

# Report

## 32h working week

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## 1 Introduction

Following a positive evaluation of the 30-hour working week experiment, Femma permanently switched to a 32-hour working week in 2022. This report provides an insight into the results of the research that accompanied it.

First, we provide an insight into the decision-making process that led to the introduction of the 32-hour working week. We then explain how Femma shapes the 32-hour work week. Then we set out the research design, followed by the research findings. Finally, we summarise the main findings.

## 2 Why a 32-hour work week?

### 2.1 Opting for a shorter working week

The decision to introduce a shorter working week at Femma is a matter of “practice what you preach” and shows how Femma as a socio-cultural organisation is fulfilling its laboratory role<sup>1</sup>.

Since 2014, Femma has been campaigning for a balanced distribution of paid work, unpaid care work and free time for all. Many people balance daily on a tightrope to combine paid work, unpaid care work and free time in a quality manner. Often with unequal opportunities. Gender stereotypes mean that women typically take on a greater share of household and care work, are more likely to work part-time and take up care leave more than men. This contributes to the pay gap, the underrepresentation of women in top jobs and the overrepresentation of women in poverty rates. People from migrant backgrounds also tend to find it harder to access paid work and are over-represented in sectors such as the service voucher sector, which mainly relieves the middle class of household chores.

Instead of placing the responsibility for better combining paid work, unpaid care work and leisure on individuals or taking only small measures, Femma advocates a new model of society. A society model that values unpaid care work - such as domestic work, informal care and voluntary work - more. A model that distributes paid work, unpaid care and leisure time more equally. Primarily between men and women, but also between women themselves. For Femma, a shorter working week as the new norm for full-time is one of the pillars of that new model of society. The current 38-hour week does not match the reality of many two-earner and single-parent families. Many, especially women, already work 30 or 32 hours a week, but this is often seen as a deviation from the norm, with adverse consequences. Femma therefore proposes to rethink the full-time working week itself.

Inspired by foreign examples, Femma decided to set up its own action research on the 30-hour working week, the first in Belgium, in 2019 (Lievens et al., 2020; Mullens et al., 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> laboratory role: experimenting in socially innovative practices with new societal rules of the game in response to complex societal issues;

With the aim of learning from it, sharing insights around working time reduction, inspiring others and fuelling social debate. You can read the results of that research [here](#).

## 2.2 From experiment to permanent arrangement

The 30-hour working week experiment ended on 31 December 2019. In 2020, the 36-hour working week became the full-time norm again at Femma. The internal agreement was to wait for the results of the study. The positive evaluation of the 30-hour working week encouraged the employee and employer delegation to explore the desirability and possibility of a permanent shorter working week at Femma. During that process, several scenarios of a shorter working week were juxtaposed. On 1 January 2022, Femma introduced the 32-hour working week.

## 3 Implementing the 32-hour work week

Before the introduction of the 32-hour working week, Femma could draw on the experience of the 30-hour working week. She did not have to start from a blank page.

### 3.1 Organisational

Six guiding principles served as the basis for shaping the 32-hour working week:

1. Maintaining organisational goals.
2. Absorb the reduction in working hours partly through substitute employment and partly through productivity gains.
3. Retention of pay.
4. Equating part-timers in pay.
5. No compensation for those already enjoying AVS days <sup>2</sup>
6. Implementing working time reduction in one go.

#### *Maintaining organisational goals.*

Maintaining organisational goals was not up for debate, but we did take it as a guiding principle because it also determines how to accommodate the reduction in working hours. Femma wants to offer its volunteers the same services, honour the agreements with the government and be an example for other organisations in the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2001, in the non-profit sector, employees older than 45 have enjoyed a reduction in working hours. Between 45 and 50, it is the 36-hour working week, between 50 and 55, it is the 34-hour working week and if you are over 55, you work in the 32-hour working week. However, Femma concluded a collective bargaining agreement back in the 1980s that collectively reduced working hours from 38 hours to 36 hours a week.

## *Compensate the reduction in working hours partly through substitute employment and partly through productivity gains.*

Maintaining organisational goals goes along with the choice to compensate the reduction in working hours through a combination of substitute employment and productivity growth. Choosing replacement employment requires an investment from the organisation, while betting on productivity growth reduces the financial investment.

In compensating the working time reduction, a 5%<sup>3</sup> productivity gain was assumed. This productivity gain is the result of measures already implemented: such as the redesign of the work organisation in the run-up to the 30-hour working week, the introduction and further optimisation of digital tools and positive effects resulting from the implementation of the 32-hour working week itself. The employer and employee delegations agreed that productivity gains would be calculated at the organisational level and that the remaining minus hours would be compensated by substitute employment. In reality, the transition from a 36-hour working week to a 32-hour working week meant that there was a need for 1 extra full-time unit (FTE).

### *Retention of pay*

Femma chose to implement the reduction in working hours with pay. This way, every staff member can take advantage of the working time reduction. Without pay retention, some staff would be better off using leave systems, such as parental leave. The reduction in working hours is a way of returning productivity gains to employees.

### *Equating part-timers in pay*

Choosing to maintain wages theoretically means that the hourly wages of full-time employees increase. This has the consequence that part-time employees must also be proportionally equalised (= perequired). The equalisation can take place in time (part-timers also reduce their working time proportionally) or in wages (part-timers receive proportionally more wages for the same working time). Only exception are the employees in partial early retirement. These part-timers can only be perequired in time and not in wages. Femma opted for perequation in pay rather than time. Making part-timers work fewer hours requires more substitute employment and more additional personnel costs (recruitment, equipment, mobility, training, etc.) and makes working hours disproportionate to a meaningful task package.

