



***The changing face of motherhood in Western Europe:  
Cross-cultural perspectives***

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***The Social Issues Research Centre  
28 St Clements Street  
Oxford OX4 1AB UK  
+44 (0) 1865 262255  
group@sirc.org***

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## 1.1 Cross-cultural perspectives

### 1.1.1 Introduction

National surveys of mothers were conducted in 12 Western European countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Data were also available from an earlier survey conducted in the UK<sup>1</sup>. The data for each of these countries are analysed and summarised separately in the country reports. In this section we bring together responses from all of the countries to provide cross-cultural perspectives on the various aspects of motherhood examined in the polls.

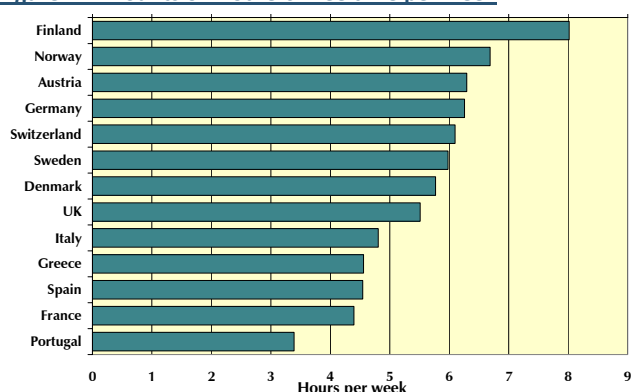
The total sample size across the 12 countries plus the United Kingdom was 9,582, making it one of the largest studies of this kind ever conducted. The raw data have been analysed using StatSoft *Statistica* 9.0.

### 1.1.2 Mothers' free time

**The average mother in Western Europe has only 48 minutes a to herself each day when she does not have obligations to do something for other people. Finnish mothers fare best with 69 minutes and Portuguese the worst with only 29 minutes.**

We have seen in the individual country reports that the amount of time a mother has to herself – her ‘me time’ when she has no immediate obligation to engage in childcare or household chores or in paid work outside of the home – varies very considerably according to the number of dependent children, the age of the youngest child, employment status and other factors. The cross-cultural analysis also shows substantial variation according to the country in which the mother lives, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Amounts of mothers' free time per week**



While mothers in Finland have, on average, 8.01 hours to themselves per week (or 69 minutes per day), Portuguese mothers have only just over half this amount of time, 3.4 hours per week, or 29 minutes per day. The average across the 13 nations is 5.6 hours per week – 48 minutes per day.

The differences shown in Figure 1. are not explained by variations in family size. In Portugal, for example, 71% of mothers have only one child to care for, compared with only 35% in Finland where family sizes tend to be larger. Nor are the differences explained by reference to the age of the youngest child – younger children tending to need more care than older children. Similarly, the differences cannot be attributed to employment rates in the various countries. While Portugal has the highest proportion of mothers in full-time employment (71%) the figure for Finland is only a little lower (66%) while in Denmark, where 69% of mothers are employed on a full-time basis, the amount of free time available is quite average.

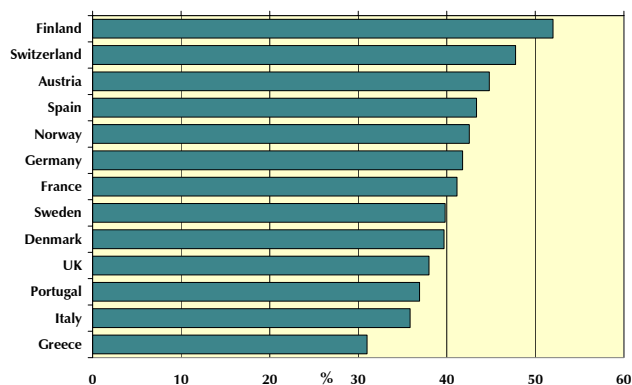
**Mothers' free time is most limited in countries that have recently experienced the worst economic problems.**

It is the case, of course, that the countries in which mothers report the greatest amounts of free time tend to be the more affluent and, currently, have the more stable economies. Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal towards the bottom of the table in this context have recently experienced the largest threats to their financial well-being. Could it be that worries about economic futures are driving mothers to be busier than they otherwise might be? The ‘flaw’ in such reasoning is France, which has largely escaped the worst of the ‘Euro crisis’ but where mothers have very little time to themselves compared with those in other European countries. As we will see in other sections of this cross-cultural report, however, France often proves to be the exception to the rule.

When we examine whether mothers across Europe feel better off in terms of the free time they enjoy compared with that experienced by their own mothers at the same life stage, a not dissimilar picture emerges, as shown in Figure 2.

<sup>1</sup> Data from the UK study have been included in this cross-cultural analysis only where questions matched with those presented in the other 12 countries – a half of all questions. The UK report can be found at: [http://www.sirc.org/publik/changing\\_face\\_of\\_motherhood.shtml](http://www.sirc.org/publik/changing_face_of_motherhood.shtml).

**Figure 2. Mothers reporting more free time than experienced by their own mothers**



Finnish mothers are the most likely to feel that they are better off than their own mothers in terms of the free time that they enjoy. Similarly, mothers in Portugal, Italy and Greece are the least likely to say that they are better off in these terms.

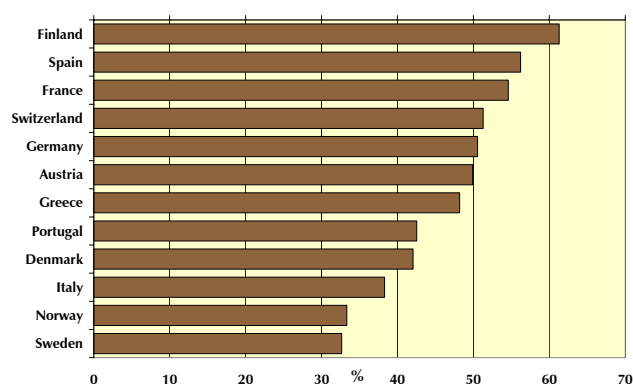
**Only in Finland do a majority of mothers feel that they have more free time than was the case for their own mothers. On average across Western Europe, only 41% feel this way.**

Among the French mothers, while they report the second lowest amount of free time, 42% still feel that they have more than did their own mothers at the same life stage. The divide between the richest and poorest countries in Western Europe, however, is still evident. Across the sample, 41% of mothers think that they have more free time, 22% the same amount of free time, and 36% less free time compared with their own mothers.

