

EVOLVING PATTERNS OF WORKING LIFE DURATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract: *This paper examines the duration of working life in the European Union (EU) member states, showing its evolution from 2015 to 2024. The objective is to determine the trends at the EU level and the differences among each state's average number of years an employee is expected to spend in the labour market. The methodology used in preparing the study is a descriptive statistical analysis of data published by Eurostat, which uses a comparative approach of the evolution over the time period examined and the existing differences between member states. The results of the study show an increasing trend in the duration of the working life in the EU countries, but also highlight significant variations among states. The Eurostat data also reveal substantial disparities between women and men. This evolution suggests significant changes in the economic context and the dynamics of the European workforce. The conclusions highlight the necessity of finding a balance in the European labour market, in order to better understand the evolution of the labour market, especially in the context of the demographic transition.*

Keywords: *working life duration; labour market; European Union; employment; gender disparities*

JEL classification: J21; J11

1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union has faced significant demographic challenges, such as population ageing, declining fertility rates, and increasing pressure on pension and social welfare systems. Understanding labour-market dynamics has become an important subject for both policymakers and researchers. The duration of working life (DWL) is defined as the expected number of years a person over 15 years old is expected to remain economically active. This indicator provides a crucial data for assessing the balance between economic contributors and dependents, with direct implications for the sustainability of welfare systems. Data from Eurostat show that the expected DWL across the EU has risen steadily over recent years, with substantial variation among member states (Eurostat, 2024).

Nonetheless, overall upward trends conceal the distinct structural, socioeconomic, and normative variances among nations. Elements like labour market regulations, job structures, education levels, and gender norms affect the duration of individuals' participation in the workforce. Studies have shown that working life expectancy

(WLE), a concept closely related to DWL, varies significantly by education level and occupation, with less-educated individuals often experiencing shorter working lives and earlier exit from employment (Loichinger & Weber, 2016; Chungkham et al., 2025).

Health and work quality also play a crucial role in shaping working life duration. Even as life expectancy increases, not all additional years are spent in good health or employment. The concept of healthy working life expectancy (HWLE) — the number of years individuals are both working and in good health — has gained attention as a more comprehensive indicator of sustainable employment (Boissonneault et al., 2021; Weber & Loichinger, 2022). Evidence from multiple European countries indicates that health inequalities and working conditions substantially affect HWLE, particularly among older workers (Lievre et al., 2007).

Gender remains another major factor influencing DWL and WLE. Across the EU, women continue to have shorter working life expectancies than men, reflecting persistent gaps in labour-market participation, they are prone to more part-time work, and they have different care responsibilities (Solovieva et al., 2024). Nevertheless, recent studies show that these gaps are gradually narrowing, driven by increasing female labour participation and policy efforts promoting active ageing and gender equality (Boissonneault et al., 2021).

Despite the increasing importance of the topic, comprehensive studies that examine DWL trends over the last decade across all EU member states — with attention to both regional disparities and gender differences — remain scarce. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing DWL in EU member states over a ten-year period (2015–2024), using Eurostat data (indicator *LFSI_DWL_A*). The objectives are to document recent trends and patterns at the EU level, and to explore disparities among states and between genders. Through this approach, the study contributes to understanding how demographic change, labour-market participation, health, and social policies intersect to shape the length and quality of working life in contemporary Europe.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptual background

The Duration of Working Life (DWL) is an indicator developed by Eurostat to measure the average number of years that a person aged 15 is expected to be economically active throughout their lifetime. It captures both the entry into and exit from the labour market, reflecting the combined effects of employment, education, retirement, and demographic change (Eurostat, 2024). The indicator is derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and provides a harmonized framework for comparing member states.

According to Loichinger and Weber (2016), the concept of DWL offers a more integrated understanding of labour market participation than static indicators such as employment rates, as it incorporates longitudinal dynamics of labour engagement across generations. DWL has become particularly relevant in the context of Europe's ageing population and policy efforts to extend working lives through pension reforms, active ageing strategies, and gender equality measures (OECD, 2021).

