Work and Life Quality in New and Growing Jobs

Qualitative case study findings of walqing, an EU-funded research project investigating working and employment conditions and quality of life in new and growing jobs in Europe

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INTRODUCTION

European project to explore quality of work in growth jobs

walqing aims to increase researchers’, stakeholders’, managers’ and policymakers’ knowledge of the quality of work and life in new and growing jobs. It helps to build actors’ capacity to identify both problematic and good practices of market developments, policies and company strategies in Europe.

Multi-layered methodology

walqing has combined the analysis of Europe-wide survey data, the exploration and action-research-based development of sectoral and cross-sectoral stakeholder policies, the analysis of strategies of work organisations, and the investigation of individual jobholders’ careers, perspectives and aspirations.

Linkages between working conditions and quality outcomes

walqing has explored the linkages between ‘new jobs’, their conditions of work and employment, and outcomes for employees’ quality of work and life. It has connected micro- and macro-levels of analysis and based on this evidence, identified both critical configurations and good practice examples.

Focus on problematic working conditions and social vulnerability

walqing focuses on work in growing jobs in Europe with problematic working conditions, precarious employment, and/or lack of social integration. It specifically addresses the representation of vulnerable groups in these jobs such as migrant and ethnic minority workers, some groups of women and younger and older workers.
**Project aims**

**walqing aims**
- to investigate growing jobs in Europe with problematic working conditions, precarious employment, low wages, and/or lack of social integration;
- to analyse stakeholder policies aiming to improve conditions in these jobs;
- to compare the impact of alternative ways of organising new types of work on the quality of workers' work and life.

**walqing aims to influence policies and practices by**
- identifying the conditions of favourable and sustainable ‘new and growing job’ configurations;
- involving stakeholders in this assessment;
- transferring examples of good practice in Europe;
- identifying gaps in stakeholder, national and European policies.

**KEY OBSERVATIONS**

**walqing – the overview**

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The **walqing** project has investigated the linkages between new and expanding jobs, the conditions of work and employment in these jobs, and the more or less favourable outcomes for employees’ quality of work and life. First, **walqing** identified growing sectors and functions (between the years 2000 and 2007) in Europe with problematic and precarious working conditions and low quality of work and life through an analysis of the datasets of the EU Labour Force Survey (ELFS), the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) and the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS). To do this, new indexes were developed and findings from the various datasets compiled (see **walqing** reports and **walqing** policy briefs 2 and 3).

Based on these results and on previous research and theoretical knowledge, we selected sectors and functions within these sectors that combine expansion, problematic quality of work and life, and different gender composition. These sectors were **commercial cleaning, construction, waste disposal, elderly care and catering**. Each of these sectors was investigated in 4-5 countries that represent different employment regimes. In each country, partners investigated industrial relations in two sectors (see **walqing** policy brief 4), conducted 2-3 company case studies in each of “their” sectors and investigated the work situations, careers and perspectives of individuals and vulnerable groups (see Holtgrewe/Sardadvar 2012; Hohnen 2012). In addition, **walqing** analysed the gaps and challenges in policy that centrally impact the quality of work and life of low-wage employees (see **walqing** policy brief 5). The project also conducted 5 small-scale action research interventions to further dialogues and sector- or company-level initiatives to improve the quality of work in construction, cleaning and waste disposal (see Ravn et al. 2012).
Key findings

Walqing found that ca. half of the job growth in Europe after 2000 consisted of jobs with below-average job quality. Indeed, these “new and growing” sectors in Europe have certain features in common: They address fairly basic needs of humans: clean shelter, food, care, waste disposal. For this reason, they both are shaped by issues of sustainability and quality of life and shape them for society. With the exception of construction, they are labour-intensive services “on the ground”, that is, spatially distributed and difficult to relocate.

In spite of their contribution to quality of life, the sectors investigated by Walqing are characterised by comparatively low wages, physically hard work, low and misrecognised skills and patchy to low interest representation. Additionally, they are structured by strong gender and ethnic segmentation, both between and within sectors. Through this accumulation of disadvantages, they reiterate social vulnerability, for instance through health risks or discontinuous employment.