### 1.1.3 Labour-saving devices and products

One factor that might make mothers' lives easier and, for some at least, allow more free time, is the steady growth over the past 50 years or more of domestic appliances, modern cleaning products and other household labour-saving devices. Have these, however, made much difference in recent years and has the lot of today's mothers improved directly as a result compared with what was available to their own mothers? Respondents across Europe were quite divided on this issue, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Mothers who feel that their lives have been made easier/richer due to labour-saving devices and products**



Here we can see that while 61% of Finnish mothers attribute an easier life to such products and services, only 33% of Swedish mothers feel this way (the average across the sample is 47%).

**While labour-saving devices and products certainly make mothers' lives easier, mothers are divided on whether much has changed in this context since their own mothers' time.**

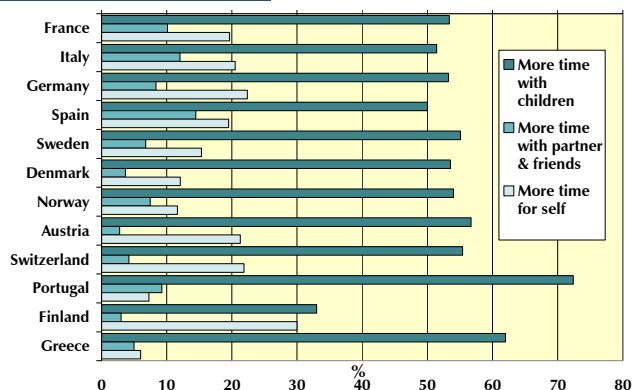
These variations are difficult to explain. It is the case that older mothers are more likely than younger mothers to feel that their lives are now easier because of labour-saving facilities. The younger mothers would have grown up themselves in households where such devices and products were already quite common. But the distribution of the ages of mothers across the sample is not in line with these results. Sweden, for example, has one of the highest proportions of older mothers in the entire sample, but only a minority feel that their lives are now easier. Similarly, Spain has a relatively high number of young mums, but mothers recognise, on average, quite strongly the contribution that modern products have made to their lives. It is more likely, then, that results reflect differential patterns of growth in labour-saving appliances and products in the various countries than demographic or other factors.

### 1.1.4 Spending the 'extra' time

Given that at least some mothers feel that they have more free time than was the case for their own mothers, and that labour-saving products are mainly responsible for this, what do mothers do with the extra time? We can see from Figure 4 that different nationalities use the time in quite different ways.

**Time saved by using labour-saving devices and products is spent on other activities. Over a half of mothers take advantage of opportunities to spend more time with their children while fewer than one in six use the time on themselves.**

Figure 4. Uses of extra time



Portuguese mothers are the most likely to spend any extra free time with their children and are among the least likely to indulge themselves with ‘me time’. French, Italian and Spanish mothers are the most likely to use the time to interact with their partners or friends while Finnish and German mothers are most likely to welcome opportunities to pursue their own individual agendas.

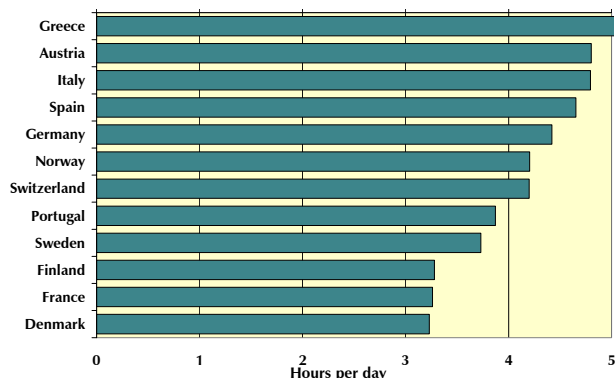
The average proportion of mothers spending more time with their children is 54%, compared with 17% who spend more time on themselves and 7% with family and friends. A further 8% use the time for extra cleaning while only 5% are able to work longer hours outside of the home as a result.

### 1.1.5 Active time with children

Depending on the age of children, part of the mothering process is a passive activity – keeping an eye on them rather than being actively involved in play or other activities. At the same time, most children, whatever their age, can be demanding of mothers and require much more than just supervision. So how much active time do mothers actually spend with their child or children?

As we might expect, the more children in the family, and the younger they are, the greater the demands on the mother. This, as we have seen from the country reports, is universally the case across Western Europe. There are, however, also some distinct national differences here, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Active time children spent by mothers



From Figure 5 we can see that, on average, Greek mothers are actively engaged with their children much more than mothers in Denmark – 5.3 hours versus 3.2 hour per day. Such activities include reading, writing, playing, etc. The average across all 12 European countries is 4.1 hours per day.

