



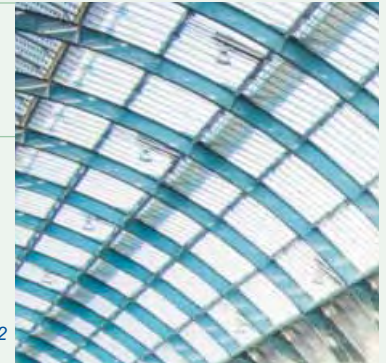
European Foundation for the  
Improvement of Living and  
Working Conditions



# Agro-food sector: Working conditions and job quality

*'Work plays a significant role in people's lives, in the functioning of companies and in society at large. But what is work? How can we describe it? Is it changing, and if so, is it for better or for worse? Is it fulfilling the numerous and at times conflicting expectations we have of it? How can we take steps to improve work for the well-being of all?'*

Eurofound, *Fifth European Working Conditions Survey: Overview report, 2012*



This report gives an overview of working conditions, job quality, workers' health and job sustainability for employees and the self-employed in the agro-food sector (NACE codes 10 and 11).<sup>1</sup> It compares the situation in the sector with that in the EU28 as a whole. Unless otherwise indicated, data are derived from the fifth EWCS, which contains responses from 838 workers in the agro-food sector.

## Structural characteristics

In 2010, 4,831,800 European workers, or 2.2% of the EU28 workforce, worked in the agro-food sector (Eurostat, 2013). Employment in the sector fell considerably (by 4.4%) between 2008 and 2010, and decreased by a further 0.5% between 2010 and 2012. Countries where the agro-food sector is a relatively large employer are Bulgaria (3.7% of the workforce), Poland (3.3%), Lithuania (3.3%) and Hungary (3.2%). The sector has relatively little prominence in Luxembourg (0.6%), Sweden (1.1%), the United Kingdom (1.4%) and Finland (1.4%) (Eurostat, 2013).

A relatively large proportion of workers in the agro-food industry, 16.5%, works in large workplaces (with 250 or more employees), compared with 12% of workers in the EU28, while 35% of workers are employed in micro-workplaces (with 1–9 employees), which is marginally lower than in the EU28 (42%).

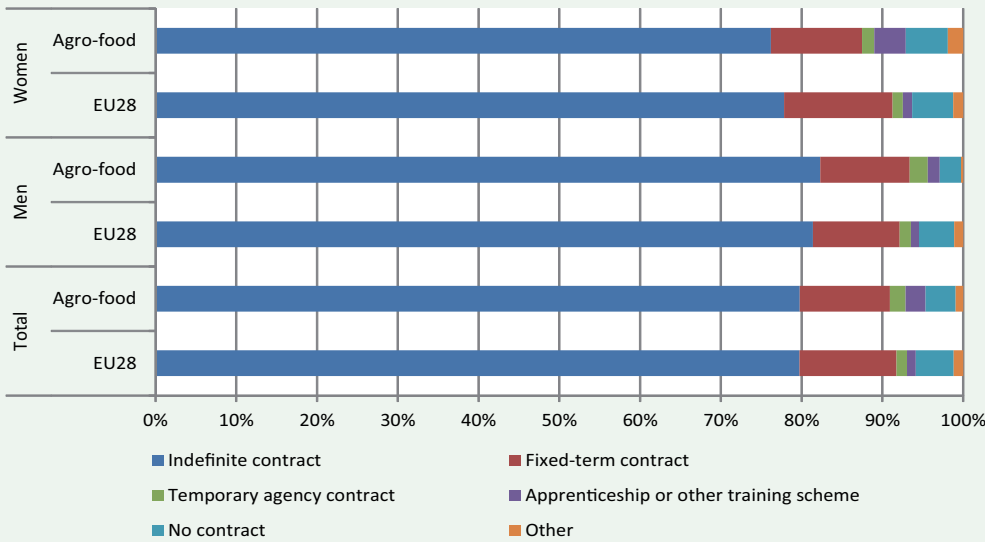
The sector is male dominated: 58% of workers are men. The age profile of the workforce in the sector is broadly similar to that of the EU28 as a whole, although the proportion of younger workers (11%) is slightly higher than the EU28 average (9.2%). Workers over 50 years of age are slightly underrepresented, accounting for 23% of the workforce, compared with the EU28 average of 27% (Eurostat, 2013). Self-employment is relatively uncommon in agro-food: 4% are self-employed with employees and only 4% are self-employed without employees, compared with 4% and 11% respectively in the EU28. Apprenticeships and training contracts are more prevalent in the sector than in the EU28 as a whole and, within the sector, are more prevalent among women than men (Figure 1).

## Agro-food in a nutshell

- Higher-than-average prevalence of large workplaces
- Excessive working hours for employees in micro-workplaces
- Higher-than-average levels of reported poor work–life balance
- Above-average levels of exposure to ambient and ergonomic risks
- Workers very well informed about health and safety risks
- Job strain an issue for the vast majority of workers in the sector

<sup>1</sup> Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne (statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community).

Figure 1: Employment status, by gender



Part-time work is less prevalent in the agro-food sector than in the EU28, particularly among men, with 30% of women and only 5% men in the sector working 34 hours or less, compared to 38% of women and 12% of men in the EU28.