2.2. Recent trends in the European Union

Studies based on Eurostat data show a clear upward trend in the duration of working life across the European Union over the past decade. Between 2015 and 2024, the average DWL increased from approximately 35 to over 37 years at the EU-27 level (Eurostat, 2024). This gradual rise reflects longer labour market participation, delayed retirement, and greater inclusion of women and older workers in the workforce (European Commission, 2023).

However, the trend is not uniform. Northern and Western European countries — such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark — consistently report longer DWL, often exceeding 42 years. In contrast, Southern and Eastern European countries, including Italy, Greece, and Romania, remain below the EU average (Eurostat, 2024). Loichinger and Weber (2016) and Weber and Loichinger (2022) note that such disparities are linked to differences in institutional frameworks, labour flexibility, and participation of women and older workers.

2.3. Gender disparities in DWL

Gender remains a significant dimension of DWL differences in the European Union. Across most member states, men have longer expected working lives than women, though the gap has been narrowing gradually (Solovieva et al., 2024). The gender gap in DWL is influenced by persistent inequalities in access to full-time employment, career interruptions due to family responsibilities, and structural labour market segregation (Boissonneault et al., 2021).

Empirical data show that Nordic countries, where social policies promote shared caregiving and flexible employment, have achieved the smallest gender differences in DWL. In contrast, Southern European countries continue to show pronounced disparities (Eurostat, 2024). Scholars such as Chungkham et al. (2025) argue that occupational strain, part-time employment, and job insecurity disproportionately affect women, reducing their total duration of working life.

2.4. Regional patterns and determinants

The DWL indicator also reveals a persistent geographical divide within the EU. Northern and Western member states exhibit longer working lives, supported by higher employment rates and more flexible pension systems. Eastern and Southern Europe are characterized by shorter DWL, reflecting structural barriers such as lower female participation, informal employment, and higher unemployment rates (OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2023).

Differences in DWL can also be linked to labour market institutions, education levels, and health outcomes. In countries with stronger lifelong learning systems and inclusive labour-market policies, individuals tend to remain active for longer periods. Eurostat (2024) highlights that policies encouraging older workers' participation and reducing early retirement have been particularly effective in extending DWL.

2.5. Synthesis

The literature consistently shows that the *duration of working life* in Europe is gradually increasing, but remains highly uneven across regions and genders. While policy reforms and demographic change contribute to the overall upward trend, structural inequalities — especially those related to gender, education, and employment conditions — continue to shape cross-country differences. DWL thus emerges as a key indicator for evaluating labour-market inclusiveness and the long-term sustainability of social protection systems in the European Union.

3. Data and methodology

This research is based on official data provided by Eurostat, specifically using the indicator *Duration of Working Life* (code LFSI_DWL_A), derived from the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS). The indicator represents the average number of years that a person aged 15 is expected to be economically active throughout their lifetime, taking into account the prevailing age-specific activity rates within each country.

The data used in this study are harmonized and comparable across all European Union member states, which allows for a coherent comparative analysis. Since the indicator is constructed using standardized LFS data and methodology, it ensures a high level of reliability and cross-country consistency. All datasets were extracted directly from Eurostat's public database in November 2025, thus incorporating the most recent updates available for the 2024 reference year.

The study covers a ten-year period, from 2015 to 2024, which is particularly relevant for capturing the evolution of the European labour market during a period of major social and economic transformations. This decade circles several important phases: the recovery from the global financial crisis, the demographic ageing process that has increasingly shaped policy debates, the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the more recent employment reforms introduced across EU member states to promote longer and more inclusive working lives. By focusing on this time frame, the analysis provides a comprehensive view of the structural and cyclical factors that influence labour participation across Europe.

The research includes all 27 member states of the European Union, corresponding to the current configuration after the withdrawal of the United Kingdom. The analysis follows two complementary perspectives. First, it examines the temporal evolution of the duration of working life at the EU level, highlighting trends and shifts observed between 2015 and 2024. Second, it explores the geographical disparities among member states, distinguishing between Northern, Western, Southern, and Eastern European countries. These two dimensions — temporal and spatial — enable a deeper understanding of both long-term patterns and regional differences in labour market behaviour.