**Mothers in Western Europe spend an average of over four hours per day with their children in activities such as reading, writing, playing, etc. Austrian mothers spend nearly 50% more time in this way than Danish mothers.**

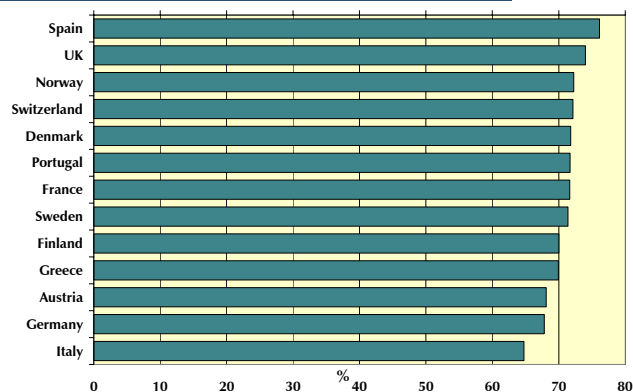
### 1.1.6 Mothers’ help

While some mothers may struggle to bring up their children more or less single-handedly, most mothers receive support from their partners and other members of their family. The most significant sources of support across Europe are, as we might expect, husbands/partners and the maternal grandmother.

**While husbands/partners give the most substantial support to mothers across Western Europe, the mother’s own mother provides the most significant aid in Italy but very little assistance in France.**

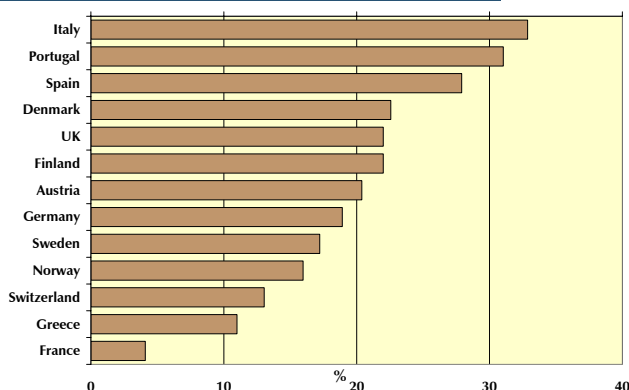
We can see from Figure 6 that there is very little variation across the various countries in the contributions made by husbands or partners. In Spain, 76% of mothers say that their husband or partner is among the people who help them the most while in Italy the figure is 65%. The average across Western Europe is 71%.

Figure 6. Most help provided by husbands/partners



It is, however, in the contribution made by the mothers’ own mothers that the nations differ the most, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Most help provided by mothers' mothers

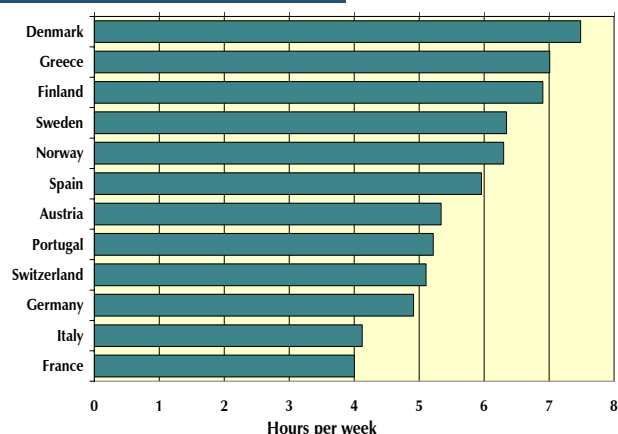


We can see that the mother's own mother (the maternal grandmother) plays the most significant role in Italy, where a third of mothers (33%) say that she is a person who helps her the most in her maternal role. The contribution of the maternal grandmother in France, however, is very much less significant – only 4% of French mothers feel that she is a 'most' helpful person. The average across Western Europe is 19.9%.

To explain these variations we might note that the three countries that feature most significantly in Figure 7 are, firstly, all Mediterranean countries where the traditions of extended family are most evident. Secondly, these are also countries that have experienced economic recession and mothers may be more obliged to rely on help from their own mothers in order to go out to work and boost family income. Greece, however, is similar in both these respects, but mothers in that country are among the least likely to report significant help from their own mothers (11%).

While husbands may be the primary helpers with child care in most Western European families, the number of hours per week that they spend in this role varies quite considerably from country to country. We can see that while Danish husbands engage in childcare, housework and associated tasks for almost 7.5 hours per week, the contribution from French partners is substantially less at 4.0 hours per week. The average across Western Europe is 5.7 hours per week – the equivalent of 49 minutes per day.

Figure 8. Number of hours per week contributed by husbands/partners to childcare, etc.



We should note, however, that 10% of Italian mothers say that they receive no help at all from their husbands/partners with childcare and household chores – compared with less than 3% of Norwegian mothers.

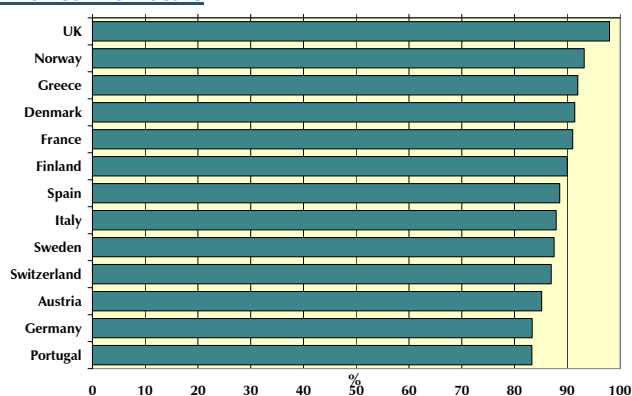
**Husbands/partners across Western Europe contribute on average almost 50 minutes per day in the form of childcare, housework, etc. The help that a mother receives in this way is highest in Denmark (64 minutes) and lowest in France (34 minutes).**

While the amount of help with childcare that is provided by husbands and fathers may vary from country to country across Western Europe, to what extent has this increased or decreased since the previous generation of parents?

The survey data indicate an overwhelming consensus that fathers are now very much more or a little more directly involved in the day-to-day of children than in the past, as shown in Figure 9. British mothers feel most strongly in this context (98%) and Portuguese mothers perceive the least change (83%).