### Working conditions

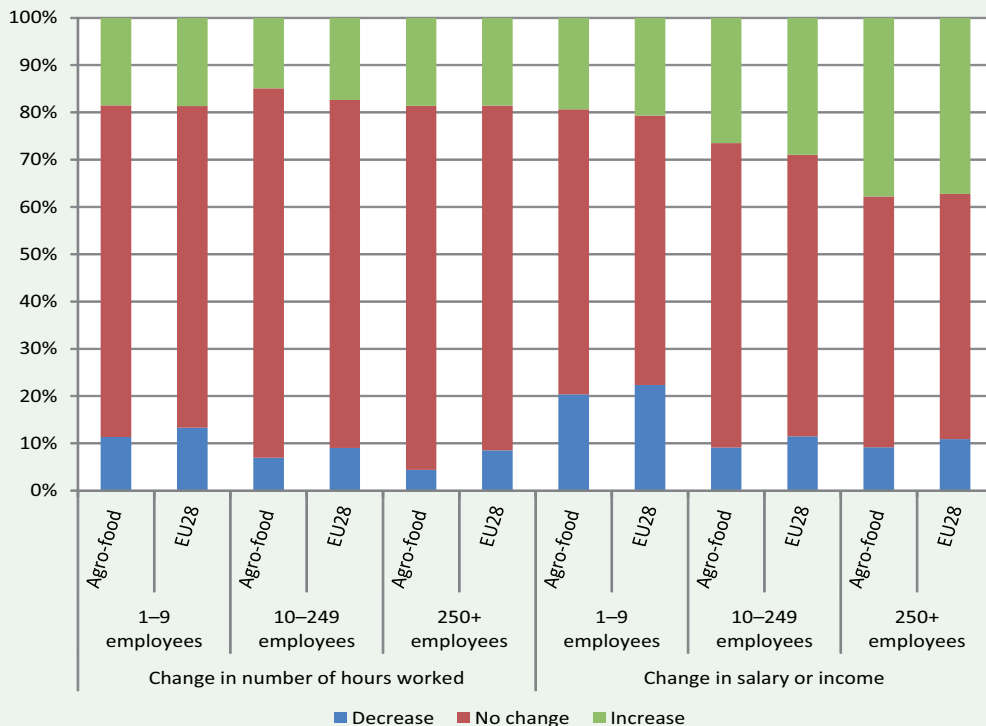
#### Changes since the crisis

As Figure 2 shows, the agro-food sector does not differ much from the EU28 average in terms of reported changes in hours worked. In general, across all workplace sizes, more workers in the sector report no change in the number of hours they worked in the past year than in the EU28.

Both in the agro-food sector and in the EU28 in general, workers more frequently report changes in salary or income than changes in hours worked in the year prior to the survey, but the pattern of reported changes in the agro-food sector does not significantly differ from the EU28 as a whole. Employees in micro-workplaces were more frequently affected by wage cuts than those in larger workplaces, while the percentage of employees reporting an increase in salary gets proportionally higher with the size of the workplace.

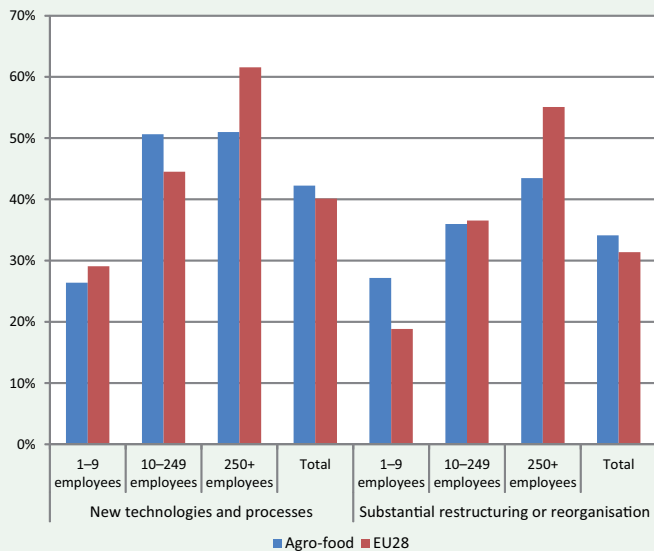
Workers in agro-food were slightly more affected by restructuring and the introduction of new technologies than workers in the EU28 in general (Figure 3). The sector follows the same pattern as the EU28, with the proportion of employees reporting restructuring or reorganisation or the introduction of new production

Figure 2: Changes in number of hours worked and salary or income in past year, by workplace size



processes and technologies tending to increase with workplace size. The introduction of new technologies was more common in small and medium-sized enterprises (those with 10–249 employees, SMEs) in the agro-food sector than in equivalent workplaces in the EU28; restructuring was more prevalent in micro-workplaces in the agro-food sector than in the EU28. Conversely, large workplaces in the sector were considerably less affected by changes than large workplaces in the EU28.

Figure 3: Restructuring and introduction of new technologies in past three years, by workplace size

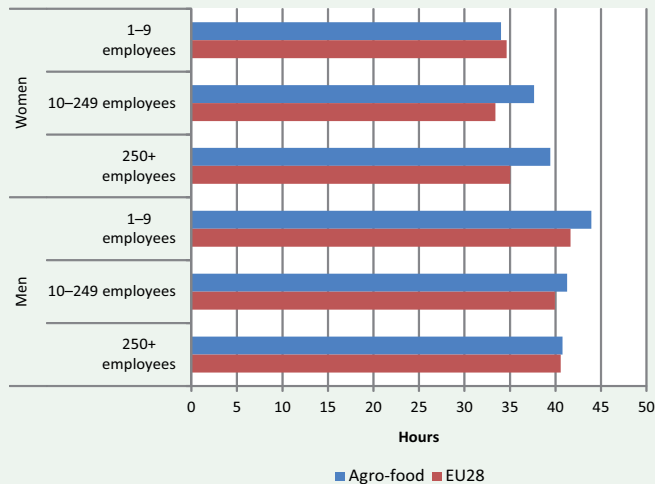


### Working time and work-life balance

Workers in agro-food on average work 39 hours per week, compared with 38 hours in the EU28. As in the EU28, men in the sector tend to work more hours than

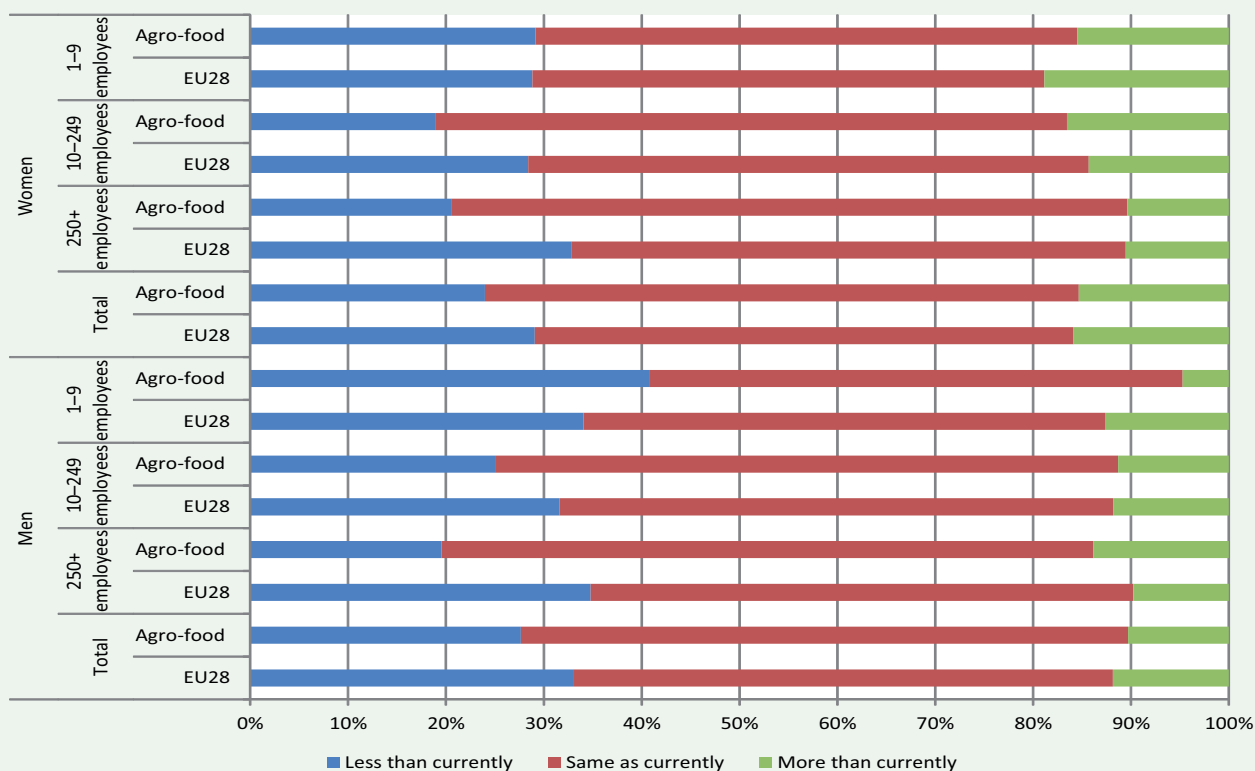
women, independent of workplace size (Figure 4). Women in SMEs and large workplaces in the agro-food sector, however, report longer working hours than the EU28 average for workplaces of corresponding size. For women in the sector, the number of hours worked increases with workplace size, but the opposite is true for men.

