to be a central determinant of quality of life.

<sup>16</sup> We are aware that the share of part-time work showing features of precarious employment differs across countries.

As in other age groups, part-time employment is more typical for women, who have often returned to the labour market working fewer hours after child-rearing. In countries where many women of all ages work part time, older women do so more frequently, too (the Netherlands, Germany, the UK and Portugal). We also see strong increases in the part-time employment rate of older women in Luxembourg, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria. At the same time it is still relatively unusual for older men to work part time. The main exceptions are the Netherlands and (to a lesser degree) Sweden and the UK. In the Netherlands, where part-time employment is generally more frequent, part-time rates for older men are high and on the increase. In Sweden, the same pattern is explained by a long tradition of partial pensions.

**Figure 13: Part-time employment rates of men and women aged 55 to 64 (2007)\***



\* Malta, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Estonia are excluded by data shortcomings. Data for Slovenia, the Slovak Republic, Luxembourg and Lithuania are not fully reliable; data for Germany are preliminary.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

From the perspective of an individual, one main factor (amongst many others) that could explain this finding might be that unlike women, men have not learned flexible employment patterns early on in their careers and are therefore less likely to change to this type of employment at the end of their working lives. In this context research based on EUROSTAT data is illuminating, showing that men often fear that part-time employment will be an

impediment to their career plans or result in less interesting jobs - and they have such fears that to a greater extent than do women. These worries are likely not only to contribute to lower part-time employment rates for men throughout working life, but also to be decisive for the decision (not) to work part-time in old age.<sup>17</sup>

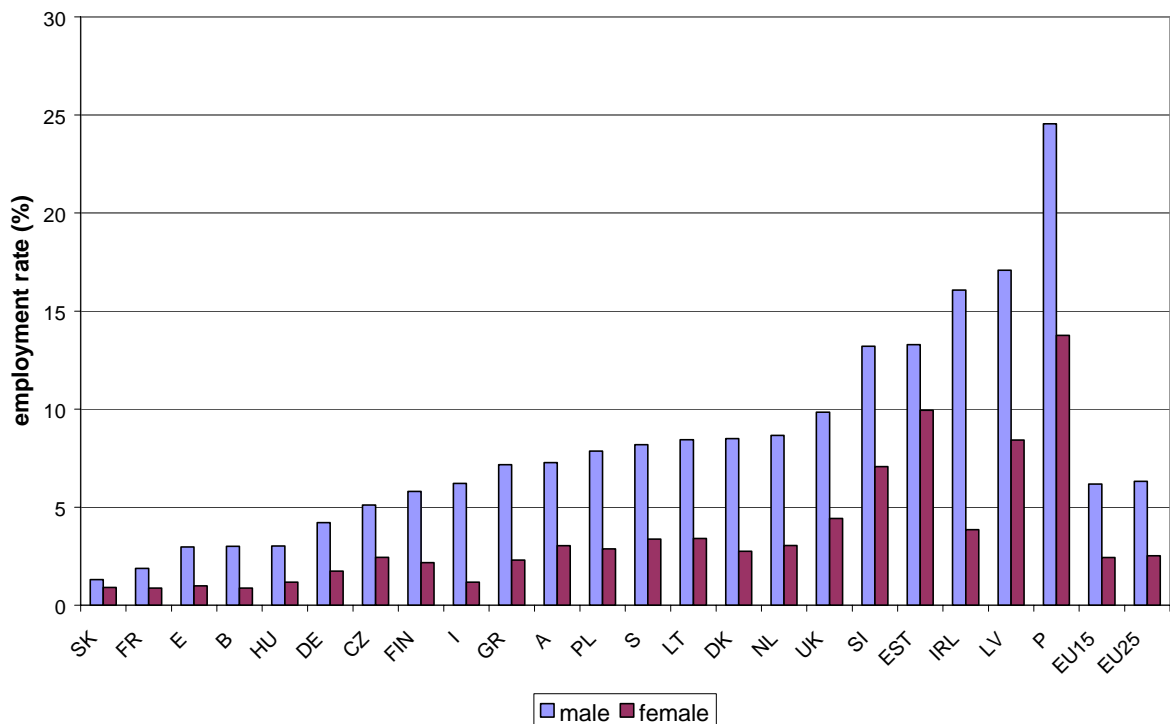
In addition to the individual perspective, companies with a limited experience in part-time employment may also find it more difficult to offer part-time employment for older employees. High overall shares of part-time employment may therefore also increase the ability of employers to employ older workers in flexible work arrangements. We base this argument on recent findings concerning the organisational learning of enterprises. Here, two aspects are generally distinguished: the ability of employers to learn how to deal with the organisational complexities of part-time work (e.g., informing staff about the existence of part-time arrangements and advising on how to avail of them; dealing with pension rights and overtime for these workers), and the learning experience of employers that part-time work can be a valuable instrument for recruiting and retaining employees (this applies particularly to employers faced with a climate of labour shortage) and for boosting job satisfaction and labour productivity (Anxo et al. 2006: 80; Leber/Wagner 2007: 25-27). It seems plausible that having (positively) experienced one or both aspects should increase the inclination of an employer to use part-time work, including that of older workers. In this sense the expansion of part-time employment or contractually agreed working-time variations during the employment biography could be an important supporting factor both for the individual and the enterprise to render part-time employment in old age a more likely choice and thereby create a more favourable employment context for an ageing workforce.