**Western European mothers overwhelmingly think that fathers are now more involved in the day-to-day care of children than in previous generations of parents.**

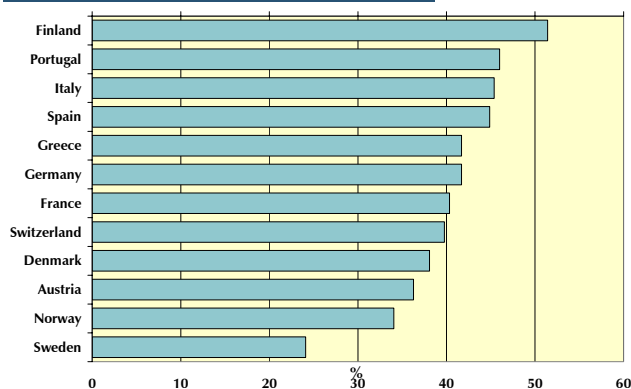
**Figure 9. Proportions of mothers saying that fathers now more involved in childcare**



If fathers are now more involved in childcare than in the past, does this represent a major change in gender roles across Western Europe? Or has this shift in behaviour been forced upon fathers because mothers today are more likely to have paid employment outside of the home than in the past?

The proportions of mothers feeling that there has been a fundamental change in gender roles is shown in Figure 10. Here we can see that over a half of Finnish mothers think that there has been such a change (51%) while less than half this number of Swedish mothers (24%) feel that way. The Western European average is 40%.

**Figure 10. Proportions of mothers who feel that there has been a fundamental change in gender roles**

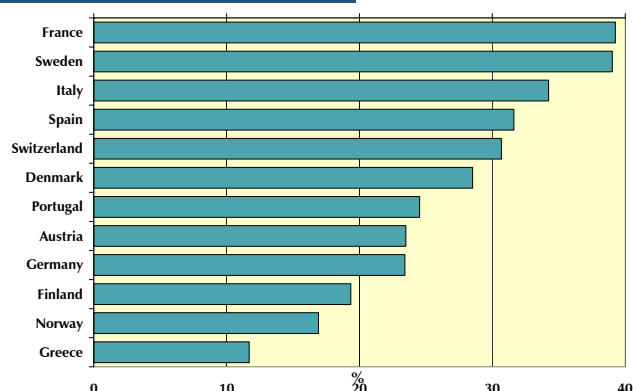


**Two thirds of Western European mothers feel that there has been a change in fathers' gender role since the previous generation.**

While Swedish mothers are the least likely to feel that there has been a 'fundamental' change in the role of their husbands or partners, they do recognise at least a small change. This, of course, may reflect the fact that the Swedes have had more 'enlightened' attitudes towards gender roles for a longer time and have, therefore, witnessed less change over the previous generation. In contrast, Italian mothers may see only small changes in their country because, in reality,

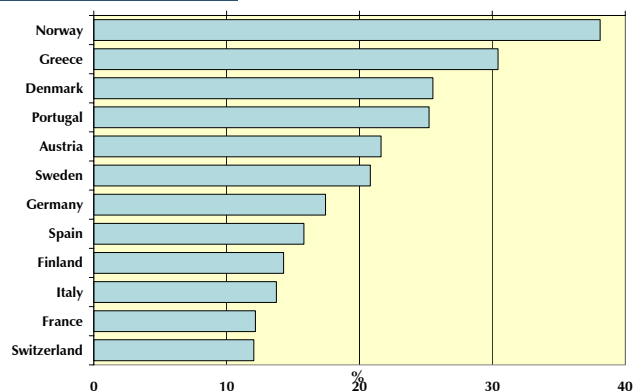
stereotypical gender roles remain quite prevalent. The Western European average for 'small change' is 27%.

**Figure 11. Proportions of mothers who feel that there has been a small change in gender roles**



The third most popular explanation for the fact that fathers are now more involved in childcare (after references to changing gender roles) is the fact that mothers are now increasingly obliged to be a 'breadwinner' – 21% of all Western European mothers subscribe to this view. The national variations are shown in Figure 12. We can see that Norwegian mothers entertain this view most strongly (38%) while mothers in Switzerland are least likely to take this view (12%).

**Figure 12. Proportions of mothers who feel that they now have to a 'breadwinner'**



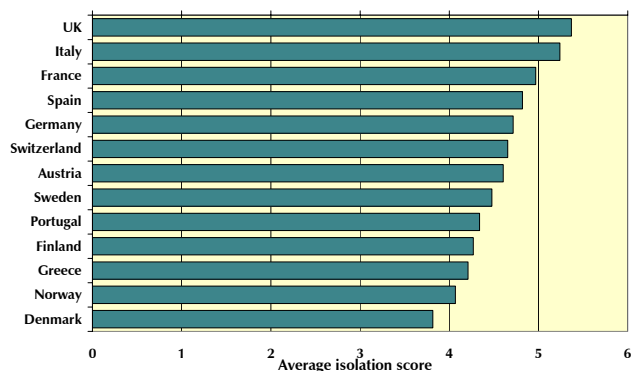
One further explanation for the change in fathers' involvement in childcare is the fact that, in some countries at least, men are able to secure more flexible working arrangements in their employment. This factor, however, is seen as being relevant by only 7% of mothers – highest in Germany (11%) and lowest in Portugal (3%).

### 1.1.7 Maternal isolation

While most mothers receive at least a degree of help and advice from various sources, many feel isolated and unsupported in their daily role. The ways in which the various nationalities rate their sense of isolation on a ten-point scale ranging from '1 – Not at all isolated' to '10 – Extremely isolated' are illustrated in Figure 13. Here we can see that mothers in the UK feel the most isolated (average score of 5.37) while Danish mothers feel the

least isolated (average score of 3.81). The average across all 13 nations is 4.58.