The methodological approach adopted in this paper is quantitative, descriptive, and comparative. It aims to identify broad patterns. Descriptive statistics are used to summarize and interpret the data, focusing on changes in averages, ranges, and relative positions of member states over time. The analysis also includes a gender perspective, given the persistent disparities between men and women in terms of labour market participation and working life duration. By comparing male and female DWL values, the study seeks to highlight progress towards gender convergence and the remaining structural barriers that continue to shape employment trajectories.

All data processing steps were carried out using secondary data directly from Eurostat's online database. The dataset was cleaned and verified for completeness and consistency, ensuring that all EU-27 countries had continuous data series for the period under analysis. Average and range values were calculated to capture overall EU patterns, while graphical representations available through Eurostat's visualization tools were used to illustrate the evolution of DWL both over time and across member states.

Nevertheless, the analysis faces several methodological limitations. The *Duration of Working Life* indicator is an expected value, not an observed measure. It estimates, based on current labour participation rates, how long individuals are likely to remain active in the labour market if current patterns persist. This implies that sudden policy shifts or structural changes — for example, economic crises, pension reforms, or technological transformations — might alter future trajectories in ways not captured by current estimates. Furthermore, while the Eurostat data are harmonized, differences in national labour market structures, such as the prevalence of informal work, part-time employment, or self-employment, may influence cross-country comparability. Despite these factors, the Eurostat DWL indicator remains the most robust and internationally recognized tool for assessing the expected duration of working life in the European Union.

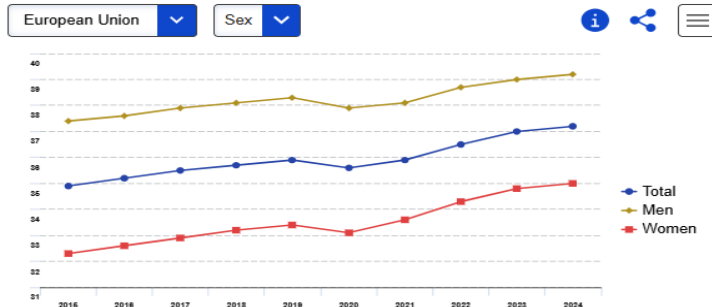
In summary, this study applies a descriptive and comparative analysis to examine the evolution and disparities of the *Duration of Working Life* across EU member states between 2015 and 2024. By relying on harmonized data and focusing on both temporal and geographical dimensions, the methodology provides a reliable foundation for understanding the dynamics of labour market participation in Europe, as well as the gender and regional inequalities that persist in the context of demographic ageing and ongoing labour market reforms.

4. Results

The analysis of Eurostat data for the period 2015–2024 reveals that the duration of working life (DWL) has continued to increase across most European Union member states, reflecting a trend towards longer economic activity and delayed labour market exit. As shown in Figure 1, the average DWL at the EU-27 level reached approximately 37.2 years in 2024, compared to around 34.9 years in 2015. This steady rise confirms that the European labour market is gradually adapting to demographic ageing and the increasing participation of both older workers and women in the labour force (Eurostat, 2024).

Expected duration of working life, 2015-2024

(years)



Source: Eurostat - [lfsi_dwl_a](#)

eurostat

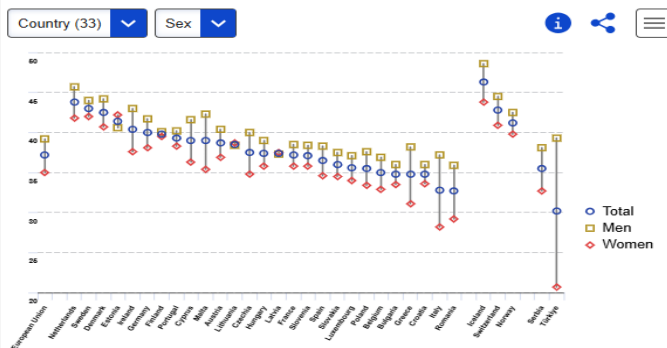
Figure 1: Evolution of Duration of Working Life in the EU, 2015–2024.

