

# The problem that has no name - work, care and time

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How the distribution of time reflects and  
reinforces inequality

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**I**t is fifty years since the American author Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. This game-changing book helped to launch ‘second wave feminism’, or the women’s liberation movement, which raged through the late 1960s and 1970s. It exposed what Friedan called ‘the problem that has no name’: something invisible, yet painfully experienced. Women felt obliterated by an unquestioned division of labour and purpose, which they had not chosen and could not control.

Fifty years on, there’s a different, but closely related, problem. It is not so much enforced joblessness and domesticity that afflict women today, as the combined pressures of paid work and caring. The root of the problem remains the same: under-valued responsibilities and stifled opportunities, locked in place by the gendered distribution of labour.

## **Pressures of paid work and care**

These days, unlike the early 1960s, women are expected to go out to work and bring home a wage. However, they must do so in ways that interfere as little as

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possible with, first, caring for children and, later, caring for ailing parents - and even both at once. This traps many women in low-paid, low-status employment, often because they opt for so-called 'part-time' jobs.<sup>1</sup> While their children are young or when an elderly parent can no longer cope alone, women often leave the labour market for a few years, losing contacts, confidence and prospects, so that when they return to paid work they are at an even greater disadvantage. This may appear to make economic sense if they are earning less than their male partner, which is still the prevailing pattern. But there is more than money at stake: there is also power, identity, capabilities and relationships. Being trapped at the low end of the job market robs women of opportunities to branch out, earn more and develop their full potential. Being the 'breadwinner' remains a strong marker of masculinity, but cuts men off from important swathes of family experience.<sup>2</sup> Inequalities between parents can breed resentment and conflict at home. Women and men rarely choose to live this way but are driven to it by force of custom and expectation.

What's happening now is that these patterns are intensifying relentlessly. In the last few years, women have come under more pressure than ever to go out to work. Meanwhile, there are growing numbers of frail and disabled parents who, thanks to modern medicine, are living to be much older, but with diminishing health and self-sufficiency in the extra years: most are cared for by their daughters or daughters-in-law. And, although there is more childcare available since the turn of the century, there is nowhere near enough high-quality, affordable care, for children or adults, to cover the time spent in paid work by those who have caring responsibilities.

Women make up the vast majority of paid carers too. Most caring work, beyond schools and hospitals, is in the hands of non-government, mainly for-profit businesses, which offer less employment protection than public sector organisations. Front-line jobs in both childcare and adult social care are low-paid and low status, with little in the way of skills development, career progression or security, and poor working conditions. In adult social care, the work is often based on zero-hours contracts (where the employer decides how much work - if any - is to be done by a worker at any time) and extensive unpaid travel. Rising demand for paid-for care is failing to drive up wages or encourage employers to improve working conditions, because there's a steady supply, especially in recessionary times, of this kind of labour, for which minimal qualifications are thought to be necessary.

Policy discussions about care tend to focus on how to make it more plentiful,

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affordable and distributed more evenly across the country; finding the best form of government subsidy - vouchers or tax relief for parents, or state funding directly to providers - and working out the level at which to cap personal spending on care for older people. These are important debates, but they invariably gloss over a bigger problem that is rarely articulated and has never (yet) been seriously tackled in public policy. This lies at the heart of the care conundrum and the unfinished business of gender inequality. It concerns the way we use and value time.

## Care policy and the power of time

There are several ways in which this matter of time shapes the care policy landscape. Most obviously, the amount of time we spend in paid work affects the amount of time we have left to care for children or elderly relatives. On average, people of working age in the UK put in just over thirty-six hours of paid work a week. For those classified as 'full-time' workers, the average is nearly forty-three hours a week.<sup>3</sup> There is nothing fixed or inevitable about these hours: they are a consequence of the way modern capitalism has developed over the last sixty years. Keynes famously anticipated in 1930 that technological progress would drive up rates of productivity so that people would need to work no more than fifteen hours a week by the twenty-first century. Instead, as productivity has risen, workers have taken a diminishing share of the surplus and have tended to trade this for money rather than time - not least because they have been urged to accumulate consumer goods to stoke the engines of economic growth. When the drive to consume has outstripped their earning power, they have been encouraged to borrow money and keep on shopping, becoming ever more tightly locked into long-hours working by the need to service debt. Meanwhile, the nature of work has changed, at least for some in the middle classes, becoming more congenial and varied. For white-collar workers, putting in long hours has become a prestigious and career-enhancing thing to do. For all these reasons and more, economic and cultural imperatives have squeezed the amount of time left to care for others within the confines of a 'normal' working week.