**Figure 13. Mothers' ratings of their sense of isolation**

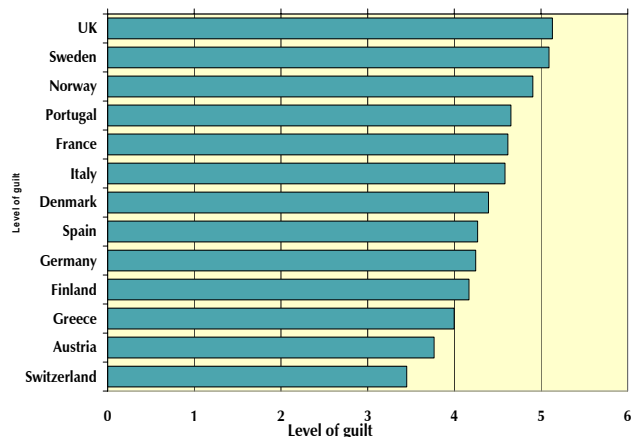


Moderate levels of a sense of isolation are experienced by mothers across Western Europe (average isolation score of 4.6 out of 10) – highest in the United Kingdom (5.4 out of 10).

### 1.1.8 Maternal guilt

Motherhood is often a period in women's lives that arouses the greatest feelings of guilt – 'am I being a good mother?'; 'should I spend more time with my children rather than pursuing my career?'; etc. We have seen from the country reports that women with full-time jobs outside of the home tend, in most countries, to feel more guilt than those who have no employment. There are, however, also some distinct cross-national differences, as shown in Figure 14.

**Figure 14. Levels of guilt expressed by mothers**



The figures illustrated in Figure 14 are averages based on 10 point scales ranging from '1 - no guilt at all' to '10 - extremely guilty'. We can see that UK mothers appear to have the most guilt while Swiss mothers have the least – scores of 5.13 and 3.45 respectively. The average across Western Europe is 4.41.

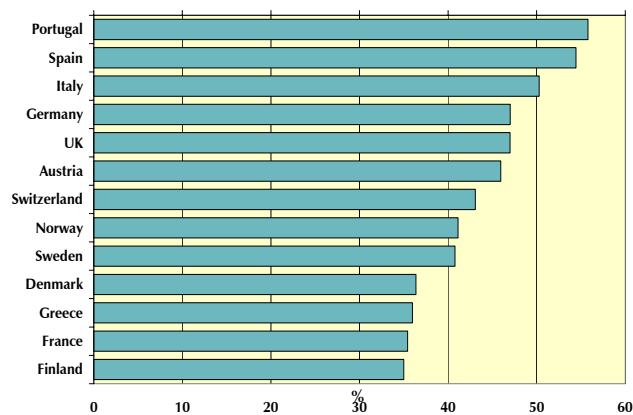
In some of the samples, however, working mothers tend to be over-represented – there are more than one would expect given the employment rates for the various countries. When this distortion is controlled for, the differences between the countries become smaller. The finding once again demonstrates the link between employment and a sense of guilt among Western European mothers.

Levels of guilt are highest among UK mothers and lowest among Swiss mothers. The differences between the countries, however, are due in part to the number of working mothers (who experience the most guilt) in the various samples.

### 1.1.9 Advice and support

As we have noted, being a mother is rarely a solitary activity. Most mothers receive help with childcare from their partners and other members of their families. They also have, in most cases, people they can turn to for support and advice on being a mother. The survey data show that across Western Europe it is most often the mother's own mother that provides this advisory role – for an average of 44% of mothers. The role of the maternal grandmother, however, appears to be stronger in some countries than in others, as shown in Figure 15.

**Figure 15. Proportion of mothers indicating their own mother as a person they turn to the most for advice**



From Figure 15 we can see that mothers' own mothers play the most significant role in Portugal (56%) and the least significant in Finland (35%).

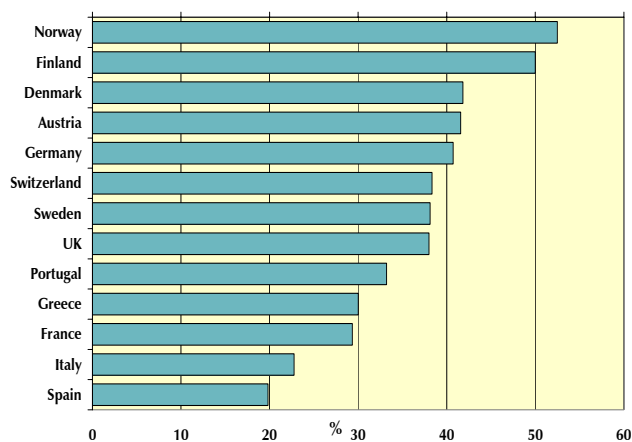
The most popular source of advice for mothers across Western Europe is their own mother (44%), followed by existing friends who are also mothers (37%) and their husbands/partners (32%).

The second-most significant source of advice is shown by the survey data to be mothers' female friends who are also mothers themselves – an average across Western



Europe of 37% of mothers. The cross-cultural variations in this context are shown in Figure 16.

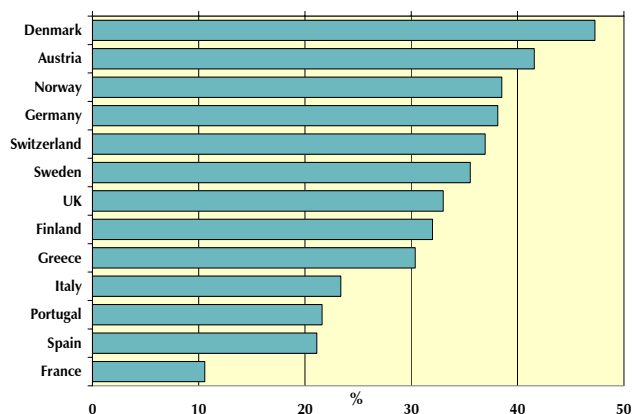
**Figure 16. Proportion of mothers indicating friends who are also mothers as people they turn to the most for advice**



The role of other mothers is strongest in Norway (52%) and weakest in Spain (20%). As we have seen from Figure 15, Spanish mothers are much more likely to turn to their own mother rather than members of their friendship networks.