Figure 4: Average weekly working hours, by gender and workplace size



There are no substantial differences in terms of working time preferences when agro-food is compared with the EU28 average, although a higher proportion of workers in agro-food (62%) express a preference for maintaining their current working hours than the EU28 average (55%). However, the data do show differences between workplaces of different sizes (Figure 5).

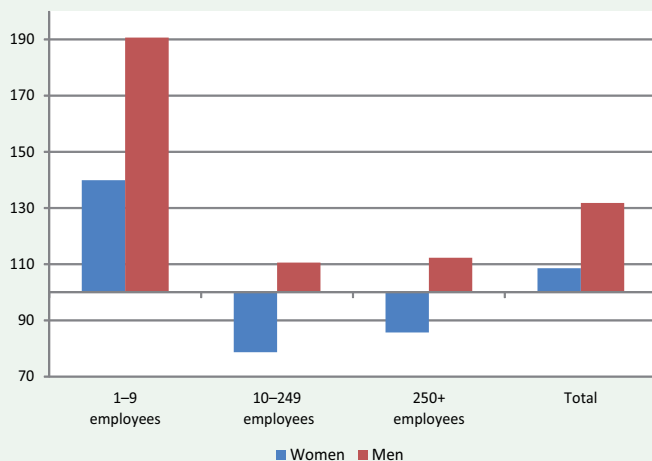
Figure 5: Working time preference, by gender and workplace size



In particular, for both men and women, the share of individuals in micro-workplaces in the agro-food sector preferring to work fewer hours (41% and 29% respectively) is considerably higher than in larger workplaces in the sector, and slightly higher than the corresponding EU28 averages. This suggests that excessive working hours in micro-workplaces might be an issue in the sector.

Figure 6 shows that working atypical hours (for example, weekends, evenings or nights) is more prevalent in agro-food than in the EU28 as a whole, especially for men. There are important differences, however, between workplaces of different sizes: while both men and women in micro-workplaces are particularly likely to work atypical hours, in larger workplaces the figure for women is below the EU28 average, while that for men is above.

Figure 6: Index of working atypical hours (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



Regarding the regularity of working time, working hours in the agro-food sector are considerably more regular than the EU28 average – workers in the sector tend to work the same number of hours every day and the same number of days every week.

Figure 7: Index of regularity of working time (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size

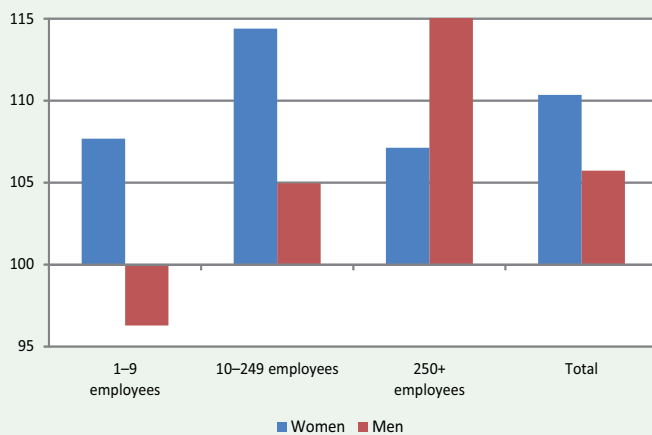
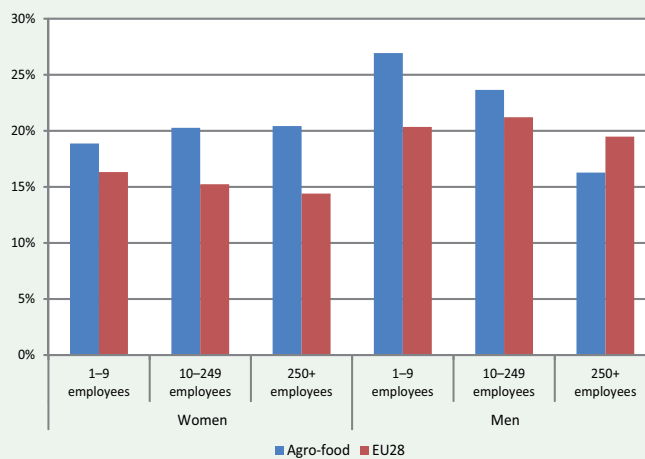


Figure 7 shows that while men in agro-food tend to have atypical working hours, these tend to be slightly more regular than the EU28 average, and considerably more regular than in the EU28 for men in large workplaces. Men in micro-workplaces constitute the sole exception, as they report less regular working hours than the EU28 average.

Work–life balance (the fit between working hours and family or social commitments) is slightly worse for those working in the agro-food sector than in the EU28 as a whole and across workplace sizes (Figure 8). As in the EU28, more men in the sector report a poor work–life balance than women; the sole exception is men in large workplaces, who are less likely than the EU28 average to report a poor fit between work and home life.