Paid time is visible and valued. Arguably, it is visible *because* it has monetary value. It has been a site of heroic struggle, imbued with a sense of importance and power. Trade unions built up their membership and identity by defending paid work and persuading employers to pay more for their members' time. The visibility

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and value attached to paid time has obscured both the existence and the value of *unpaid* time. This, of course, includes the time people spend caring for children and disabled and elderly adults. It is invisible or overlooked, afforded no economic value. It does not feature in any measures of progress, prosperity or success. If the total number of hours currently spent on unpaid childcare and domestic labour (as calculated in Time Use Survey) were valued at an hourly rate equivalent to the minimum wage, the resulting sum would be equivalent to 20 per cent of Gross Domestic Product. But there is no formal way of valuing unpaid time. In most policy discourse it is left without worth in the margins.

The lack of status and value attached to unpaid caring time has strongly influenced the status and value attached to *paid* caring time. Put another way, it is typically the way women spend their time and therefore it is worth little in the labour market, compared with jobs that have no unpaid-female equivalent.

As we have noted, caring responsibilities leave many women with too little time to participate in the labour market in ways that are considered 'normal' - that is, full-time work, comprising around forty hours a week. In the UK, jobs involving less than thirty-five hours a week are technically 'part-time' and routinely disadvantaged in terms of pay, status and advancement. Thus, the amount of time an individual can devote to paid work strongly influences the opportunities they have to earn money, develop skills and make progress in paid employment.

The way time is valued and distributed both reflects and contributes to gender inequalities. It is also a major determinant of individual freedom. As Tania Burchardt has argued, discretionary time is an important measure of an individual's 'substantive freedom' - that is, what people are capable of doing with the resources available to them, to pursue their personal goals.<sup>4</sup> How much discretionary time you have and how you are able to use that time will depend on your caring responsibilities, as well as on the resources you have at your disposal. Time spent on caring can diminish your chances of building up those resources. It is hardly surprising, then, that so many women with heavy caring responsibilities - especially lone parents - are trapped not just in income poverty, but in time poverty as well.

We are all familiar with the phrase 'time is money'. In fact, time is a great deal more precious and powerful than that. Distributing paid and unpaid time differently has the potential to transform not only gender relations, but also - as we shall see - the quality and quantity of care, as well as the economics of the care sector.

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Given this potential, it is remarkable that time does not feature more prominently in debates about care policy. Indeed, it features hardly at all. This is today's 'problem that has no name'. And it weighs more heavily as the demands of paid work and caring increasingly crowd-out discretionary time and reduce opportunities to build resources, thereby leaving people with caring responsibilities - of whom the vast majority are women - with a negligible share of substantive freedom.

## The pressures intensify

Political leaders on all sides are keen to pledge their support for 'hardworking people'. George Osborne, in his conference speech in 2012, declared: 'We speak for all those who want to work hard and get on ... They strive for a better life. We strive to help them'. Defending welfare reforms in April 2013, the Chancellor drove home the message: 'We're trying to make the system fair on people like you, who get up, go to work, and expect your taxes to be spent wisely'. Liam Byrne, shadow secretary for work and pensions, has been whistling the same tune: 'Labour is clear', he told *The Guardian* in January 2012. 'We are on the side of people who work hard and do the right thing.'