Source: Eurostat ([lfsi_dwl_a](#))

The overall upward trend can be interpreted as a combined effect of several structural forces. First, the extension of retirement ages and the reform of pension systems across many EU countries have encouraged older workers to remain active for longer periods (OECD, 2021). Second, improvements in education and life expectancy have contributed to higher participation rates throughout the working life. Third, the expansion of flexible and part-time employment arrangements has made it easier for individuals to remain in the labour market during different life stages. Nevertheless, the data reveal substantial regional disparities.

Expected duration of working life by country and sex, 2024

(years)



Source: Eurostat - [lfsi_dwl_a](#)

eurostat

Figure 2: Expected duration of working life by country and sex, 2024.

Source: Eurostat ([lfsi_dwl_a](#))

As illustrated in Figure 2, Northern and Western European countries consistently record the highest DWL values, often exceeding 42 years. Sweden (43.0), the Netherlands (42.8), and Denmark (42.5) stand out as examples of societies with inclusive labour markets and high levels of female and older-worker participation. These countries also tend to combine active ageing policies with strong welfare systems and lifelong learning programs that support continuous employability (Weber & Loichinger, 2022).

By contrast, Southern and Eastern European countries remain below the EU average. Italy (32.8 years), Greece (30.2 years), and Romania (34.8 years) display shorter expected working lives (Eurostat, 2024). The lower DWL values in these countries can be attributed to multiple structural constraints, including lower employment rates, high youth unemployment, and limited integration of women into full-time employment. In Southern Europe in particular, more rigid labour markets and traditional gender norms tend to discourage prolonged participation, while in Eastern Europe, economic instability and migration dynamics continue to affect the sustainability of national labour forces.

The geographical pattern, visualized in Figure 3 as a map of Europe, shows a clear North–South divide, with Northern and Western countries forming a cluster of longer working lives and Southern and Eastern countries lagging behind. This persistent divergence aligns with previous studies highlighting that DWL is not only a function of demographic factors but also of institutional and cultural contexts (Loichinger & Weber, 2016; European Commission, 2023).

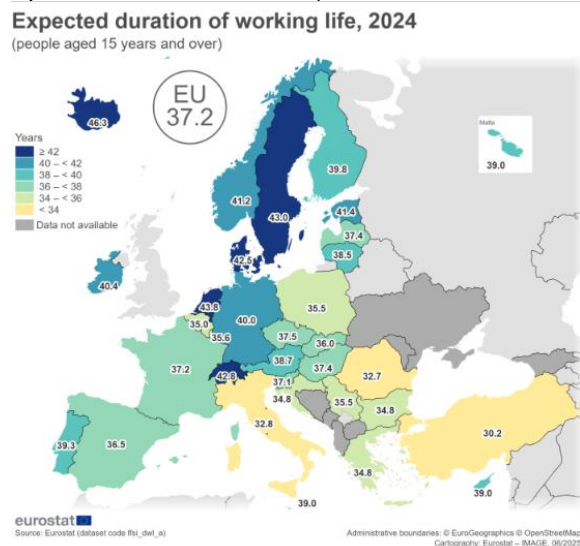


Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of DWL in Europe.

Source: Eurostat ([lfsi_dwl_a](#))

A more detailed examination by gender provides further insights. As seen in Figure 4, the DWL indicator remains higher for men than for women in every EU member state, although the gender gap has narrowed slightly over the past decade. In 2015,

the average difference between men and women in the EU-27 was about 4.9 years, whereas by 2024 it had decreased to approximately 4.1 years (Eurostat, 2024). The reduction of this gap reflects broader social changes, including improvements in female education levels, increased childcare support in several member states, and EU initiatives promoting gender equality in employment (Solovieva et al., 2024).