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3 That 5% productivity gain is based on:

- The findings from the action research with the 30-hour working week. Then there was a productivity increase of about 4% (people achieved the same goals while only 70% of the minus hours were replaced). That productivity increase was both the result of 'working differently' and a direct consequence of less working time. For instance, in the study with the 30-hour working week, we saw that among the '36h group', short-term absences decreased. That group reported working more focused and planning better.
- recognition that we have started working more effectively and efficiently over the past 2 years (which is why we estimate higher than the 4% in the 30-hour work week). We have further optimised adapting the work organisation (team leaders), adapted vision of group coaching, implemented MS teams, time savings in corona due to less travel, ... So there is some productivity gain that can be converted into a working hour reduction.

### *No compensation for AVS employees*

By opting for a 32-hour working week, Femma generalises the working time reduction already enjoyed by older colleagues (over 55y).<sup>4</sup> Since older colleagues who are already in an AVS system see little or no reduction in their working hours with a 32-hour working week, it could be suggested that they are also entitled to a further working-hour reduction or pay rise. Femma decided not to provide compensation here, but to pay extra attention to workable work for older colleagues and appreciate them appropriately. By not providing compensation for AVS colleagues, the financial investment of the working time reduction is minimized.

### *Implementing working time reduction in one go*

The reduction from a 36-hour working week to a 32-hour working week can be done incrementally or all at once. Femma implemented the reduction in one go. This ensures that you only have to change your work organisation once and that you have a bigger effect from the start.

### *Design of the 32-hour work week*

The 32-hour working week applies on a weekly basis. Employees work 8 hours per day (an effective working week of 40 hours) and take 1 full or 2 half working time reduction days (ADV) each week to reach an average working week of 32 hours. ADV days may not be taken on Tuesdays or Thursdays, unless with the express consent of the manager. This is to ensure work processes run as smoothly as possible. Femma did not opt for a collective closure day as it wants to be available to its members and externals on all weekdays. Moreover, employees also preferred different days. The teams coordinate internally on who takes ADV on which day.

Overtime can be limited.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Femma limits the likelihood of employees consecutively working a lot of overtime. Exceptions are possible at peak times and with the approval of the team leader.

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<sup>4</sup> AVS system: Colleagues over 50 already enjoy a reduction in working hours in our sector. Those on full-time 36-hour contracts get 1 AVS day (working 34h per week) from the age of 50, and 2 AVS days per month from 55y (working 32h per week). These so-called wrinkle days were enforced in the 1990s by the White Rage. It is a measure to enable older workers in the care sector to stay in the workforce. Femma benefits from this system because we also fall under the non-profit.

<sup>5</sup> Daily limitation of 2 overtime hours, weekly limitation of 8 overtime hours and semester limitation of 24 overtime hours.

### 3.2 Technical-legal

To enable the 32-hour working week, Femma entered into a collective bargaining agreement (CLA) and amended the labour regulations. As in the 30-hour working week, Femma applied the formula of additional holidays. For a full-time employee under 50 years of age, this means 26 additional holidays annually. Full-time employees between the ages of 50 and 55 receive 13 additional holidays annually. At individual level, Femma adjusted the contracts of part-time employees - with the exception of those in part-time jobs because of early retirement.

For the legal framework, Femma still relies on the legal advice<sup>6</sup> that law firm Progress Lawyers drafted in the context of the 30-hour working week.

### 3.3 Financial section

It is not easy to give the full financial picture of the 32-hour working week because some benefits are not for Femma. If staff take fewer care leaves, this is a benefit for the government because it has to pay out fewer allowances. There are also effects that are difficult to predict: on retirement age, the use of childcare, sick leave, ... Effects that help determine the full financial picture. We do, however, provide some figures that we can see at the start:

- Substitute employment in the 32h regime: around €65,000/year
- The perequation (those who did not work less received a similar benefit in salary in proportion to their employment break): 32,000 euros/year
- The government support Femma receives for the reduction of working hours. This support is 400 euro per quarter per full-time employee for 4 years. In our example, that is  $1,600 \text{ euro} \times 38 = 60,800 \text{ euro}$  per year (and this for the first 4 years).

## 4. Research design

In this section, we discuss how the investigation into the 32-hour work week at Femma was approached and designed.

### 4.1 Longer-term effects

In recent years, a lot of organisations worldwide, like Femma in 2019, were experimenting with a shorter working week. This shorter working week often took the form of a 4-day working week (e.g. In the 4-day week Global experiments in the UK, US etc.). These experiments provide us with knowledge about the impact of a shorter working week on the experience of work, productivity and the impact on workers' personal lives. However, the experimental and thus studied phase of these experiments was always limited in time. In many of the foreign exper-

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<sup>6</sup> The European Social Charter states in Article 2 that "reasonable daily and weekly working hours should be set, with the working week being progressively reduced insofar as productivity gains and other influencing factors permit".

iments, this pilot phase covered only six months (e.g. Lewis, et al., 2023), in Femma the experiment took place over one calendar year. This time limitation obviously has some consequences: for instance, workers know that this is an experiment and that its impact is being studied (Hawthorne effect), because of the time limitation they might try harder to get the most out of it, and the possible positive effects experienced at the beginning might fade away over time because they become 'used to it' (hedonic adaptation). To know whether the impact of a shorter working week has a similar effect in the longer term, it is necessary to do more long-term research into its impact. To examine this long-term impact, Femma chose to also have their full-time 32-hour working week introduced in 2022 examined.