This kind of rhetoric has become increasingly strident, most recently expressed in the shameful coverage of the case of Mick Philpott, whose crimes were seized on as being in some way typical of people living on benefits. Thus Philpott was described by the *Daily Mail* as a 'drug-taking layabout, who embodies everything that is wrong with the welfare state'. Such rhetoric sets up two distinct groups: 'strivers' and 'skivers'. 'Strivers' are socially dependable, economically productive, morally righteous and on 'our side'. 'Skivers' are untrustworthy, unproductive, morally disreputable and not on 'our side'. Everyone in paid work may be thought of as a 'striver', while everyone not in paid work may be tarred with the 'skiver' brush. You are worthy or guilty *by association*, regardless of how you live or what you intend. This is a seductive narrative that seeks to justify spending cuts and punitive welfare-to-work policies.

But more important for this discussion is the exclusive elevation of *paid time* to the moral high ground. The only kind of 'hard-working people' recognised by this narrative are those who are paid for the work they do. The harder and longer they work for money, the higher the ground they stand on. Those who work hard for no pay at all, caring for others, bringing up children and looking after their families,

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homes and neighbourhoods - without which constant effort the formal economy would grind to a halt - are airbrushed out of the ranks of 'strivers'. And since we are presented with a simple dichotomy, by implication they are consigned to the nether regions along with Mick Philpott.

The 'strivers versus skivers' mythology has strengthened one arm of the pincer that is closing around women in the twenty-first century. Putting in long hours of paid work is apparently the best way of making a contribution to society. The less paid work you do, the worse it will be for you.<sup>5</sup> The other arm of the pincer, also growing stronger, is the burgeoning obligation to care. Of course caring can be more of a joy than a burden, but, as we have noted, the collateral damage can be immense. For many women it is grim choice: do a dead-end part-time job to earn just enough to pay for someone else to look after your children and/or ailing parent while you are at work; or give up paid work altogether and live off the resources of a third party (your husband, partner or the punitive regime of the 'reformed' welfare state). It does not have to be this way.

### What are the alternatives?

One option, favoured until recently by many Conservative politicians, is to pay people to stay at home and do the caring. This might be achieved by introducing substantial new welfare payments for those with caring responsibilities, or by new tax concessions for two-parent families, or through some combination of these. (Some would probably claim that a 'citizens' income' would do the trick, but we disagree, for reasons too numerous to be discussed here.) Leaving aside the question of whether care is better in social or domestic settings, which we address below, the arrangement could work in principle if the money were enough to live on - and if it were taken up by equal numbers of women and men.

The problem here is that even in countries with a more egalitarian approach and adequate support for caring, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, men remain a small minority of full-time carers. And arguments against paying women to stay at home have been well rehearsed for nearly half a century. In a nutshell, it would unravel most (if not all) of the achievements of the women's movement since first publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. It might offer some relief from the painful squeeze between paid work and caring. But without very strong incentives for men

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to care, it would reinforce the original 'problem without a name' by entrenching current divisions of labour that exile men from home and family, as well as gendered inequalities of income and power.

Creating more affordable, high-quality paid-for care is an obvious alternative. But let's remember that care workers themselves are often caught in the same trap: juggling low-paid work with their own caring responsibilities. It makes no sense to expand the care sector without tackling the pay and conditions of care workers. But it will be expensive to pay such workers a decent hourly rate and to offer contracts that enable them to combine earning a living with caring for family members. And this raises the bar for policy-makers looking for fundable manifesto pledges. It is an important goal, well worth pursuing, but only as part of a wider strategy to promote fair wages and working hours for carers - as well as for all the workers who cannot function in the labour market unless others help to care for their loved ones.

### **A thirty-hour week**

This brings us back to the question of time. Not just women's time, but men's time too. Suppose, as a thought experiment, that it became 'normal' to do paid work for the equivalent of four days or thirty hours a week. Every individual - male and female - who now works for five days or around forty hours would work thirty hours instead. Notwithstanding the implications for pay, discussed later, this opens up a range of opportunities for doing things differently. Each man and women would have three days instead of two to spend outside the workplace - 50 per cent more time. For a family with two adults who currently work five days a week, this could reduce the number of hours required for paid care by as much as two days a week, reducing the care bill by up to 40 per cent. For households where one adult, usually the female, works short hours while the other works long hours, a new thirty-hour 'standard' could enable the woman to take on more paid employment, opening up opportunities outside the home and potentially narrowing the pay gap between herself and her partner. And it would give the man more time to spend with his family.