The third most significant sources of advice for a mother is her husband or partner (32%). Husbands are the first choice for 47% of Danish mothers, but only 11% of French mothers, as shown in Figure 17.

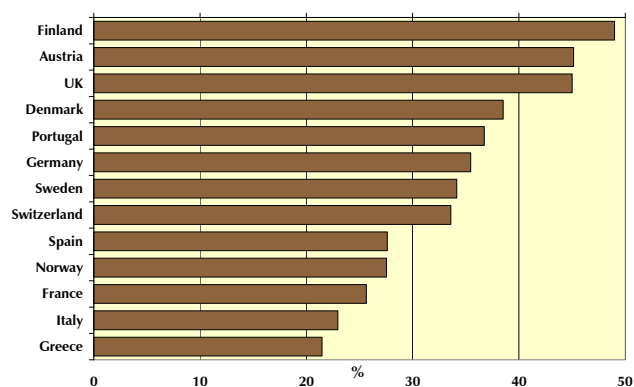
**Figure 17. Proportion of mothers indicating husbands/partners as people they turn to the most for advice**



One interesting feature of the data on sources of advice is that French mothers appear to be reluctant to turn to anyone for advice. On the other hand, they are among the most likely (15%) of any national group to log on to Internet forums aimed at mothers and families to seek information and advice.

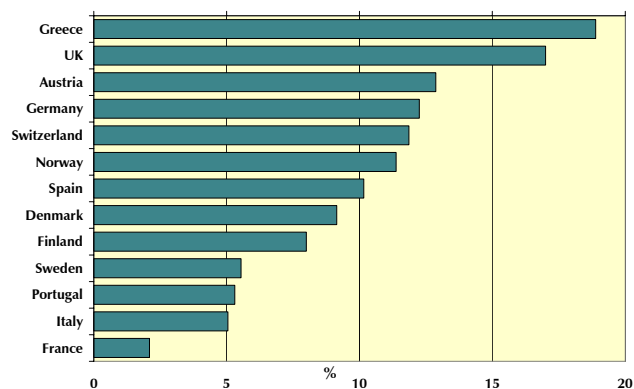
Of the various ways in which mothers can keep in touch with their support network, phone calls and texts are preferred by the largest group – (34%). The use of this method, however, varies across the different countries – highest in Finland (49%) and lowest in Greece (21%), as shown in Figure 18.

**Figure 18. Use of phone/texts by mothers to keep in touch with support network.**



Greek mothers, in contrast, prefer to communicate with their support networks and/or individuals through face-to-face, one-to-one encounters, as shown in Figure 19.

**Figure 19. Face-to-face, 1-1 meetings to communicate with support network.**



On average, 20% of Western European mothers say that personal meetings of this kind are their preferred way of keeping in touch with people who can offer them support and advice. Other means include impromptu encounters while out and about (9%) and subscription to mother-specific online networks (8%).

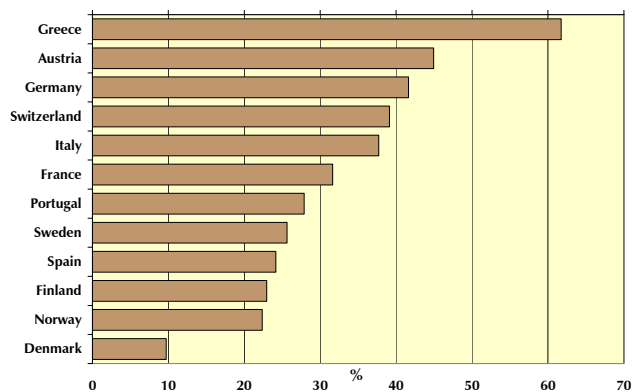
**Mothers keep in touch with their support networks mainly by phone calls and text messages, but personal, face-to-face meetings are more important for some nationalities.**

### 1.1.10 Improving mothers' lives

We have seen that while most mothers have others around them on whom they can rely, and that they have various ways of keeping in touch with their support networks, many still feel isolated and have pangs of guilt about the extent to which they are being a 'good mother'. Given this state of affairs, what do mothers feel might improve their everyday lives? The two most significant factors in this context are shown by the survey data to be larger state benefits and greater opportunities for flexible hours of employment outside of the home.

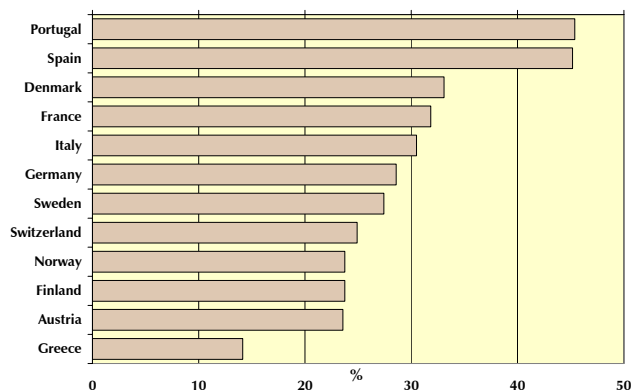
We can see from Figure 20 that Greek mothers feel most strongly the need for increased state benefits (62%) while this is much less of an issue for Danish mothers (10%). The average across the 12 countries is 32%. This, perhaps, reflects the fact that Danish (and Norwegian and Finnish) benefits are quite generous compared with most other Western European countries.

**Figure 20. Proportion of mothers who feel that increased state benefits would improve their lives.**



More flexible employment opportunities for women is the preferred option for Portuguese mothers (45%) while only 14% of Greek mothers think that this would be useful. The Western European average is 29%, as shown in Figure 21.