Clients, both institutions and the private end-customers, contribute to the shaping of working conditions by negotiating contracts, making ad-hoc demands and exerting control. Public sector privatisation and outsourcing have contributed to the expansion of the sectors investigated. Cost pressure and quality considerations by both clients and employers thus have a central impact on working conditions.

The sectors and their companies and markets

A large part of the “new and growing” sectors in Walqing are services that have certain aspects in common: they are labour-intensive and delivered “on the ground”, that means, they involve work at clients’ sites, and some mobility between workplaces. The same applies to construction which is obviously not a service but has some of these features in common. In care, cleaning, catering and waste management, outsourcing the function from the public sector and also from other sectors has contributed to the sectors’ restructuring, often with an aim to cut labour cost. Some shifts of jobs from other sectors, and also some fragmentation of employment lies below the surface impression of growing sectors.

Companies operating in these sectors take different positions and pursue various strategies. Indeed, the sectors are characterised by both very large and quite small and local companies. We have investigated some multinational companies and large, internationally active firms in cleaning, catering and waste. It appears that multinationals have a chance of retaining some manoeuvring space even in markets that are otherwise tightening, pursuing both strategies of standardisation and deskilling and strategies of professionalisation. However, medium-sized and small companies may also find niches to limit the competitive pressures: a quality focus in cleaning, a specialisation on market segments that offer higher margins and also some space for investment or a regional focus with limited ambitions for expansion. Small to medium-sized Eastern European construction companies, struggling with the crisis, tend to focus on their core competencies and retain a core of generalists or specialists, outsourcing the rest of their work. Indeed, some family-run enterprises emerge as niche players with an interest...
in continuity and relational contracting. However, their capacities for providing sustainable and secure employment while being flexibly specialised (cf. Sabel/Piore 1984) are challenged by institutional environments in which social partnership is patchy and collective goods such as training facilities and programmes may be eroding or lack resources to adapt to new demands.

We have also investigated a group of public-sector units and hybrid companies/units that have been fully or partly outsourced from the public or non-profit sector or involve some private capital as in the case of Italian municipal waste companies. The picture of those units’ strategies is varied and they are specifically embedded with their national environments.

Are green jobs better jobs?

The greening of products or services is not found to have a consistent impact on the quality of work. In the cleaning sector, it is mostly talked about as an aspect requiring some skill adaptation but not making many changes. Waste management companies regard themselves as green by definition. The differentiation of material flows and recycling processes has given them multiple inroads into the market and is also used to provide workers with health problems with less strenuous work. On the other hand, workers in treatment plants are exposed to dust and potential (and potentially unknown) hazardous substances. Job quality is not automatically improved, but requires extra attention to the entire socio-technical system of waste handling that involves householders’ practices, design of bins and vehicles, work organisation and so on.

In construction, it has been made most evident how green building allows for varied forms of work organisation, from a craft-based, “alternative” approach to increased standardisation of work. Some health risks are eliminated in these ways, such as work with solvents or hazardous materials, but windows and doors with better insulation tend to be heavier. Standardisation of modules may make it possible to produce more building parts in more controlled surroundings but eliminates discretion on-site. Again, there is no observable automatism of greening improving working conditions, but the quality of work continues to need actors’ deliberate attention.

Fragmentation of employment

Since all sectors investigated are characterised by irregular workflows and contingencies resulting from client needs and expectations, market developments, environmental conditions and the consequences of their prevailing modes of work organisation, flexible employment contracts and working hours play a central part and centrally contribute to problematic working conditions. The effects are strikingly gendered: The women-dominated service sectors tend to address flexibility through part-time work (often also marginal part-time), whereas the male-dominated sectors use both subcontracting and long working hours in the case of construction and comparatively short de-facto working times (within full-time employment) in waste collection. In the male-dominated sectors of construction and waste collection, full-time employment prevails. This can lead to fairly favourable working hours as in waste collection, especially when the full-time wage is paid for an explicit or
de-facto piece-rate that can be achieved in five or six hours – although this practice found in Danish waste collection entails the risk of work teams intensifying their work beyond what is healthy. Conversely, in construction, work-days can be long with long commutes or weekly commuting to the workplace on top. In this sector, it is less the working hours than the employment contracts that are fragmented, using various arrangements of temp agency work, sub- and sub-subcontracting, which also increase the likelihood of lower pay, health and safety risks and discontinuous employment.