The aim is not to return all care to the home. There is some evidence that spending time with others in a social setting brings positive benefits, especially for children.<sup>6</sup> A thirty-hour week would not only make it possible for fathers and mothers to combine paid work with significant home-based caring; it could also

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help to create a more collaborative base for care outside the home, with softer boundaries between social and domestic settings. It would increase the human resources available for providing social care, without an equivalent increase in cost.

If one or both adults contributed some of their newly-released hours to the nursery or day centre where family members were being looked after, they would be adding their time, skills and experience to that of paid care workers. With suitable training and changes in management - which have been tried and tested in practice<sup>7</sup> - this would (cumulatively) transform the way such services are delivered and their impact on all those involved. The growing literature on co-production and time-banking shows that tapping into uncommodified resources and building more equal and reciprocal relationships between formal and informal carers, including parents, as well as recipients of social care, can bring a range of benefits.<sup>8</sup> It can improve the experience of those who are cared for; it can get better results in terms of health, well-being and personal development; and it can make the whole system more affordable - and economically sustainable - in the longer term. Enabling men to participate on an equal footing with women would bring further benefits: adding to men's skills, freeing up some of women's time to pursue different opportunities, changing perceptions about the work itself and developing a more rounded experience for all involved.

In effect, with a thirty-hour norm, 'part-time' would become the new 'full-time'. The pressures on women of combining paid work and caring would ease substantially. 'Part-timers' would no longer be marginalised once this became the 'standard' pattern of paid employment for men as well as women. The corrosive inequalities of income and power between women and men would begin to ebb and change. Men could build their capabilities as parents and carers. Children would get more time with their fathers as well as their mothers and develop less polarised views about male and female identities.

The case for a shorter working week has been set out in some detail by the new economics foundation.<sup>9</sup> We argue that a slow but steady move towards a shorter paid working week would help to address a range of urgent, interlinked problems: overwork, unemployment, over-consumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities, and the lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each other, and simply to enjoy life. It is beyond the scope of this essay to cover these points in detail, but two deserve closer attention.

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First, there is the great divide between long-hours working and no-hours working. In the UK between December 2012 and February 2013, there were over 2.5 million people unemployed, with around one in five young people aged 16-24 unable to find a job.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, there are just over 5.7 million people working more than forty-five hours a week.<sup>11</sup> A shorter 'standard' working week could help to iron out inequalities in the labour market by distributing paid work more evenly across the population. Since 2008, some firms have reduced hours rather than forcing redundancies. In Germany, this has been a common way of dealing with economic set-backs for decades. It keeps people connected with the labour market and able to develop their skills, so that firms can respond more readily when orders pick up again. Lower rates of unemployment make it easier for workers to negotiate decent returns for their labour. This would also have a positive impact on the care sector, where - as we have noted - there is currently an ample supply of unorganised, unskilled labour, propping up low pay and poor conditions. Despite claims from the political right that long-hours working is good for competitiveness and growth, there is no correlation between average paid working hours and the strength of a country's economy. Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark, for example, all have shorter average hours and economies that are as competitive - or more so - than the UK.<sup>12</sup>

Second, there is the problem of over-consumption and damage to the natural environment. As the new economics foundation has argued elsewhere, society, environment and economy are interdependent, and policies cannot sensibly be designed or pursued separately.<sup>13</sup> Juliet Schor, among others, points out that countries in the rich world cannot continue to grow their economies if they are to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to sustainable levels.<sup>14</sup> The UK and other wealthy economies must prepare for a future with little or no economic growth in order to remain within planetary boundaries. One of the worst effects of a flat-lining economy is usually high unemployment - but this can be offset, to an extent, if people work fewer hours. Schor proposes that workers, especially above-average earners, should start negotiating annual increments due from increased productivity (where this occurs) in terms of more time rather than more money. This, she argues, will help to keep more people in employment and to narrow the pay gap, as well as helping to erode the prevailing ethos that attaches higher pay and status to those who work longer hours. It will also help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. People who work shorter hours generally have a smaller ecological footprint. This is partly because they are earning less pro rata and therefore have less money to buy energy-intensive stuff. But it is also because

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they have more disposable time, which makes it possible to live at a different pace and break the habit of 'convenience' consumption that is generated by life in the fast lane. There is evidence that, beyond the point of meeting life's essentials (albeit a flexible concept), increased consumption does not make people any happier. It is worth noting that time is finite and money is not. When workers win more time for themselves, in lieu of part or all of a pay rise, that extra time cannot be diminished by inflation: as such, it is a real, enduring gain. For these reasons, among others, working shorter hours could enable us all to live more sustainably and encourage us to reconsider how much money is enough to live a good life.