As with the 30-hour working week experiment in 2019, the TOR research unit of the Brussels Institute for Social and Population Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel was asked to investigate this longer-term impact of the 32-hour working week. Unlike the previous research design, data collection this time consisted of survey questionnaires only, not supplemented by time-use diaries and in-depth interviews as in 2018-2020. This was because of the large time investment of the employees and researchers and the limited space available for this purpose. The knowledge from the previous survey allowed us to focus more specifically on some key aspects. Like last time, we opted for a longitudinal research design in which employees were surveyed at several points in time. Below, we give more info on the longitudinal design and go deeper into the research population.

## **4.2 Measurements**

In January 2022, Femma introduced the 32-hour working week permanently. The board took the decision in September 2021. There was no more time for a 'pre-measurement' in 2021, during the 36-hour work week. Femma chose to conduct four measurements over the first two years of the 32-hour work week. By analogy with the research on the 30-hour work week, Femma and TOR chose to conduct one measurement each year in March and one in October. These months were chosen because they are the most similar and they contain few 'special days' such as bank holidays or school holidays. TOR thus conducted the measurements in March and October 2022 and in March and October 2023. These four measurements allow us to study evolutions within the 32-hour working week. For example, we look at whether the impact after 22 months is different from the impact after 2 months and after 10 and 15 months. Supplemented by the data from the 2019 30-hour work week survey, we can also make comparisons between 2022-2023 and 2018 (in a 36-hour work week) and 2019 (during the 30-hour work week).

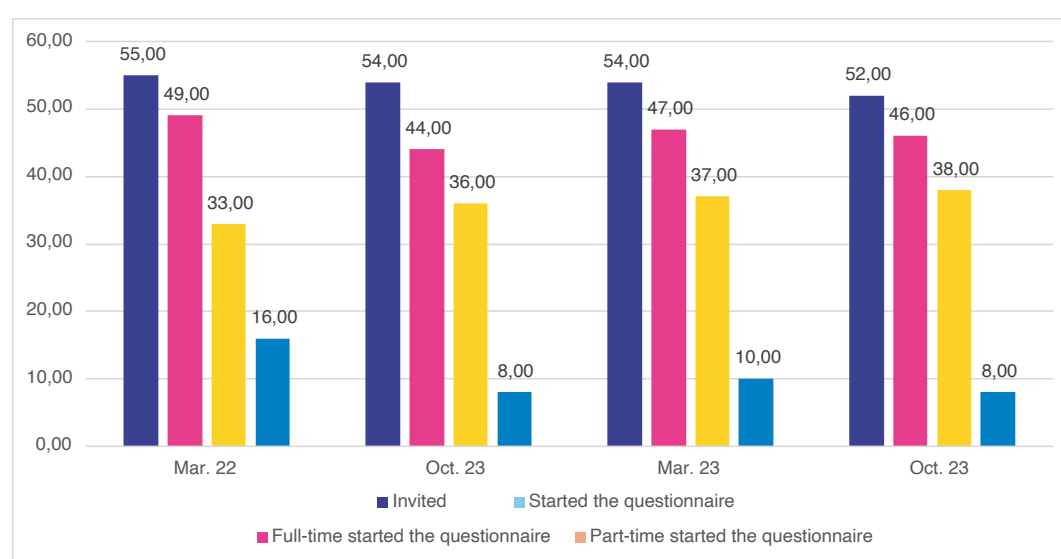
When scale variables are used in the report, we describe them briefly. The appendix contains more detailed information.



### 4.3 Research population

The study population includes the entire group of Femma employees, i.e. both full- and part-time employees. At the start of measurement 1 in March 2022, there were 55 people working at Femma. All employees were invited to the survey. As can be seen from Figure 4.1, 49 employees started the questionnaire in March 2022, of which 33 were full-time and 16 part-time employees. In further measurements, the number of employees at Femma drops to 52 in October 2023. Between 44 and 47 employees start the questionnaires each time, of which an increasing proportion are full-time employees. This corresponds to an increase in the proportion of full-time employees out of the total number of employees at Femma in 2023. By October 2023, around 80% of all employees will be working full-time in a 32-hour week.

**Figure 4.1. Response measurements**



As for the composition of the sample, we can say that it is a group of mostly women. Only 2 employees are male. In addition, it is also a highly educated group of employees, some 80% of whom hold a bachelor's or master's degree in higher education. In terms of age, the organisation is more diverse. In October 2023, about 26% of employees were older than 55, 24% were between 46 and 55, 30% were between 36 and 45 and about 20% were 35 or younger. This differs from March 2022 when an even higher proportion of workers were 55 years or older (about 33%). Thus, a slight rejuvenation of the organisation over time is noticeable.