The use of temp agency work in our cases depends on both national regulations and the relative pay levels of agency and sectoral workers. Fixed-term contracts are sometimes used to align employment and service provision contracts – in effect shifting the risk of discontinuity on to employees, especially when rules of transfer of undertakings or subrogation do not apply. In care and catering similarly, we can observe an increase of precarious employment contracts in different shapes that depend on each country’s regulations of atypical employment: we find involuntary part-time, fixed-term contracts, or zero- or low-hour contracts that result in unpredictable amounts of work and wages. In cleaning and catering, which are often done in part-time arrangements, we see some evidence of a contraction of working hours with intensified work.

Wages and payment systems

The sectors selected are low-wage sectors, albeit not always in a strict sense of wages below two thirds of the median wage (cf. Gautié/Schmitt 2009). Low-wage can mean many things and workers’ own comments are quite differentiated: It can mean low, but sufficient to make ends meet (as in the Norwegian cleaning sector), low, but reasonable compared to other professions on a similar skill level (as in the Austrian cleaning sector) or very low indeed and even decreasing (as in the Lithuanian care and catering sector, in Hungarian and Spanish catering and the Bulgarian waste sector). In the female-dominated sectors under investigation (care, cleaning, catering), the problem is exacerbated by the fact that low wages are often earned on a part-time basis, which obviously results in very low de-facto wages.

Throughout the five sectors, women are structurally disadvantaged with regard to wages by the dynamics of horizontal (and some vertical) labour market segmentation both between and within sectors. Women concentrate in the worse-paid sectors where low pay, precarious employment conditions and low recognition accumulate, and also in the worse-paid parts of “their” sectors. On the other hand, the male-dominated sectors with their stronger traditions of interest representation have developed modes of compensation of performance and also hardships that keep their wages above the poverty level: While piece-rates may increase the intensity of work and enrol work teams in self-rationalisation, they can be negotiated with favourable results, especially if unions are continuously involved in the evaluation of demands as in Norwegian construction. It is worth noting that the women’s sectors are highly exposed to intensification of work but generally do not receive compensation. Gender inequality and each sector’s traditions or non-
traditions of collective bargaining thus result in quite unequal patterns of compensation that go beyond wages as such.

**Work organisation and intensification**

Organising and managing spatially distributed labour-intensive work presents some distinct challenges: Workforces must be deployed across sites, schedules developed and adapted, absences covered and local contingencies accommodated. In the service sectors, work takes place in the **triangle** of employer – customer – worker. Negotiations and interactions thus multiply, and so do organisational cultures as well as relationships of control and management. Nevertheless, hierarchies in cleaning, elderly care and waste collection tend to be flat, with foremen/-women or frontline managers in charge of several workplaces or large groups of workers. The resulting **need for coordination** is distributed among frontline managers, formal or informal teams, and local interactions of workers and customers on-site. It increases when employers resort to short-hours part-time work and thus have to coordinate more people. In all these configurations it is likely that the tasks of **foremen and frontline managers** can become quite complex very quickly, negotiating and being available for all sides. In construction and cleaning, we also find some informal leadership roles that are not necessarily remunerated.

One of the major trends in the sectors investigated is a tendency towards **work intensification**. It increases stress, physical and psychological demands and may contribute to vicious circles lowering the quality of work, e.g., if there is too little time to take care of the relationship with clients in elderly care. In some cases in cleaning, care and catering, workers "cope" with work intensification by informally extending working hours, coming early to be able to do their job or leaving later, frequently accepting that this time will be unpaid. In waste collection and construction, work intensification is compensated by **improvements in technologies** in some cases, especially with regard to heavy lifting.