Figure 8: Poor work–life balance, by gender and workplace size

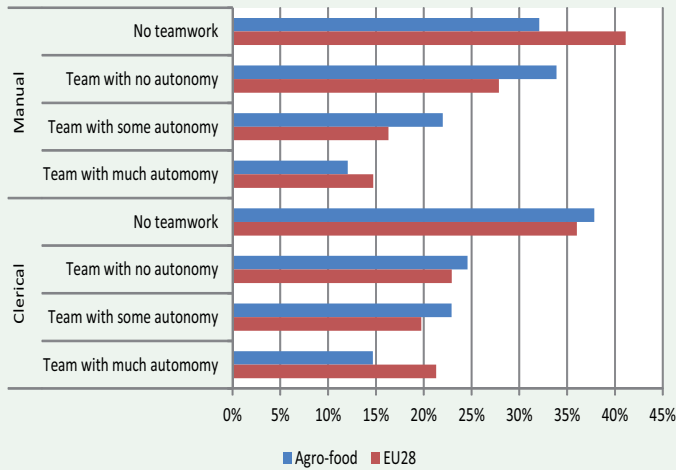


## Work organisation

### Teamwork

Teamwork is proposed as an alternative to work organisation models based on high levels of labour division. As teamwork reflects a variety of practices, it can also assume a variety of forms. Different types of teamwork can be identified from the EWCS by looking at the level of autonomy within the teams. In the agro-food sector, 66% of workers work in a team, so it is slightly more prevalent than in the EU28 (62%) (Figure 9). It is particularly interesting to note that amongst manual workers in the sector, no teamwork is less common than in the EU28, while the opposite is true for clerical workers. For both manual and clerical workers, teams with no autonomy or with some autonomy are more common as forms of teamwork than the EU28 average, while teams with a high level of autonomy are less common.

Figure 9: Teamwork and team autonomy, by occupational category



**Task rotation**

Task rotation is also an important feature of work organisation at the workplace level. The percentage of workers in agro-food working in some form of task rotation system (52%) is slightly higher than the EU28 (47%) (Figure 10). A relatively large proportion of agro-food workers work in a management-controlled multitasking system (32%, compared to 27% in the EU28).

This form of multitasking is particularly prevalent in small and medium-sized workplaces in the sector (38%), compared with both the corresponding EU28 average and workplaces of other sizes in the sector. Large workplaces in agro-food have an above-average incidence of autonomous fixed task rotation compared both with the EU28 average and with smaller workplaces in the sector.

**Female bosses**

Agro-food is a male-dominated sector, and the proportion of employees reporting they have a female boss is much lower than in the EU28 as a whole. Only 35% of women and 8% of men report having a female boss, compared to the EU28 averages of 47% and 12% respectively.

**Skills and training**

Overall, the majority of workers in agro-food say that their present skills correspond well with their duties (Figure 11). As in the EU28, more workers in agro-food report being over-skilled than under-skilled, and this applies across all age groups. While the proportion of older and younger workers in the sector reporting to be under-skilled is below the EU28 average, the opposite is true for workers in the 35–49 age group; the proportion of this age group, however, reporting to be over-skilled (22%) is considerably below the EU28 average for the same age group (32%).

Figure 10: Prevalence of task rotation, by workplace size

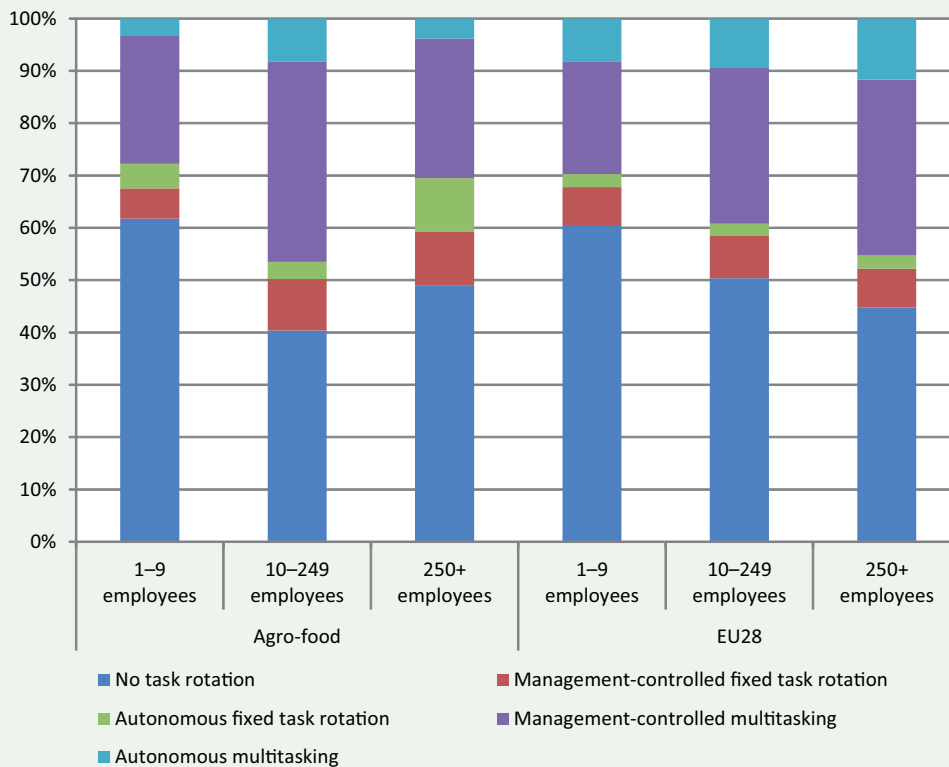
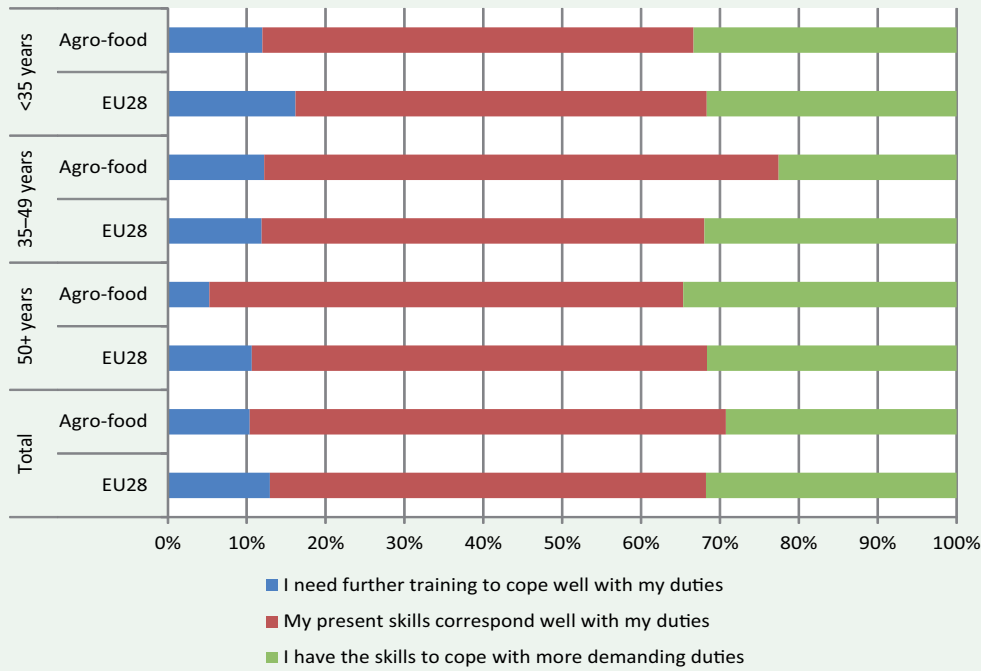
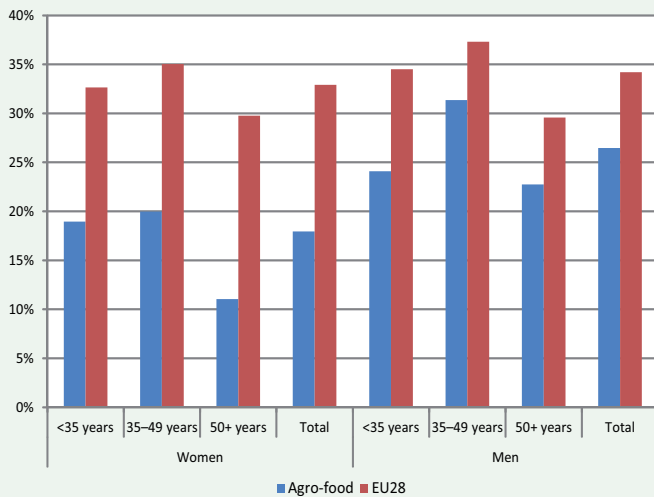