### 4.4 Reading guide

This report mainly describes the results of the new measurements in 2022 and 2023. It outlines the evolution within the 32-hour working week, intending to explore longer-term impacts. In addition, it regularly refers to data from 2018 and 2019 as points of comparison. 2018 then represents the year when employees worked in a 36-hour work week. 2019 is the year when Femma experimented with a 30-hour work week. These periods provide an interesting perspective to place the results of the 32-hour work week along. Due to the addition of some new

questions and scales to the questionnaires in 2022 and 2023 based on the findings from the 30-hour workweek survey, not all scales and questions can be compared to 2018 and 2019.

The quotes from employees included in the report come from responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire.

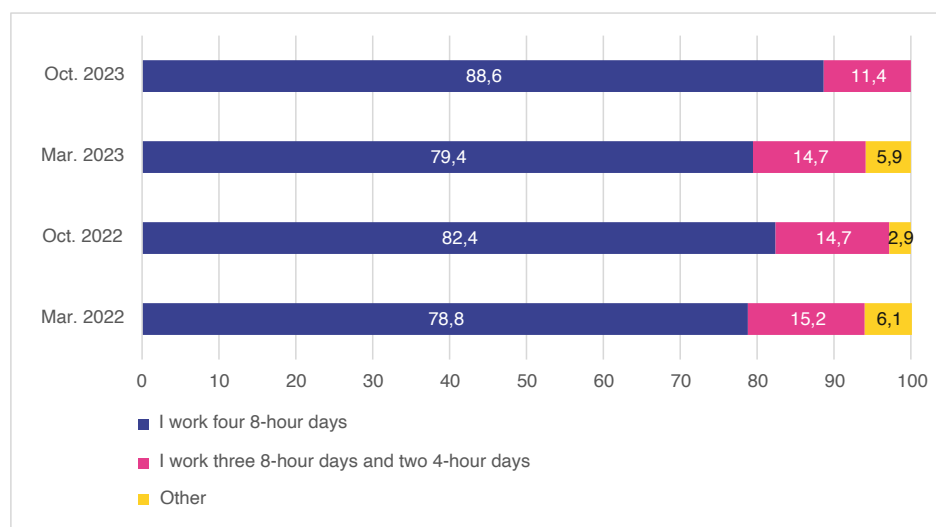
## 5. Research results

Below, we elaborate on the results. We focus on several themes such as the chosen design of the 32-hour working week, the impact on paid work and private life, and on the balance between paid work, unpaid care work and leisure.

### 5.1 Form of 32-hour working week

The vast majority (80%) of employees working in the 32-hour work week chose a 4-day formula, working four eight-hour days. This is not surprising as this was also the most frequently chosen option in 2019, during the 30-hour work week. However, in the permanent 32-hour work week, employees can only opt for one full day off or two half days off. The option to work five shorter days, of 6h24 min each, is no longer there in the 32-hour work week.

**Figure 5.1.** Choice of form of 32-hour working week for full-time employees across the four measurements between 2022 and 2023



From Figure 5.1, we infer that in October 2023, almost two years after the introduction of the 32-hour working week, almost 89% of employees working 32 hours a week opt for a 4-day formula. From March 2022 to March 2023, some 15% work in a five-day system, working three days of 8 hours a day and two days of only 4 hours a day. A very small percentage say they shape their week in yet another way, often amounting to a combination of the above options or three longer days and one shorter day. The most popular day not to work is Friday (more than half sometimes or never work on Friday), followed by Wednesday and especially Wednes-

day afternoon with some 45-50% of employees (almost) never or only sometimes working on Wednesday. Choosing Wednesday afternoons off is mostly related to school-aged children. Often, the extra time serves to combine some household chores with something fun or relaxing. As in the 30-hour working week (Lievens, et al., 2020), this gives most people a more relaxed feeling at the weekend because some of the household chores have already been done and they have already had some time for themselves on the extra free (half) day.

*“Usually Friday is my ADV day, which I currently use mainly for practical matters, or to meet up with friends (some are in a 4/5th regime, or usually stop earlier on Friday). That way, I feel much less ‘rushed’ in the weekend, can enjoy it more and feel much more rested.”*

*(26 y/o, no resident children)*

## **5.2 Impact on paid employment**

Below, we describe how the Femma employees experienced the impact of the shorter working week on their work.

### *Enjoyment of work, work pace and collegiality*

As shown in Figure 5.2, the experience of pleasure in work remains stable over the four measurements between March 2022 and October 2023 for the group working 32 hours full-time. The shorter working week does not diminish the enjoyment and meaning they get from work. The ‘Enjoyment in work’ scale is measured using different items such as ‘I do enjoy starting the working day’ or ‘I like the challenge in my work’.

In contrast, we do see that the perceived pace of work, a scale of seven questions on speed and amount of work, is significantly higher in October 2023 than in the earlier measurements. 21 months after the introduction of the 32-hour working week, workers in this regime experience a higher pace of work than at the start. However, the October 2023 measurement fell in an exceptional period when there was a temporary absence of management and increased workload, especially among team leaders.