**Skills, capacities and careers**

In the sectors investigated, **skill levels** generally are low although workers and managers are aware that working successfully even in operative positions requires certain competencies such as common sense and awareness, physical stamina, social and interpersonal skills. These are often not formalised skills (and not easy to formalise) but elements of experience, tacit knowledge and overall smartness. Their importance makes itself felt in terms of difficulties recruiting the "right" people for the job. On the other hand, lines of social inequality, unequal labour market access and gender and ethnic discrimination provide diverse reserve potentials of capable people with limited labour market alternatives. Hence, we find some instances of overqualification, especially among migrant workers and workers in rural environments where vocational training in craft occupations does not have a wage premium. While thus viable possibilities for development could certainly be improved in the sectors involved, skill improvement in a simple sense reveals its limitations.
Careers from the operative level into first-line management positions are still found and regarded as a possibility in the sectors investigated by walqing. However, higher positions may have their own issues of job quality. In cleaning and construction, and partly in catering, they are characterised by very high workloads, long workdays, comprehensive and somewhat ill-defined responsibilities, and not corresponding compensation. Incentives to advance thus are limited. Moreover, training is often not followed by advancement, which generates some disappointment.

Worker voice and collective action

Employee representation varies substantially between sectors, countries and cases (in more detail, see Kirov 2011). Indeed, there is some evidence that on the respective shop floors, union influence is less perceptible than on the sectoral level. It appears that a visible union organisation is most likely when there is a strong tradition for it, as in waste collection with its roots in the public sector, or also in parts of construction, which conversely suggests a lack of more recent organising successes of unions in growing sectors. In smaller companies, unions are often strikingly absent, but even in the multinationals that may have European Works Councils, they may feel remote. Access to workers for trade unions as well as control of employment and working conditions are particularly difficult when work is spatially distributed, as in cleaning, care, catering and construction.

Employers and managers also express an interest in collective action. They discuss the benefits of curbing irregular competition by companies operating in the grey areas of regulation and of standards for quality of products and work that contribute to a level playing field. In Bulgaria, they also supported the establishment of a union at the company level with a view to having a predictable partner in negotiation rather than unpredictable flares of conflict.

The view of workers

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Employees’ subjective perceptions of their work show several consistent tendencies across sectors. First, employees identify with and attempt to make sense of their work and the choice they have made to work in the sector. This is particularly striking in elderly care, where workers regard their job not only as an occupation or profession, but rather as a vocation.

In all sectors, workers’ perceptions are characterized by reflections on the benefits of the job relative to available alternatives, either within the sector or in the surrounding (available) labour market. As a result there is an overall tendency to emphasise the positive aspects of the work. In catering, e.g., regular working hours are emphasized as positive and put forward as the main argument for working in the sector, although they are also aware that other features (e.g. wages) are less attractive in catering compared to the hotels and restaurants sector as a whole. Similarly in waste collection, the outdoor work and being able to work ‘independently’ is emphasized, while the low status of the job is played down. Finally, construction workers favour the ‘craftsmanship’ while downplaying the long working hours and/or the long time spent commuting to and from work.
Second, some of the sectors are generally acknowledged as being low status jobs and workers in these jobs have generally not selected them as their first choice. This is the case in cleaning, waste collection and elderly care and for kitchen assistants in catering. However, workers in these jobs have been surprised about the jobs and have found work tasks and the social relationships that they build more interesting than they had expected. In addition, work in these jobs is often viewed as a solution to a problematic social situation, e.g. losing one’s job in another sector, and is valued simply because it generates an income.

Third, viewing the five sectors together, it should be mentioned that the gender segregation is significant and workers’ perceptions of their work to a certain extent follow stereotypical gender lines. Women value regular working hours (catering), meaning in the work (elderly care) and having the option to reconcile work and family life (all sectors), while men tend to emphasize independence, wages and leisure time. Women (and some of the few men working in “female” sectors) found it difficult to accept the lack of social recognition that they perceive their work received. In particular, women working in elderly care explicitly raised the lack of social recognition, while men who work in waste were less concerned with the reputation of the work and more concerned with the actual employment and working conditions. The concern with lack of recognition was also related to wage levels. Particularly in elderly care, wages were regarded as both low and unfair in comparison with the importance of the work.