### How much money is enough?

The call for a thirty-hour 'standard' working week throws the issue of pay into sharp relief. For those on average earnings or more, it raises the question of sufficiency, given the imperative of living within planetary boundaries: earning less could help control high-carbon consumption. But for many on low wages, shorter hours would mean abject poverty. However, the answer to the problem of low pay is not to force people to work long hours to feed and house their families. It must be tackled on its own ground. This calls for a broad strategy on low pay that goes well beyond defending the National Minimum Wage. It would include, for example, better education, especially for low achievers; concerted efforts to improve skills, especially among those less likely to go to university; encouraging employers to move away from work organisation that relies on cheap labour; and continuing pressures to pay a decent living wage rather than just the bare minimum.

Some analysts rightly point out that extended childcare would make it possible for parents who have reduced their hours while their children are young to return to longer hours and earn more as the children grow older.<sup>15</sup> However, this line of argument fails to address the pay and conditions of care workers, or the negative social and environmental impacts of long hours of paid employment. In a similar vein, some left-leaning commentators have excoriated the 'underemployment' hidden by the upward trend in jobs while the economy fails to grow.<sup>16</sup> Here it is useful to distinguish between the genuine underemployment of those on a 'zero-hours' contract who are getting close to zero hours of paid work, and people who are working, say, thirty hours and want to work more in order to maintain a decent

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standard of living: the latter is arguably a problem of low pay. The distinction is a crucial one, but absent from mainstream debates about current employment trends.

An effective strategy on low pay would need to ask what is a reasonable wage for workers who put in thirty rather than forty or fifty hours a week. It would also need to tackle the underlying causes of low pay, which can be traced to the way we have learned to value and distribute time, as well as to the spectacular and unjustifiable rise in income inequalities over the last three decades.

## **Making the transition**

We suggest three ways to reduce hours of paid work, which could be mutually reinforcing. One is to trade productivity gains for a bit more time each year rather than just for money, as Juliet Schor suggests. This will work better for some kinds of employment than for others, where increasing productivity is seldom possible or relevant. Caring for others, playing in a band, teaching, dancing, driving a bus or helping children cross the road - these are all activities where time is of the essence: doing things faster will not improve the quality or value of output.

Another way of making the transition is to enshrine in law the right to request shorter working hours, and to strengthen and enforce the right to fair treatment regardless of hours worked. Accordingly, employees would be able to apply for shorter hours, within agreed parameters, while employers would be obliged not to withhold permission unreasonably. There would need to be effective legal sanctions against discrimination on the ground of working shorter hours. This would help to improve flexibility for workers and to establish shorter-hours working as an entitlement rather than a deviation from the norm.

A third way is to initiate hours reduction at both ends of the age scale. At one end, young people entering the labour market for the first time could be offered a four-day week (or its equivalent). That way, each successive cohort adds to the numbers working a shorter week, but no-one has to cut their hours. Before long, there's a critical mass of workers on shorter hours and others may want to do the same. At the other end of the age scale, incremental reductions of working time could be introduced for older workers. For example, those aged fifty-five and over could reduce their working week by one hour each year. Someone on forty hours a week at fifty-five would thus be working thirty hours a week by sixty-five and - if

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they continue in paid employment - twenty hours by seventy-five. The shift would be gradual and universal, enabling people to carry on working for more years without undue stress and strain, adjusting slowly but steadily to shorter hours and then to retirement. Over time, the cohorts of youngsters who enter the workforce on a four-day week will reach fifty-five. Thirty hours will be the new standard. Gradual reductions could continue for older workers: deciding how exactly this is done could be left to future generations.