**Figure 5.2.** Job satisfaction and Work pace across the four measurements for the 32-hour group

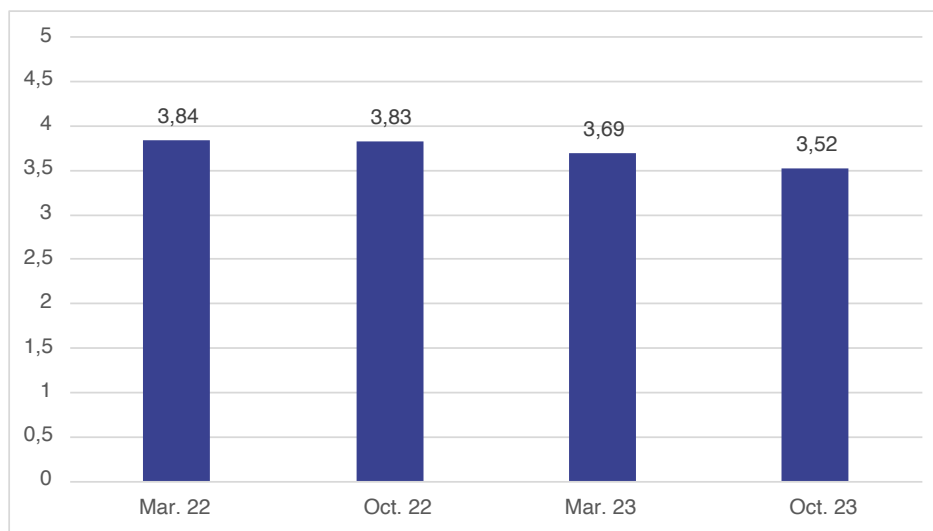


A decrease in collegiality accompanies the increase in work pace, see figure 5.3. Collegiality here stands for experiencing a good team spirit and atmosphere, being able to find support among colleagues and being able to freely express ideas. It is a scale consisting of 4 items. Again, in the October 2023 measurement, we see that collegiality is generally scored lower. The high pace of work due to the absence of management may have made coordination with colleagues and within teams a bit more difficult and/or resulted in missed interaction with colleagues (we see this was indeed more the case in 2023 compared to 2022, see figure 5.7). The absence of management and greater pressure on those following in line, namely team leaders, may thus be one of the causes of a declining sense of collegiality.

*“The fact that I work in a team where not everyone works full-time but the task package is large means that to complete this often gives extra work pressure. Especially the fact that an annual plan has to be followed very strictly gives extra pressure.”*

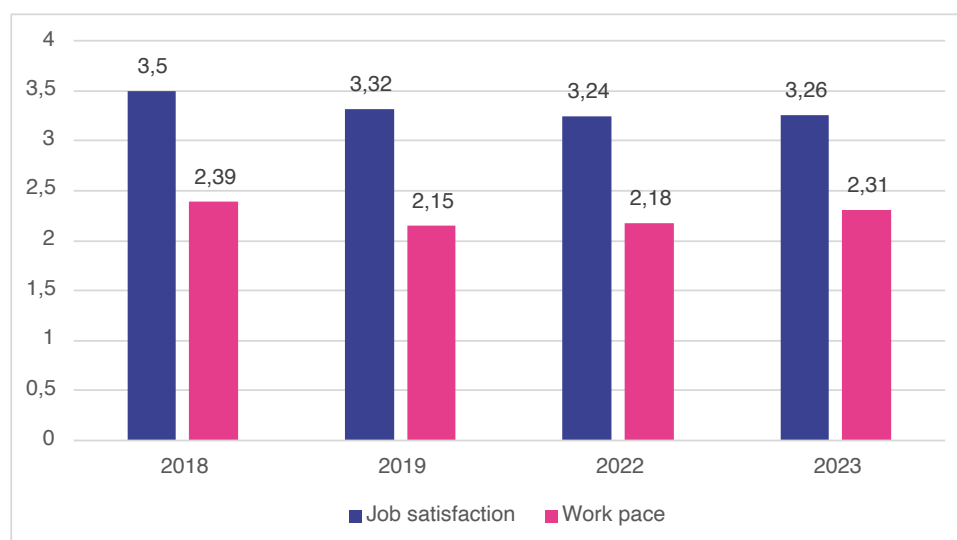
(53 y/o, with resident children)

**Figure 5.3.** Collegiality across the four measurements for the 32-hour group



However, comparing the year 2023 (32-hour working week) with the year 2018 (36-hour working week) (Figure 5.4), we see that the work pace in 2023 is still slightly below the 2018 level. We can argue that it is not so much the shorter working week that caused an increase in work pace at Femma, but rather that other organisational factors are sometimes at play. For 'Job satisfaction', we see that there is a significant drop between 2018 and 2019 (in the 30-hour work week) and then it remains at relatively similar levels in 2022 and 2023. In 2019, this was mainly due to some teams where the transition to 'the new work organisation' was not so smooth. This affected the atmosphere in these teams and, consequently, the pleasure team members experienced in their work. After the 30-hour working week experiment, Femma reviewed the structure of the teams and made adjustments. It is therefore not possible to compare the teams from 2022 and 2023 with those of 2019. However, we do see that even in the 32-hour work week, there are differences between teams in terms of enjoyment of work (results not shown).