**Figure 21. Proportion of mothers who feel that more flexible working arrangements would improve their lives.**



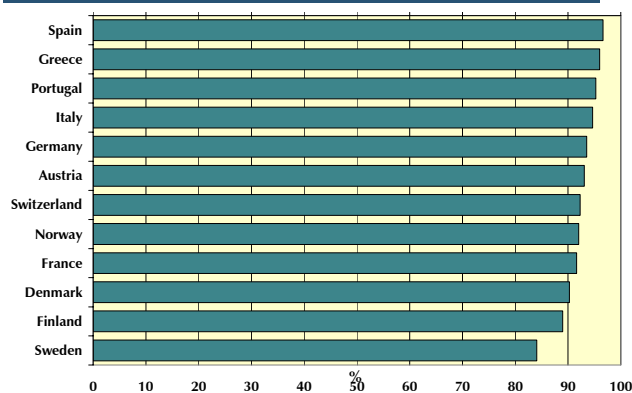
**The main way of improving mothers' lives in some Western European countries would be, mothers feel, to increase state benefits, while in other countries more flexible employment opportunities are seen as the way forward.**

### 1.1.11 Encouraging children's participation in sport

Western European mothers are overwhelmingly in favour of encouraging their children to participate in sports in order to improve their development and well-being, as shown in Figure 22. Spanish mothers are the most enthusiastic in this context (97%) but even in the least enthusiastic country, Sweden, there are still 84% of

mothers who think that such encouragement is either essential or important. The Western European average is 92%.

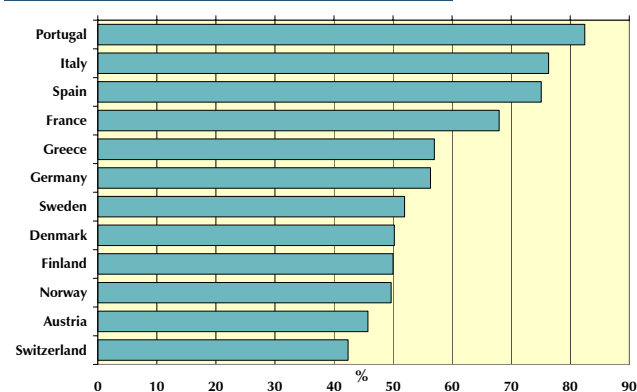
**Figure 22. Mothers' views that encouraging sporting participation among their children is essential or important.**



**An overwhelming majority of mothers in Western Europe (92%) feel that encouraging sports participation among their children is essential or important.**

While mothers across Western Europe are clearly very motivated to get their children involved in sport, many feel that they lack the time to do so, as shown in Figure 23. Here we can see that Portuguese mothers feel this lack of time most strongly (82%) while many fewer in Switzerland (42%) feel that they have insufficient time in which to encourage their children to engage in sports. The average across Western Europe is 58%.

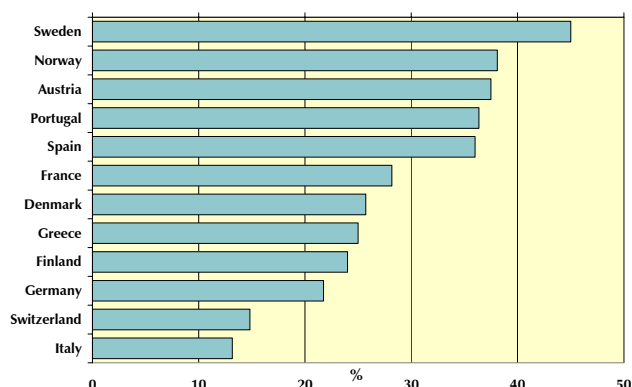
**Figure 23. Proportions of mothers who wish they had more time to enable children's sports participation**



The consensus among mothers regarding the desirability of encouraging children to engage in sports has made it difficult to analyse the reasons why sports should not be encouraged – the numbers in some cases are simply too small. The most popular reason offered by mothers, however, is that they would rather encourage their children to be successful in academic subjects. Of the 8% of mothers who felt that encouraging sport was not important, 29% took this view – most strongly felt among

Swedish mothers (45%) and least among Italian mothers (13%) as shown in Figure 24.

**Figure 24. Proportion of sub group of mothers preferring to emphasise academic subjects rather than sport**



**The small minority of mothers who do not think that it is important to encourage sports participation among their children think that academic subjects should come first.**

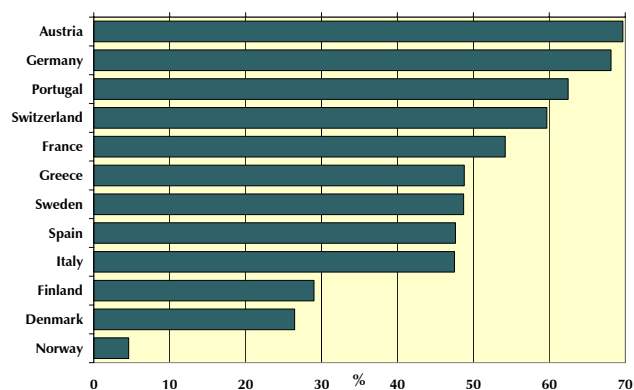
Other reasons offered by mothers who felt that the encouragement of sports participation was unimportant included dislike of the competitive element in sports (26%) and the fact that children’s sports often involved substantial expense (19%). A further reason offered concerned the lack of adequate facilities (17%).

### 1.1.12 The changing nature of motherhood

The survey respondents were asked “To what extent do you think that motherhood in the modern world is different from what it was in your mother’s day” and provided them with various options from which to select.

