The indicator on duration of working life has been developed to monitor the EU 2020 strategy on employment. It is an indication, i.e. estimation, of the number of years a person, at the current age of 15 years, is expected to be in the labour market (i.e. to be employed or unemployed) throughout his or her life.

In this article, the expected average duration of working life of the adult population aged 15 years and more is described for the 27 EU Member States, the United Kingdom, four candidate countries and three EFTA countries. It provides a different angle of the labour market, looking at the entire life cycle of persons in the labour force (i.e. being employed or unemployed) rather than on specific states in the life cycle, such as youth unemployment or early withdrawal from the labour force.

Increase in expected duration of working life in the EU

The expected duration of working life in the EU in 2019 was 35.9 years. This was 0.2 years longer than in 2018, and 3.6 years longer than in 2000. The gender gap in 2019 has shrunk compared with almost 20 years ago: 4.9 years difference against 7.1 years in 2000. In 2019, the estimated expected duration of working life for men was 38.3 years while for women it was 33.4 years (aged 15 years and more). The expected average duration among the EU Member States ranged from 32.0 years in Italy to 42.0 years in Sweden. This was exceeded at both ends of the range by non-EU countries: Turkey (29.3 years) and Iceland (45.8 years).

Sweden and the Netherlands with the longest working life

In the European Union, there is a clear east/west division regarding the average expected duration of working life, with only Italy (32.0 years in 2019), Belgium (33.6) and Luxembourg (33.9) as exceptions on the western side (Map 1). These three countries have on average shorter working lives compared with the other western countries, where the expected number of working years is in the range 35 to 40 years.

Sweden (42.0 years) and the Netherlands (41.0) had the longest expected duration of working life in the EU-27 in 2019. These were the only two EU Member States where the expected number of working years was above 40. On the other hand, Italy (32.0 years), Croatia (32.5) and Greece (33.2) had the shortest expected working life.

The Baltic countries are closer to the western part of Europe in terms of duration of working life; indeed Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia recorded 39.0, 37.1 and 36.8 years respectively in 2019. It is also worth noticing that the expected number of working years in Cyprus (37.5 years) exceeded the one in its neighbouring countries.
Map 1: Estimated duration of working life in years for a person who is 15 years old in 2019, by country

Overall, countries can be divided into five groups. The first group is made of the low ranking countries, where the expected duration of working life is below 33 years, including Italy, Croatia, Montenegro, North-Macedonia and Turkey. Next is the group of countries where the expected duration of working life is within the range of 33 to 35 years. This group includes Greece, Belgium, Poland, Romania, Luxembourg, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary and Serbia. Spain, France, Slovenia, Czechia, Malta, Latvia, Lithuania, Ireland, Cyprus and Austria shape the third group, which corresponds to a working life of 35 to 38 years. Group number four consists of countries with an estimated working life of 38 to 40 years, i.e. Portugal, Finland, Estonia, Germany, the United Kingdom and Norway. Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and Iceland shape the last group with an expected working life of 40 years and over.

Men expected to work longer than women

In 2019, the duration of working life was longer for men than for women in all countries, with the exception of Latvia and Lithuania (Figure 1). In Latvia there was no difference in the expected years between sexes, while in Lithuania, women were expected to work longer than men (0.8 years). Among the EU Member States, Malta had the largest gender gap at 9.3 years, followed by Italy at 9.1 years. This gap was, however, bigger in the two candidate countries North Macedonia (10.4 years) and Turkey (19.9 years).
Figure 1: Expected duration of working life in years for a person who is 15 years old in 2019, by country and sex. Source: Eurostat (lfsi_dwl_a)

Italy is the EU Member State with the shortest working life for women (27.3 years) and Sweden the one with the longest (41.0 years). If including also the non-EU countries, Turkish women are expected to work the shortest (19.1 years) and Icelandic women the longest (43.7 years). For men, the shortest working life is recorded in Croatia (34.5 years) and the longest, among the EU Member States, in the Netherlands and Sweden (43.3 and 42.9 years respectively). The longest overall is recorded in Iceland (47.8 years).

Overall, there is no clear obvious relation between the length of the expected working lives and the size of the gender gap. Gender gaps of about 5 years exist in countries with the longest expected working lives, e.g. in the Netherlands. However, Italy, North Macedonia and Turkey have the shortest expected working life and the largest gender gaps: 9.1, 10.4 and 19.9 years respectively.

**Evolution of the duration of working life over time: 2000-2019**

**Gender gap slowly decreasing**

The EU-27 gender gap has diminished slowly but steadily since the year 2000 (Figure 2). The gap was at 7.1 years in 2000 and reached 4.9 years in 2019. The expected working life for women has increased by 4.7 years while for men it has increased by 2.5 years over this period.
Different trends among countries

Changes in the expected duration of working life over the period 2000-2019 vary widely among EU countries (Figure 3). The largest increases of the expected duration over time are recorded in Malta (7.6 years), Hungary (6.9) and Estonia (5.6), while the smallest increases can be found in Denmark (1.7 years) and Greece (1.8). Romania is the only country showing a decrease of the expected duration of working life: with 36.0 years in 2000 and 33.8 years in 2019, a decrease of 2.2 years.

Looking at the changes over the same period of the expected duration of working life by country and by sex, more variations can be found. For example, Maltese women saw their expected number of working years increasing by 14.2 years between 2000 and 2019, while Romanian women saw it decreasing by 3.9 years. Also, in Spain the expected duration of working life rose by 8.9 years for women but only by 0.3 years for men.
Source data for tables and graphs

- Duration of working life 2019

Data sources

The duration of working life is calculated using the participation rates (also called "activity rates") from the Labour Force Survey and life tables from demography statistics. Both the activity rates (in 5 year bands) as well as the complete (single year) life tables are published by Eurostat.

Context

The duration of working life indicator is produced at the request of the Employment Committee indicators group, under the EU 2020 strategy. It uses life expectancy tables and activity rates as input for the calculation. The methodology was developed at the Ministry of Labour of Finland, in a paper by Helka Hytti and Ilkka Nio.

A common misunderstanding in the public debate on this indicator is that it shows how long persons must or should work. This is not the case. The indicator is purely descriptive and shows what is happening, not what should be happening.

As it is an average computed overall adults in the country, the indicator is heavily influenced by the number of persons outside the labour force in a country. In other words, it does not make any claims about how many years the persons who are in employment, work. It rather shows the combined effect of:

- what proportion of the adult population is in the labour force (being employed or unemployed) in each year of their life,
- and the life expectancy.

Most of the duration of working life can be explained by the participation rate. An illustration for the male and female population (total population), comparing their working life with the participation rate in each country, is presented in figure 4.

![Figure 4: Linear correlation between activity rate and expected duration of working life, 2019 (rate and years)](source: Eurostat)

See also

- Employment statistics
- Mortality and life expectancy statistics
Database

- Employment and activity - LFS adjusted series (lfsi_emp), see:
  Duration of working life - annual data (lfsi_dwl_a)

Legislation

- Summaries of EU Legislation: Labour force survey
- Metadata

View this article online at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Article_name.