A second empirical phenomenon capturing the concept of 'active ageing' is *economic activity beyond age 65*. Here, in 2007 the picture for the European countries is heterogeneous. Employment rates beyond age 65 vary between countries. The picture would become even more differentiated if diverse types of jobs after retirement were taken into account. Teipen and Kohli (2004: 110) have identified three major groups: unskilled part-time workers, self-employed workers and workers who remain employed in their previous company. The same holds true for different reasons for continuing working, such as a precarious economic situation. However, in the following we will stick to simply measuring economic activity by employment.

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<sup>17</sup> EUROBAROMETER data (collected in the EU-15 in 2003, weighted), shows that some 53 percent of male respondents share the opinion that 'reducing working hours is bad for one's career', while 41 percent of male respondents fear that they will be allocated less interesting duties if they reduce their working hours (the comparative figures for the female respondents are 45 percent and 33 percent, respectively).

**Figure 14: Employment rates of men and women aged over 65 (2007)\***



\* Malta and Cyprus are excluded by data shortcomings.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Eurostat.

After the age of 65, men work most often in less affluent Portugal and in Ireland, as well as in some of the eastern European countries. Activity for both men and women is especially low in the Slovak Republic, France, Spain, Belgium and Hungary. As for men, female activity is by far the highest in Portugal. In Latvia and Estonia, women aged over 65 are more likely to work than in the other countries, too. A main difference with respect to gender can be observed in the Anglo-Saxon countries, which only show evidence of important economic activity beyond age 65 for men.

If we accept these indicators of flexible work arrangements, then the comparison of the part-time employment rates shows a substantial need to catch up in Germany. Similarly, continuous employment rates beyond age 65 are comparatively lower in Germany than in the majority of the EU member states. Both part-time or gradual retirement as well as working beyond age 65 could be opportunities to come closer to what we have discussed above under the concept of 'active ageing'. Currently, every deviation from the 'standard employment relationship' still implies a risk with respect to continuous income flows, occupational careers and social security in old age. This acts as a massive deterrent to established employees taking such risks. It comes as no surprise that instead of constituting a positive employment context, continuous economic activity beyond age 65 currently seems to be more frequent in Portugal,

Ireland and the eastern European countries. Thus we can assume that employment beyond age 65 is currently mainly driven by economic necessity and constitutes less an individual choice. For part-time employment the picture is less clear. While high part-time rates are frequent in the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries with their favourable employment contexts for older workers, part-time work is also frequent amongst some of the continental member states with overall low employment rates for older workers.

## 4 Conclusion

With these overall trends in mind, we can now sum up the risks and opportunities associated with the employment of older workers. Having looked at the key aspects and factors through a comparative lens, we can conclude that Germany has some catching up to do if it wants to create a favourable employment context in which both enterprises and employees can operate successfully when facing the challenge of an ageing workforce. The labour market situation for older workers is relatively more difficult in some of the continental and new member states, while Scandinavia, the Baltic states and the Anglo-Saxon countries provide for a more favourable environment for an ageing workforce. Interestingly, apart from Scandinavia and the Baltic states, in most countries employment rates are particularly low for mature female workers. Although to some extent the labour market challenge linked to an ageing workforce can thus be characterised as a gender problem, we also see comparatively more improvement in the situation of older women on the labour market. The fact that these improvements correlate with high employment rates for prime-age workers (25-54) suggests that enhancing higher labour force participation amongst older women starts with family-friendly policies for young adults. Moreover, we find that higher shares of part-time work and self-employment amongst older workers are more frequent in those member states with high employment rates amongst older workers.

Regarding sectoral patterns, the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries not only show the highest overall employment rates, they also provide work in the service sector more often than other countries. Besides high employment growth, the service sector might provide job opportunities for older workers for a second reason: the skills and capacities of older workers could be especially valuable here. An important insight is that the employment situation of a specific group of older workers must not be sought mainly in the characteristics of the individual, but in the general economic parameters and especially in the degree of employment growth in the service sector. A policy that begins here would contribute to resolving several interrelated problems.<sup>18</sup> It would do justice to the increasingly limited

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<sup>18</sup> We are aware that there is a comprehensive literature on the development of the service sector in relation to labour market policies (see Fagan et al. 2005; Scharpf 2000; Schettkat/Yocarini 2005). However, analyses so far do not deal with the question of demographic change and older workers.

mobility associated with ageing and create the kind of infrastructure that allows young adults with children to reconcile their family life with their work. It would open up new job opportunities for older men who are physically not able to carry out demanding manual work, and it would allow older women, whose employment rate is substantially lower than that of men, to participate more extensively and for longer periods in working life than to date.

Currently, the tendency of both employers and employees to stop investing in continuous training as age increases – and especially when it passes the virtual limit of 45 – constitutes a great risk and needs to be overcome so as to avert latter risks in the form of new challenges at work or unfavourable employment situations for older workers. Here, an important insight is that labour market policy for an ageing workforce must start much earlier than just with older people. As both theory and European experience show clearly, it is important within the context of ‘lifelong learning’ to already offer further education opportunities in the middle phase of the employment career, when the horizon of expectation of the fruits of the investment is long enough to motivate both the enterprise and the employee. In addition to organisational deficits, financing instruments in this regard should guarantee fairly distributed risk-sharing and resolve the problem of the time gap between investment and benefit.

Finally, a last important point is the observation that it is not enough to manipulate single parameters (reducing labour costs for older workers through wage-cost subsidies, for instance) or to turn the regulatory steering wheel in what is considered to be the right direction (for example, by relaxing the law on dismissal protection or raising statutory retirement age). Those countries that have been most successful to date have followed a comprehensive approach coordinating different areas of policy, interlinking supply and demand policies and, in particular, starting to address the challenge of an ageing workforce early on in the life course and aiming at achieving equality between the sexes.

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