Figure 11: Match between skills and tasks, by age



The percentage of workers in agro-food reporting to have received training is much lower than in the EU28 for both women and men (Figure 12). The difference between agro-food and the EU28 is particularly pronounced for older workers, both women and men. Across all age groups in the sector, however, women report lower levels of employer-paid training than men.

Figure 12: Prevalence of employer-paid training, by gender and age

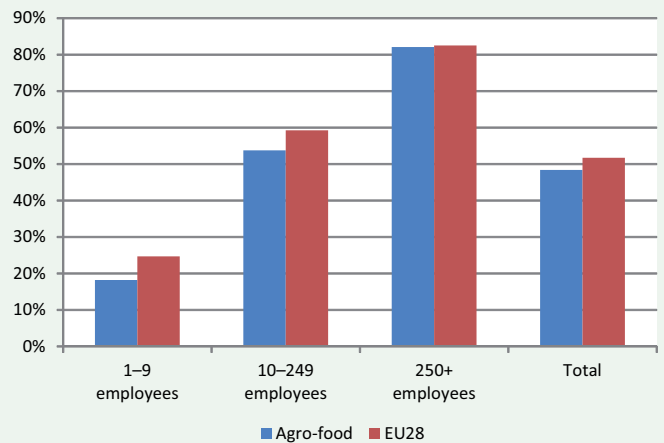


### Employee representation

The EWCS contains limited information on formal employee representation. It asks whether an employee representative is present in the workplace and whether workers have raised an issue with an employee representative in the past year. Figure 13 shows the combined results of these questions (an employee representative was considered to be available if they were present in the workplace or when an issue was raised). In 2010, 48% of employees in agro-food reported that an employee

representative was available, compared to 52% of workers in the EU28. This difference disappears when we look at workplaces with more than 250 employees. As is the case in the EU28, the more workers employed in the workplace, the higher is the probability of having an employee representative.

Figure 13: Workplaces with an employee representative, by workplace size

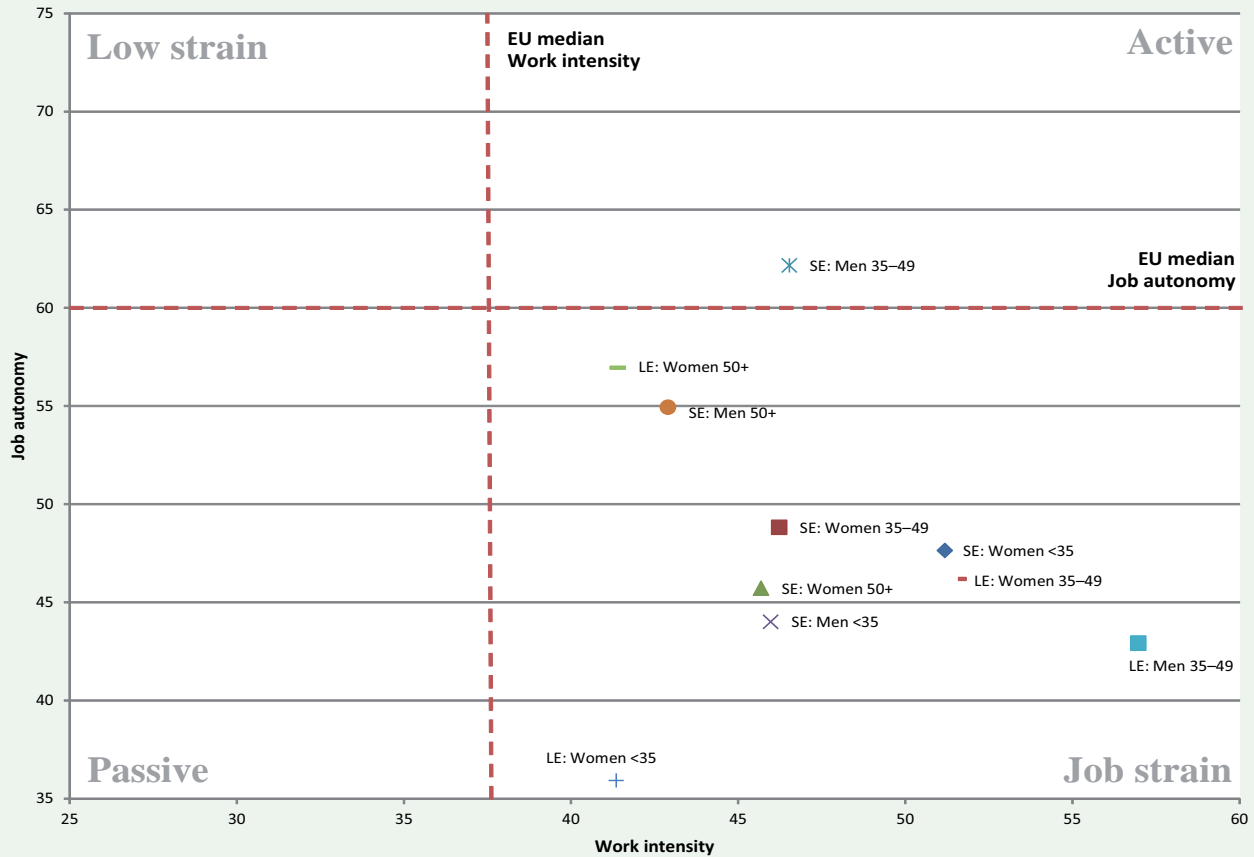


### Psychosocial and physical environment

#### Job autonomy and work intensity

The psychosocial and physical environment has a substantial impact on workers' well-being. According to the job demand and control model developed by the American sociologist Karasek (1979), workers are more likely to suffer from work-related stress when they are faced with a high level of demands while being limited in the control they have over the way in which they carry out their job. Figure 14 shows the likelihood of workers in the agro-food sector suffering from work-related stress. Groups of workers are plotted along two axes: job autonomy and work intensity.