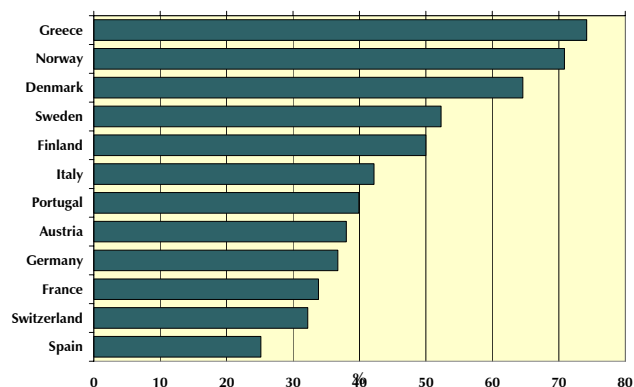
One of the most popular responses in this context was that mothers were now more like ‘family managers’ than traditional ‘housewives’. This was the view of 47% of all Western European mothers, but there were very considerable national variations, as shown in Figure 25. Here we can see that while 70% of Austrian and 68% of German mothers took this view, only 5% of Norwegian mothers did so.

**Figure 25. Proportions of respondents who feel that the modern mother is a ‘family manager’**



Of equal importance in this context was the view that mothers today were increasingly obliged to be ‘breadwinners’ – held by 47% of the sample. As we can see from Figure 26, however, there were again substantial national differences. The increasing need to contribute to family earnings was most acutely felt by Greek mothers (74%) but much less so by the Spanish (25%).

**Figure 26. Proportions of respondents who feel that the modern mother needs to be a ‘breadwinner’.**



Another change identified by respondents to the surveys was the modern mother’s need for independence (42%).

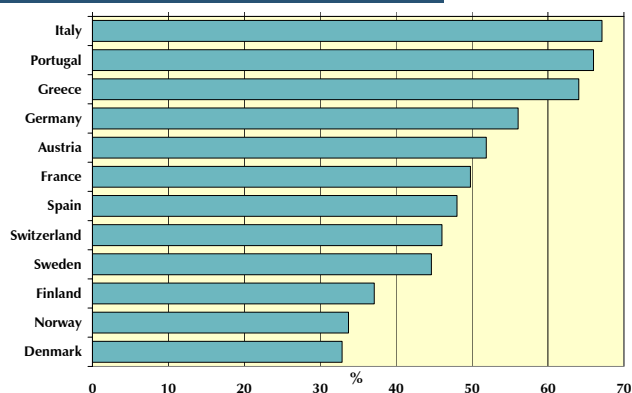
**The modern mother in Western Europe has become a family manager and breadwinner, rather than being just the ‘housewife’ of previous generations.**

### 1.1.13 The impact of economic recession

We have noted in previous sections of this cross-cultural analysis that some national variations may be due to the differential impact of the current economic climate across Western Europe. In the survey we specifically posed the question “What do you think has been the impact of recent economic conditions in [your country] as a whole? The response scale ranged from “Being a ‘good’ mother very much more difficult” to “Being a ‘good’ mother very much easier.”

In Figure 27 we illustrate the proportions of mothers who felt that it was now ‘very much more difficult’ or ‘a little more difficult’ to be a ‘good’ mother.

**Figure 27. Mothers who say that economic conditions have made it more difficult to be a ‘good’ mother.**



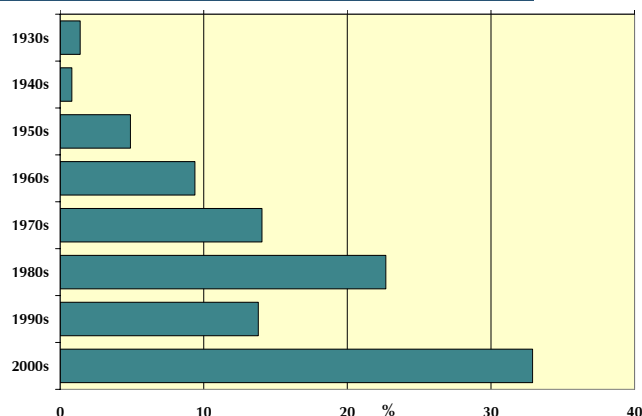
**A half of all Western Europeans feel that it is now more difficult to be a ‘good’ mother because of economic recession. Mothers in Mediterranean countries express this view most strongly.**

From Figure 27 we can see that the economic recession has been most keenly felt in this context by mothers in Southern Europe – Italy, Portugal and Greece – and significantly less so by the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden. The exception in the chart is Spain, where mothers report relatively moderate impacts of the economic conditions. While the average here is 50% of mothers thinking that it is now more difficult to be a ‘good mother’, 67% of Italians take this view compared with less than half that number (33%) in Denmark.

### 1.1.14 The ‘ideal’ decade in which to be a mother

Given the specific issues that beset mothers in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what for them would be the ideal decade in which to be a mother? Would they prefer to travel, metaphorically, some way back in time to a ‘golden age’ of motherhood, or would they opt for a more recent time? The responses to this question are illustrated in Figure 28. Here we can see that most Western European mothers would not travel very far back in time – the largest group (33%) would go no further than the 2000s. The 1980s were popular with 23% of mothers – the decade in which a sizeable proportion of them would have been growing up as children themselves.

**Figure 28. The ‘ideal’ decade in which to be a mother.**



**Today’s mothers would be reluctant to return to any decade earlier than the 1980s – times when the conveniences that make their lives easier and richer were much less in evidence.**

There were few national variations in this context – mothers in 9 countries preferred the 2000s while those in 3 preferred the 1980s, as shown in the table below.

Country	Preferred Decade
Austria	2000s
Denmark	2000s
Finland	2000s
France	1980s
Germany	2000s
Greece	1980s
Italy	1980s
Norway	2000s
Portugal	2000s
Spain	2000s
Sweden	2000s
Switzerland	2000s
UK	2000s

The only real exception here is Greece, where fewer than 8% of mothers would wish to remain in the 2000s – 43% and 25% would prefer to go back to the 1980s and 1990s respectively. These are seen by today’s Greek mothers, perhaps, as gentler times when the harsh economic realities and associated political unrest that surround them and their families today were much less to the fore.