**Figure 5.4.** Job satisfaction and pace of work over the years for those working full-time (with or without ADV age leave)



### *Productivity and energy*

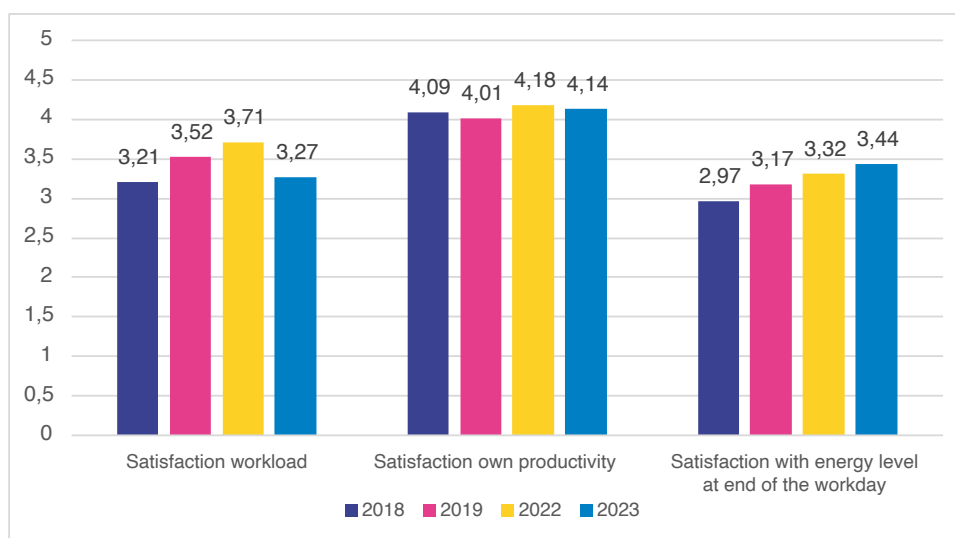
Figure 5.5 also shows the impact over the years, juxtaposing the years 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2023. This time, we show employees' satisfaction with certain aspects of their work, such as workload, their productivity and their energy level at the end of the working day. In line with the scale of work pace discussed above, we see an increase in satisfaction with workload in 2019 and 2022 compared to 2018 when employees worked 36 hours a week. In 2023, we see a drop back to 2018 levels. This is probably due to the higher perceived work pace in October 2023 that we discussed above.

Productivity is not so easy to measure, especially in an organisation that does mainly knowledge and policy work. We have two indicators of productivity: periodic progress reporting at the organisational level and staff reporting on satisfaction with their own productivity. In 2023, Femma prepared a progress report with quantitative and qualitative parameters and a visitation and assessment by the Flemish Government took place. Both the progress report and the visitation showed that Femma was meeting its set targets. Staff satisfaction with their own productivity also remains stable over the years. There is no decline during the 30- or 32-hour working week. Interestingly, we do see that employees are more satisfied with their energy level at the end of the day. This satisfaction increased in 2019 compared to 2018, but it increased further in 2022 and 2023. Therefore, although most employees do work full-time days (with one day less per week), in the 32-hour working week, they experience higher satisfaction with the energy they have left after such a working day.

*“The 32-hour work week generally gives more energy during the work week. It is easier to focus on work for four days instead of five. Sometimes there is still an ‘unproductive day’, but that is not directly due to fatigue because of the working week.”*

(38 y/o, with resident children)

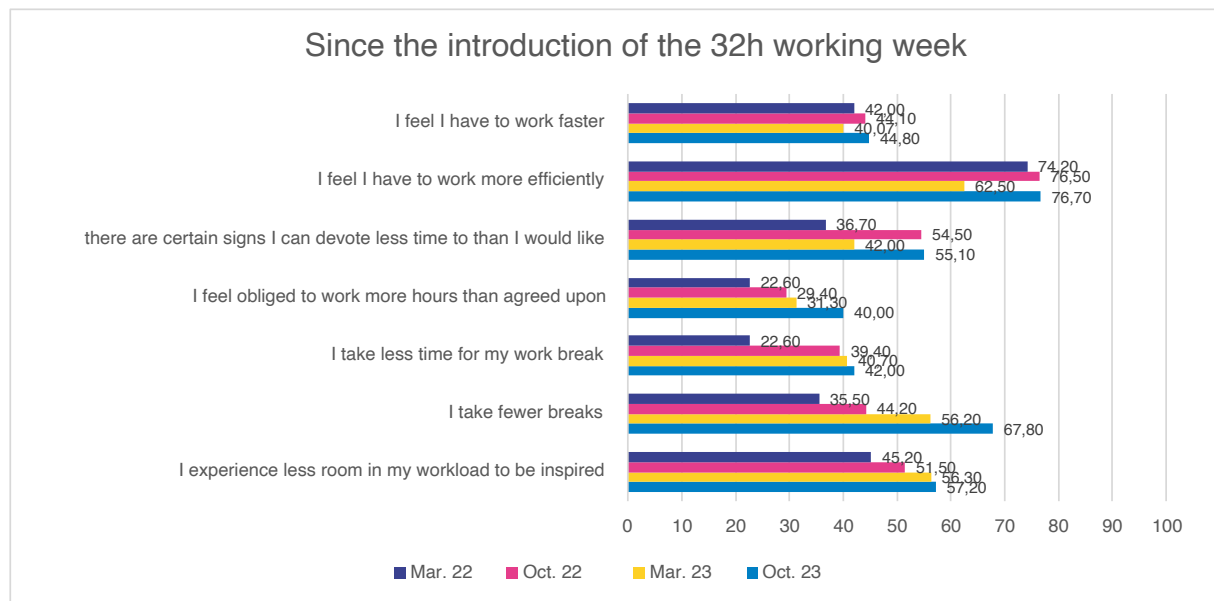
**Figure 5.5.** Satisfaction with work aspects over the years for those working full-time



### *Experience of work intensification*

Employees were asked about the intensity of work since the introduction of the 32-hour working week. The question started with ‘Since the introduction of the 32-hour working week...’ and then followed a whole number of statements on which they could indicate whether they agreed or disagreed on a 5-point Likert scale. Figure 5.6 shows the percentage of employees working 32 hours who agreed with the statements. The listed statements together form the ‘work intensification’ scale. In the analysis of this composite scale (not shown here), we see a slight increase in the two October measurements of 2022 and 2023, with the highest work intensification in October 2023. We also see this reflected in the individual statements.