Figure 14: Distribution of groups of workers by average levels of job autonomy and work intensity



Note: LE = large enterprise; SE = micro, small or medium-sized enterprise

The top and bottom left quadrants, which indicate low strain and passive jobs, are empty. This is due to the fact that in the agro-food sector, average levels of work intensity are above the EU28 average for all groups of workers.

The top right quadrant contains the average for men aged 35–49 working in micro, small and medium workplaces (SEs) in agro-food. These workers tend to be in ‘active’ jobs with high levels of work intensity and high levels of job autonomy. Although their jobs can be very demanding, they have sufficient control over the way they do their job and can develop coping strategies through active learning.

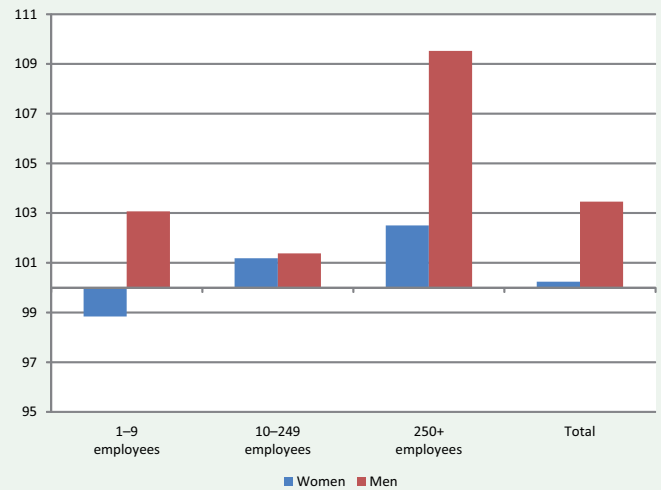
The most problematic category in the model is the job strain category in the bottom right quadrant, which contains the averages for all other groups of workers in the sector (all women in SEs, all men in large workplaces, and all men below age 35 and above age 50 in SEs). Their jobs are characterised by high levels of intensity and low levels of autonomy, posing the risk of unhealthy stress levels and, consequently, a range of stress-related illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and mental health problems.

**Social environment**

A good social environment is characterised by the existence of social support and the absence of abuse at work. High levels of social support can compensate for high levels of job strain. Workers in agro-food are consistently above the EU28 average on this indicator, with the sole exception of women in micro-workplaces (Figure 15). Average scores for good social environment tend to increase with workplace size, and

men tend to report higher scores for good social environment than women across all types of enterprise.

Figure 15: Index of good social environment (EU28 = 100), by gender and workplace size

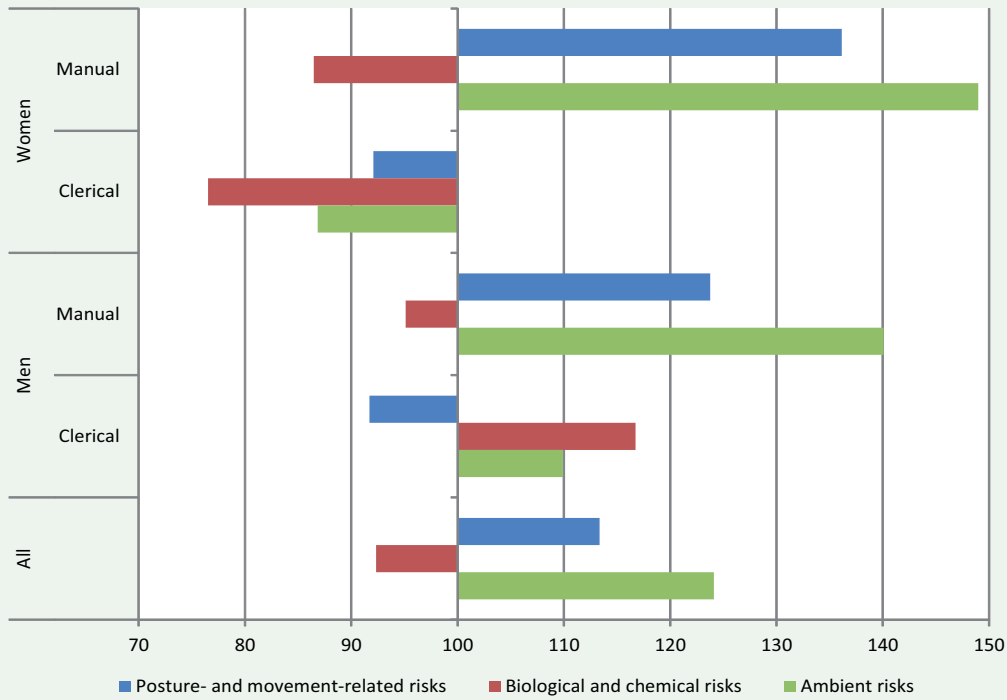


**Physical environment**

In terms of exposure to physical risks, ambient risk is the most prevalent in the agro-food sector, followed by posture- and movement-related risks (Figure 16). Exposure to both types of risk is considerably above the EU28 averages in the sector as a whole, and particularly so for both men and women in manual occupations. Women in clerical occupations are the only group of workers in the sector that reports levels of exposure below the EU28 average for all three types of physical risks.

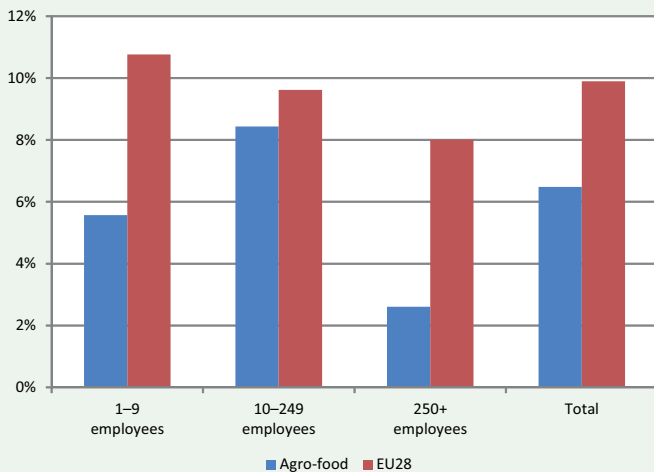


Figure 16: Indices of exposure to physical risks (EU28 = 100), by gender and occupation



Just 1 in 16 workers in the agro-food sector reports that they are not very well informed or not at all well informed about health and safety risks in the workplace, compared to 1 in 10 in the EU28 (Figure 17). The difference between the agro-food sector and the EU28 is particularly pronounced for workers in large workplaces, who appear to be particularly well-informed about workplace risks.