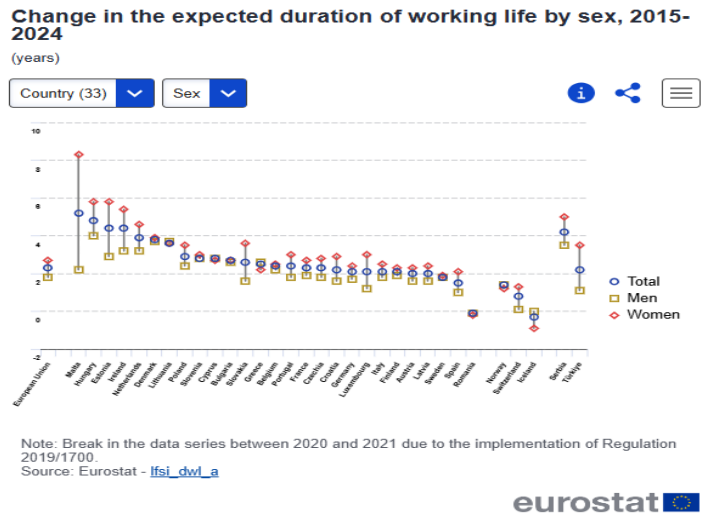


Figure 4: Change in the expected duration of working life by sex, 2015–2024.
Source: Eurostat ([lfsi_dwl_a](#))

However, the narrowing of the gender gap is far from uniform. In Nordic countries such as Sweden and Finland, the difference between men and women is now less than two years, while in Southern and Eastern Europe it remains substantially larger — exceeding six years in countries such as Italy, Greece, and Romania. These persistent disparities suggest that structural barriers continue to limit women's capacity to maintain long and stable employment trajectories. In particular, unequal access to full-time work, cultural expectations surrounding family responsibilities, and gendered labour segregation continue to constrain the DWL of women compared to men (European Commission, 2023).

When observing the temporal evolution, the most rapid increases in DWL occurred between 2017 and 2019, coinciding with the post-crisis economic recovery and growing labour market participation. The period 2020–2021 reflects a temporary stagnation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when employment interruptions and early retirements affected several labour markets. Yet, by 2022–2024, most EU countries had resumed their upward trajectory, suggesting a return to long-term growth in labour force participation.

From a policy perspective, these results underline the importance of maintaining a balance between extending working lives and ensuring the quality and sustainability of employment. While the extension of professional life can alleviate demographic

and fiscal pressures, it may also expose older and vulnerable workers to higher risks of precarious employment or deteriorating health if not accompanied by adequate support measures (Weber & Loichinger, 2022; OECD, 2021).

The comparative evidence also indicates that countries with comprehensive active ageing strategies — combining training, flexible retirement options, and inclusive social policies — are more successful in achieving both longer and healthier working lives. In contrast, member states where labour market participation is uneven or dependent on rigid institutional structures continue to face lower DWL values and wider gender disparities.

The analysis of Eurostat data for 2015–2024 demonstrates that the duration of working life in the European Union has gradually increased, but remains highly uneven across regions and between genders. Northern and Western Europe lead the trend towards longer working lives, while Southern and Eastern Europe lag behind due to structural and institutional challenges. Gender gaps, although narrowing, persist as a major source of inequality in the European labour market. These findings emphasize the need for continued policy efforts to promote equal access to employment opportunities and to create flexible and sustainable pathways for extending working life across all population groups.

5. Policy implications and future outlook

The results of this analysis highlight the growing importance of policies that promote longer, healthier, and more inclusive working lives within the European Union. The gradual increase in the duration of working life (DWL) observed between 2015 and 2024 suggests that labour markets are adjusting to demographic ageing, yet the persistent regional and gender disparities underline that these changes are neither uniform nor equitable. Consequently, effective policy responses must go beyond the simple extension of retirement ages and address the structural factors that condition participation throughout the life course.

At the European level, several strategic frameworks have already acknowledged the centrality of extending working life. The European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Green Deal both emphasize the need for inclusive labour markets capable of integrating diverse age groups and skill levels. Moreover, the European Employment Strategy promotes active ageing, lifelong learning, and flexible working arrangements as key elements in improving labour market resilience (European Commission, 2023). However, implementation remains uneven across member states. In Northern and Western Europe, where employment policies are more adaptive and welfare systems stronger, these measures have translated into higher DWL values. In contrast, Southern and Eastern European countries continue to struggle with rigid labour structures, lower employment rates, and limited policy coordination.