**Figure 5.6.** % of 32-hour workers who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with the statements followed by ‘Since the introduction of the 32-hour working week...’



More than 60% say they feel they have been forced to work more efficiently since the start of the 32-hour working week. More than 40% say they have to work faster in the 32-hour work week and in the October measurements, some 55% experience that they have less time to put into certain tasks than they would like. For the other statements, we observe an increase over time. We see the biggest difference for the statement ‘I take fewer breaks’, where 68% of employees agree in October 2023 (32.3 percentage points more than in March 2022). About 57% also experienced less “white space” due to the 32-hour work week in October 2023, compared to about 45% in March 2022. This greater intensification of work in October 2023 could again be explained by the specific working conditions of that period. Nevertheless, it is notable that a large proportion of employees still perceive that they have to work more efficiently and there is less “white space” and room for breaks since the introduction of the 32-hour working week. However, these statements need not always be interpreted as negative. For instance, working more efficiently can also contribute to a positive feeling about work.

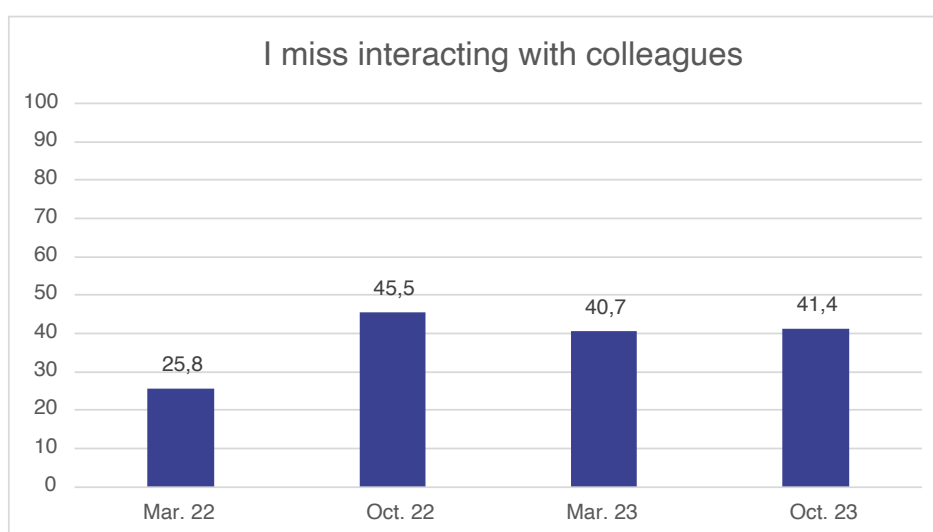
*“Working more efficiently also means working faster. Small nuance though: it often has a positive effect, but in busy periods (lots of meetings, deadlines, actions/objective that fall together within one particular month) it does create pressure. It is neither positive nor negative, it changes.”*

(27 y/o, no resident children)



Not only having less “white space” in work and space to take a break, but also spending less time in the office because of the shorter working week and location- and time-independent working can cause employees to see each other less. This need not be a problem, of course. However, we see in Figure 5.7 that from October 2022, a relatively high proportion of employees say they miss interacting with colleagues. Here, it is possible that after 9-10 months in the 32-hour work week, it becomes palpable that colleagues see each other less. This is also related to the individual choices employees make about when they take their days off (half-days) and when they work from home. Femma previously tried to address this by promoting Tuesdays and Thursdays as standard office working days.

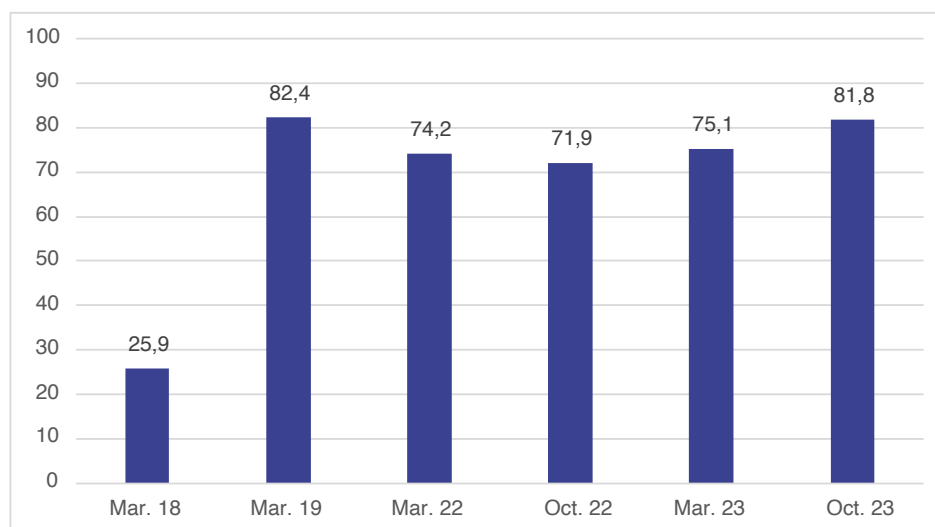
**Figure 5.7.** *Share of full-time employees indicating they agree or strongly agree with the statement ‘Since the introduction of the 32-hour working week, I miss interacting with colleagues’.*