Figure 17: Not very well informed or not at all well informed about health and safety risks at work, by workplace size



## Job quality

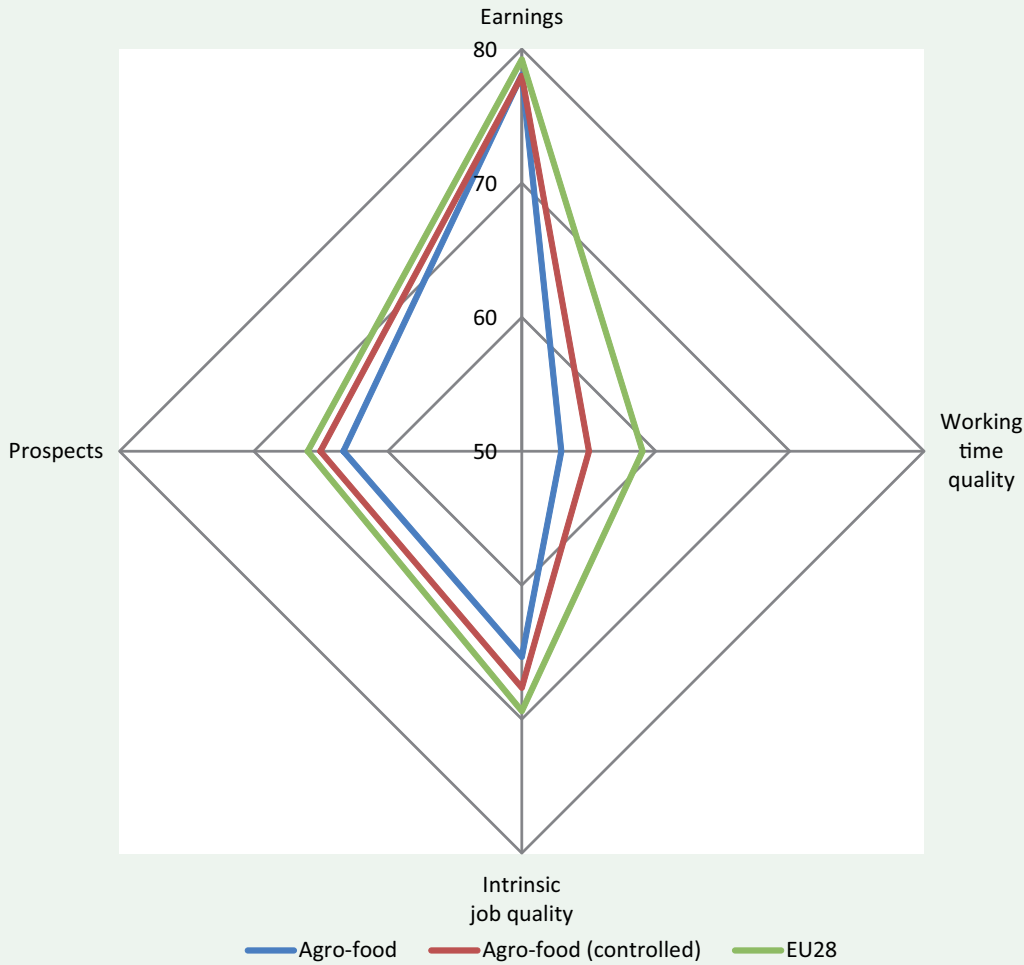
In the report on *Trends in job quality in Europe* (Eurofound, 2012), the authors constructed four indices of job quality: earnings, working time quality, intrinsic job quality and prospects. The indices are built using job characteristics that are unambiguously associated with workers' well-being.

Figure 18 summarises the situation in the agro-food sector in terms of job quality. It shows the average score for each of the indicators in relation to the sector, with and without controlling for the structural characteristics of the workers (age, gender, workplace size, education level and country), and for the EU28. All four indicators range between 0 and 100.

Job quality in the agro-food sector is considerably lower than in the EU28 as a whole. Workers on average have lower working time quality, lower intrinsic job quality and fewer prospects, while they differ little from the EU28 average in relation to earnings.



Figure 18: Job quality in agro-food compared with EU28



Note: Scores on all four indicators range from 0 to 100

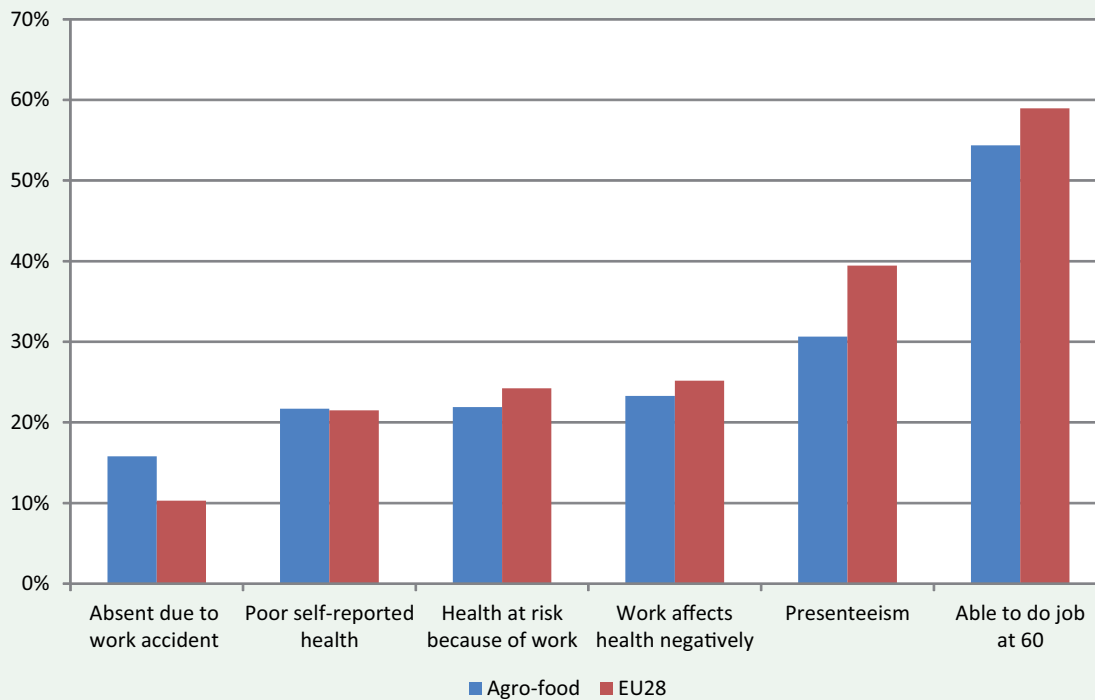
When the structural characteristics of the sector are controlled for, the differences from the EU28 with regard to intrinsic job quality and working time quality are reduced but remain significant. This suggests that while part of the difference is explained by the age and educational profile of workers in the sector, workers in agro-food are nevertheless worse off on average than workers with similar profiles in other sectors. In relation to prospects, the difference between the sector and the EU28 is also reduced when controlling for structural factors, and the specific effect of the sector appears no longer statistically significant, suggesting that this difference is mainly due to the lower levels of educational attainment of workers in agro-food.