### In conclusion

To achieve these aims there would need to be better incentives for employers and a strong challenge to conventional wisdom about what can and cannot be changed in a contemporary market economy. We are not suggesting it would be easy. But we are suggesting that the question of time - how it is valued and deployed - is an essential feature of any progressive debate about care policy.

It is time to articulate today's 'problem without a name', as the crucial first step towards addressing the problem and starting the process of change. The combined pressures of paid work and caring are building up and tightening, pincer-like, around women's lives. For while women spend much more time in paid work than they did fifty years ago (indeed, they have fought hard for it), the change has not been matched by any significant increase in unpaid time spent by men in caring for children or others. This has huge implications for equality and opportunity; for the quality and culture of family and workplace; for the way care is perceived and priced; and for the balance of power between women and men. The key to solving the problem may be found in the way we use, value and distribute paid and unpaid time.

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## Notes

1. 44.9 per cent of women do paid work for between 6 and 30 hours a week, compared with only 14.5 per cent of men. Labour Force Survey, ONS, April 2013.
2. '55 per cent of UK mothers in couple families work part-time (the third highest rate in OECD countries), while 44 per cent of fathers in couple families do paid work for more than 45 hours a week'. James Plunkett, 'The Missing Million', Resolution Foundation, 2011: [www.resolutionfoundation.org](http://www.resolutionfoundation.org).
3. OECD.Stat.
4. Tania Burchardt, 'Income, Time and Freedom', in Anna Coote and Jane Franklin (eds), *Changing Time*, new economics foundation, forthcoming 2013.
5. For example, households are exempt from a benefit cap if a member of the household is a recipient of Working Tax Credits, which requires single parents, those over 60 and disabled workers to work a minimum of 16 hours a week, couples to work a minimum of 24 hours per week and those over 25 to work at least 30 hours per week: [www.gov.uk/working-tax-credit/eligibility](http://www.gov.uk/working-tax-credit/eligibility).
6. Positive benefits of universal childcare are assessed in Jody Aked, Nicola Steuer, Eilis Lawlor and Stephen Spratt, 'Backing the Future', new economics foundation and Action for Children, 2009. See also Lawrence J. Schweinhart on The HighScope Perry Preschool Programme at [www.promisingpractices.net/](http://www.promisingpractices.net/).
7. David Boyle, Julia Slay and Lucie Stephens, 'Public Services Inside Out', new economics foundation and NESTA, April 2010: see [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org).
8. David Boyle, Anna Coote, Chris Sherwood and Julia Slay, 'Right Here Right Now', nef NESTA, June 2010; David Boyle and Michael Harris, 'The Challenge of Co-production', nef and NESTA, December 2009; Josh Ryan-Collins, Lucie Stephens and Anna Coote, 'The New Wealth of Time', nef, November 2008: all at [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org).
9. Anna Coote, Jane Franklin and Andrew Simms, '21 Hours', nef, February 2010: [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org).
10. Labour Force Survey, ONS, April 2013.
11. Ibid.

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12. The average usual weekly working hours for Denmark, Germany and Netherlands are 33.6, 35.5 and 30.5, respectively, compared to 36.4 for the UK; while the figures for those only in full-time employment are 38.3, 41.2 and 39.1 for Denmark, Germany and Netherlands, which are all lower than the UK, with 42.6 hours. OECD.Stat.

13. Anna Coote and Jane Franklin, 'Green Well Fair: Three economies for Social Justice', nef 2009; Stephen Spratt, Andrew Simms, Eva Neitzert and Josh Ryan-Collins, 'The Great Transition', nef, June 2010: both at [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org).

14. Juliet Schor, 'The Triple Dividend', in Anna Coote and Jane Franklin (eds), op cit.

15. 'Gaining From Growth: The final report of the Commission on Living Standards', Resolution Foundation, 2012: <http://livingstandards.org/>.

16. *Guardian*, 15.4.13: [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/apr/15/underemployment-corrosive-unemployment-on-rise](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/apr/15/underemployment-corrosive-unemployment-on-rise).

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