**Vulnerabilities: gender, ethnicity and age**

Vulnerabilities have been analysed in terms of the extent to which work constrains or sustains future risk of social exclusion. The following groups of workers seem to be particularly vulnerable in the “new” work situation where employment changes, where increased flexibility and customer orientation is expected and where continuous relationships are hard to maintain.

- Older workers (45+)
- Migrants/ethnic minorities
- Women
- Temporary workers/seasonal workers
- Single parents.

The present labour market, characterised by increasing privatisation, outsourcing, use of fixed term contracts and increasing customer orientation, exposes new groups (e.g. older workers, migrant workers and temporary workers) to vulnerability in terms of social risk.

**Workers’ aspirations**

Workers in the five sectors have also been asked about their future aspirations and these also reveal some consistent tendencies. First, most workers were more concerned with short term aspirations than long term visions.
Examples include:

— To get a steady job and a regular income
— To get more working hours
— To get regular working hours
— To prevent health problems and physical strain
— To be able to stay in the job or to get a similar better paid job
— To be paid on time.

There appears to be a relationship between the kind of employment situation employees have and their future aspirations. Those in a fixed-term position often try to get a permanent position and those who work part-time or (in cleaning) in split shifts try to get additional and/or more regular working hours. In addition, workers who feel that they have a ‘steady job’ (often but not always referring to an open-ended contract) are more interested in upskilling and in future career options than those who have more insecure employment.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS**

What drives the quality of work and life down in low-wage and low-skills jobs and functions?

In all sectors, there are distinguishable downward pressures on job quality that result from a lack of resources and increasingly cost-based competition and take shape in different context-specific ways. Both public and private sector organisations now set a strong focus on cutting costs, and with the crisis, end-customers also limit their spending, which is noted in catering in particular.

This is reflected in adverse outcomes for employment conditions and quality of work, such as work intensification and a fragmentation of employment. Increasingly, fixed-term employment contracts are used to align employment with the duration of service contract. In the feminised sectors, companies offer shorter-hour part-time contracts, occasionally for the same amount of work. In construction, subcontracting is extended. In recent years, the cost pressure was exacerbated in the context of the economic crisis. In the public sector in particular, previous reforms have often decreased wage levels and pay supplements and benefits for new recruits.

These increases in uncertainty contribute to vicious circles: With shorter time horizons of contracts, organisations become increasingly reluctant to invest in skill upgrading and more ergonomic equipment. This increases turnover and health and safety risks. It also requires more regimented and standardised work organisation, which in turn leads to even less investment in skill. Indeed, in catering, cleaning and construction in particular, managers complain about difficulties in finding sufficiently capable workers. Not least, we find that workers under more precarious employment conditions, with lower skills and space for job crafting tend to limit their aspirations further (Hohnen 2012).
How to improve quality of work and life?

Nevertheless, favourable configurations of pay, work quality and professionalisation are possible. They are contingent on inclusive employment regimes and an active social partnership that is capable to maintain and develop standards of training, continuous employment and technological improvement and health & safety. Consequently, several good practice examples and quality of work initiatives are found in the Nordic countries. In countries with less institutionally provided social inclusion in particular, local initiatives by companies, corporate social responsibility and social entrepreneurship also contribute to improving working conditions. Examples of good practices on both the sectoral and company level can be found at www.walqing.eu/webresource. Interventions by the walqing team to establish dialogues on job quality and develop context-specific measures of improvement are found in Ravn et al. 2012.

Clients, especially the public sector, can as centrally contribute to improving quality of work as they can contribute to its downgrading. They are able to enforce standards that contribute to the quality of work not just by being prepared to pay realistic prices for good-quality services but also by demanding certain skill levels or technical equipment. The attention that European social partners are giving to socially responsible public procurement thus is well-placed, and these initiatives need to be extended and devolved to the national and regional levels across Europe (cf. Kirov 2011).