### Health and sustainability of work

Working conditions can have both a positive and negative impact on the health of workers and on the sustainability of their jobs.

Figure 19 shows that agro-food compares favourably with the EU28 in terms of the slightly lower proportion of workers reporting their health is at risk because of work and that work affects their health negatively, as well as lower levels of presenteeism (workers reporting having worked when sick). The sector performs worse, however, than the EU28 in terms of the higher proportion of workers who report having been absent due to an accident at work, and the lower proportion stating that they think they will be able to do their job at age 60.

Figure 19: Health and sustainability of work



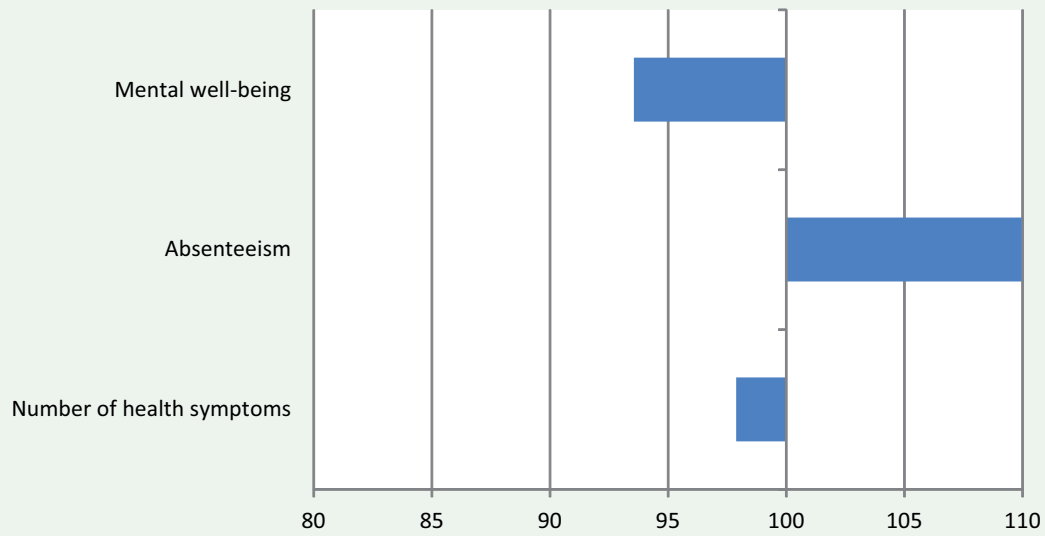
The difference in relation to lower levels of reported health at risk due to work and lower levels of presenteeism in the sector remains significant when controlling for gender, age, education, workplace size and country. All other differences, however, appear no longer significant when controlling for background characteristics; this suggests that the negative outcomes in the sector in relation to absence due to work accidents and perceived ability to do the job at 60 are mainly explained by the lower-than-average levels of educational attainment of the workforce in the sector and, in the case of absence due to work accidents, by the high predominance of men in the sector – who are considerably more likely than women to experience absence due to work accidents.

Figure 20 again shows a fairly negative picture of the agro-food sector, with mental well-being scores below the EU28 average and considerably higher levels of absenteeism. The reported number of health problems is, however, lower than the EU28. None of

these differences remains significant when controlling for gender, age, education, workplace size and country. The above-average levels of absenteeism in the sector are partly explained by the higher-than-average proportion of large establishments, in which the likelihood of absenteeism is higher than in smaller establishments.

It is important to bear in mind that the impact of work on health is a very gradual process that can take a long time and cannot be fully captured in a cross-sectional survey. The results in this section are likely to underestimate the often negative health effects that physically and psychologically strenuous working conditions can have.

Figure 20: Indices of health symptoms, mental well-being and absenteeism (EU28 = 100)



## References

Eurofound (2012), *Trends in job quality in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Eurostat (2013), EU Labour Force Survey database, available at [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search\\_database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database).

Karasek, R. A., Jr. (1979), 'Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: Implications for job redesign', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 24, 1979, pp. 285–308.

## European Working Conditions Survey

Eurofound developed its European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) in 1990 in order to provide high-quality information on living and working conditions in Europe. Five waves of the survey have been carried out to date, enabling long-term trends to be observed and analysed.

The EWCS interviews both employees and self-employed people on key issues related to their work and employment. Fieldwork for the fifth EWCS took place from January to June 2010, with almost 44,000 workers interviewed in their homes in 34 countries – EU28, Norway, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. The 5th EWCS was implemented by Gallup Europe, who worked within a strong quality assurance framework to ensure the highest possible standards in all data collection and editing processes.

The questionnaire covered issues such as precarious employment, leadership styles and worker participation as well as the general job context, working time, work organisation, pay, work-related health risks, cognitive and psychosocial factors, work-life balance and access to training. A number of questions were included to capture the impact of the economic downturn on working conditions.

For more information on the EWCS, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/index.htm>

## Sectoral analysis

The report *Working conditions and job quality: Comparing sectors in Europe* and the series of 33 sectoral information sheets aim to capture the diversity prevalent across sectors in Europe in terms of working conditions and job quality. The report pinpoints trends across sectors in areas such as working time and work-life balance, work organisation, skills and training, employee representation and the psychosocial and physical environment. It identifies sectors that score particularly well or particularly poorly in terms of job quality and sheds light on differences between sectors in terms of health and well-being.

For more information, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/2010/sectorprofiles.htm>

### Further information

Gijs van Houten, Research Officer  
[gvh@eurofound.europa.eu](mailto:gvh@eurofound.europa.eu)

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions  
Wyattville Road, Loughlinstown, Dublin 18, Ireland  
Telephone: (+35 1) 204 32 00  
Email: [information@eurofound.europa.eu](mailto:information@eurofound.europa.eu)  
Website: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/>