Gender equality policies remain a particularly critical area of intervention. The narrowing of the DWL gap between men and women is encouraging, yet the persistence of differences in many member states indicates that additional reforms are required. Policies that expand affordable childcare, promote shared parental leave, and ensure equal access to full-time employment opportunities have proven

effective in increasing women's labour market participation (Solovieva et al., 2024). Furthermore, promoting lifelong career development and combating occupational segregation can reduce interruptions in women's working lives, thereby contributing to both gender equality and the sustainability of labour markets.

The results also suggest that extending working life must be balanced with the quality of employment and health conditions of older workers. Merely increasing the statutory retirement age without improving working conditions risks exacerbating social inequalities and creating negative health outcomes among vulnerable groups (OECD, 2021; Weber & Loichinger, 2022). Active labour market policies should therefore focus on improving access to training and re-skilling opportunities for older employees, promoting flexible or phased retirement, and encouraging age-friendly workplaces. These measures can help ensure that longer working lives are also sustainable and productive.

Looking forward, the digital and green transitions present both challenges and opportunities for Europe's working-age population. Automation and new technologies may shorten traditional career paths for some workers while creating new opportunities for others. At the same time, the transition to a greener economy is expected to generate new labour demands and skills needs. In this context, maintaining and extending the duration of working life will require proactive investment in digital literacy, vocational requalification, and adaptive lifelong learning systems (European Commission, 2023).

From a demographic perspective, the continued rise of DWL represents a vital counterbalance to population ageing. However, to sustain this trend, policies must simultaneously enhance employment inclusivity and ensure intergenerational equity. Encouraging the participation of underrepresented groups—such as women, young people, migrants, and older workers—remains key to maintaining a stable and productive labour force.

6. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the evolution and disparities of the duration of working life (DWL) across the European Union over the period 2015–2024, using harmonized Eurostat data (indicator *LFSI_DWL_A*). The results confirm a steady and significant increase in the expected duration of working life across the EU-27, indicating that individuals are remaining economically active for longer periods. This trend reflects both structural adjustments in labour markets and the demographic imperative to sustain economic activity in ageing societies.

However, the analysis also demonstrates that this upward trajectory is uneven across countries and genders. Northern and Western European states, such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark, continue to exhibit the longest expected working lives—often exceeding 42 years—supported by comprehensive welfare systems, flexible labour-market institutions, and strong gender equality policies. In contrast, Southern and Eastern European countries, including Greece, Italy, and Romania, remain below the EU average, reflecting persistent structural and institutional barriers.

Gender disparities, although gradually narrowing, persist across all member states. Men continue to have longer expected working lives than women, but the gender gap has decreased over the past decade, particularly in countries with inclusive labour policies and robust childcare systems. These findings suggest that progress toward gender equality in employment remains a key driver of extended working life and labour-market sustainability.

From a policy perspective, the results underscore the importance of a comprehensive approach to managing demographic change. Extending the duration of working life cannot rely solely on raising retirement ages; it must also involve improving working conditions, promoting lifelong learning, and supporting active ageing through targeted employment policies. At the same time, efforts to ensure gender equality, fair access to employment, and the inclusion of older workers are crucial for achieving balanced and equitable labour participation across Europe.

The findings also carry broader implications for the sustainability of social protection systems and the competitiveness of European economies. By increasing the duration of working life, EU member states can strengthen the ratio between active and dependent populations, thereby mitigating some of the fiscal pressures of ageing. However, these gains will only be sustainable if accompanied by policies that ensure quality employment and protect the health and wellbeing of workers throughout their careers.

In conclusion, the European Union is moving towards a model of longer, more inclusive, and potentially more resilient working lives, yet substantial differences persist. Bridging these divides requires coordinated efforts at both national and EU levels, aimed at harmonizing labour-market participation, fostering gender equality, and promoting active ageing. Future research should build on this analysis by exploring the interaction between DWL, health outcomes, and technological change, as these factors will play an increasingly decisive role in shaping Europe's labour markets in the decades ahead.

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