Innovation and contextuality

Obviously, the “new and growing jobs” outside the sectors that are commonly associated with knowledge and innovation need political attention. Regardless of their location in the public, non-profit or private sector they provide important products and services that contribute centrally to basic human needs and to European societies’ achievements of quality of life and sustainability. They also have potential for innovation of processes and products with regard to new technologies to render work environments more ergonomic, eliminate work peaks where possible and coordinate distributed work. Often, technological, organisational and social innovations will need to be related in realising that potential.

However, policy interventions will require a consideration of both national and sectoral contexts. Not all “good practices” found in one country or sector will easily translate to another. For example, workers’ interest in skill improvement is shaped by previous learning experience, their current aspirations and sense of security, and expectations of actual usability. Hence, improvements will need to be embedded with a work organisation allowing for skill utilisation and possibilities of advancement, payment schemes that remunerate both formal and informal learning and a sense of recognition.

On the other hand, the comparison of practices across countries and sectors can provide ideas to improve job quality. For example, comparing wages and benefits between the female- and male-dominated sectors, walqing found that in construction and waste, social partners have developed performance-related pay schemes that so far are lacking in care or cleaning and might provide inspiration for ways of rewarding flexibility, quality or productivity.
Policymakers and social partners need to find ways of creating safety nets against downward spirals of cost-cutting, precarious work, and deskilling and “level playing fields” in the newly developing markets.

These may consist in

— using and extending the possibilities to use public procurement procedures to ensure decent work, service quality and employment continuity
— Supporting and developing comprehensive institutions to do this and enforce standards
— Developing welfare and industrial relations to become more inclusive and extend beyond “core” sectors/segments
— Developing information flows and knowledge circulation between European, national and regional arenas of social dialogue in order to disseminate good practices and solutions within and also across sectors
— Involving new actors (clients, NGOs) and addressing new issues (environment)
— Learning to negotiate and aggregate interests among increasingly diverse collective actors in multi-union or employer association bargaining
— Encouraging and supporting investment in innovative job design.

An important conclusion is that equal opportunity policies are required in low-wage sectors and female-dominated as well as male-dominated sectors to tackle women’s accumulating disadvantages within the generally disadvantaged sectors of the economy. Overall, the case study findings indicate a low level of consciousness among managers about mechanisms of gender segmentation and women’s structural disadvantages. With some exceptions, gender segmentations are perceived as a “natural” thing, or something external that cannot be influenced by management or stakeholders. Obviously, there is a lot of room for improvement in this regard, starting with disseminating knowledge about the basic mechanisms of gender segmentation and continuing with concrete measures to fight both horizontal and vertical segmentation as well as entry restrictions – because on a very material level, they are all de facto linked to women being disadvantaged in the currently dominating structural patterns. In this regard, much will depend on the strength and commitment of interest representation in the feminised sectors and again, the possibility of involving actors on the client side. Initiatives for daytime cleaning for instance could form alliances with municipal gender equality actors.
RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Methodology
In the first phase of the project, walqing used in-depth analyses of the most important European data sources, such as ELFS, EWCS, EU-SILC and ESQL to investigate patterns of job growth in Europe, to identify ‘new and growing’ jobs and to assess the quality of jobs and life in these growth areas. The data analyses provided evidence for the selection of salient sectors and occupations for further investigation through institutional analysis and qualitative case studies. Based on this evidence, walqing investigated collective actors’ policies and their limitations and takes stock of successful arrangements. walqing also explored the organisational strategies and practices of work organisation, HRM strategies, contractual relations and working conditions by means of in-depth case studies in companies in the selected sectors. This included an analysis of the quality of work and life of particularly vulnerable groups, and of individual workers’ life courses, perspectives and occupational identities. Integrating these analyses, walqing connects institutional contexts, individual and organisational case studies, and proactively translates and dissemnates successful solutions and strategies with the help of action research.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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### Website
www.walqing.eu

### Further reading
- Hohnen, Pernille (2012): Capacities and vulnerabilities in precarious work. The perspective of employees in European low wage jobs. Synthesis report on employees’ experience and work trajectories for work package 7 of the walqing project, SSH-CT-2009-244597

### Related projects
- www.worksproject.be
- www.pique.at
- http://www.capright.eu
- http://www.dynamoproject.eu
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