### *Working until retirement*

A question that was also asked in the 30-hour working week study in 2018 and 2019 is ‘Do you think you could work in the current regime (hours of paid work per week) until the statutory retirement age?’. The current regime refers to the hours currently worked by employees, e.g. in 2018 it was 36 hours for full-time workers, in 2019 30 hours, and in 2022 and 2023 32 hours. As shown in Figure 5.8, employees perceive the regime in a shorter working week (30 or 32 hours) as much more feasible until their statutory retirement age. Only about 26% in 2018 said they thought they could work in the 36-hour regime until retirement, in the 30-hour working week and about two years in the 32-hour working week, that number rises to 82%. In this way, the shorter working week could contribute to a more viable career and sustaining ‘full-time’ work until retirement.

**Figure 5.8.** % that say they can sustain the current regime until the statutory retirement age (full-time workers (with or without additional ADV because of age +50))



### *Take-up of thematic leave*

To facilitate the combination of paid work and unpaid care work in certain phases of life (such as the period when care is needed for children or other dependents), a lot of people choose to take up thematic leave or time credit. More than 80% of thematic leave taken in Belgium is parental leave (RVA, 2024) and these are most often taken in the form of a 1/5th working time reduction (almost 50%). Only 10% of cases involve full-time take-up (RVA, 2024). Most parents therefore choose to shorten their working week by one day through parental leave. We might wonder whether introducing a shorter working week has an impact on the take-up of this kind of thematic leave. At Femma, just before the transition to the 32-hour working week, some 6% of employees were taking parental leave. This dropped to 3% in the first months of the 32-hour work week (January-March 2022). As of October 2022, no one was still taking parental leave. Because of the small number of employees, this could be a coincidence. However, we also asked employees whether the introduction of the 32-hour working week played a role in not taking thematic leaves, time credit, etc., or taking them less. Some 20-30% of full-time employees indicated that this did play a role. Among employees with resident children under 18 years, this was as high as 45% in October 2023. A few indicated exactly in what sense the 32-hour working week played a role in this:

*“I would look for the legal opportunities to work less  
in a full-time regime of 38 or 36 hours...”*

(40 y/o, with resident children)

*“Before working at Femma, I took parental leave. Because of the 32-hour week,  
I deliberately did not opt for the time credit.”*

(36 y/o, with resident children)

*“I have extra time to take up care duties for which I would otherwise take leave.”*

(63 y/o, no resident children)

### *Work-life balance*

Being able to combine work life with an enjoyable private life in a quality manner was a major goal of the shorter working week at Femma. From the data, we see that the shorter working week does succeed in reducing the conflict employees experience between the sphere of paid work and the sphere of private life. The decrease in work-life conflict occurred between 2018 (36-hour work week) and 2019 (30-hour work week). However, we see in Figure 5.9 that this conflict remains at the same reduced level in 2022 and 2023 as in 2019. Thus, in the 32-hour work week, workers experience less work-life conflict than in 2018 when they worked 36 hours a week. We also find no significant differences across the 4 measurements in 2022 and 2023, although we do note that conflict is always slightly higher in the October measurements than in the March measurements. Employees indicate that October is also consistently a slightly busier month.

**Figure 5.9.** *Work-life conflict over the years for those working full-time*



### **5.3 Impact on private life**

In this section of the report, we focus on the impact of the 32-hour working week on private life. We already saw that the shorter working week meant that most employees had an extra day off in the week, that they did not have to take thematic leave to have enough time for their children or others, and that work-life conflict was reduced. Furthermore, how did the shorter working week impact aspects such as time pressure, distribution of unpaid work in the household and general well-being?

#### *Distribution of housework*

A more equal division of household tasks between partners, with attention to gender, is also an important goal of the shorter working week for Femma. After all, women still spend much more time on unpaid work than men (about 1.5 hours per weekday more on housework and childcare), while men (can) spend more time on paid work (Glorieux & van Tienoven, 2016). To achieve the goal of a more equal distribution of work, both partners within the family would have to work in a system of a shorter working week. Unfortunately, Femma only impacts the working hours of its own employees. These are mainly women and we might therefore expect the 32-hour working week to reinforce gender roles in some cases.

Since the employees' partners did not fill in a questionnaire and we are basing ourselves this time only on data from the questionnaires and not from time-use diaries, it is not possible to make statements about the effective division of labour within the family. We can, however, gauge perceptions and satisfaction with the division among employees. For various household tasks, we asked them to indicate what % of this task they themselves took up, what % their partner (if applicable), what % their children (if applicable) and what % was taken up by other actors. In total, this had to come out to 100%. Since the vast majority of housework is either taken up by themselves or by their partner, we do not consider the other actors further.

Table 5a shows the percentage that the employee perceives that she/he takes up of that task herself/himself. It is striking that for many of the household tasks, employees feel that they take up the majority of this work. They often indicate that they take on around 60-70% of this task, with ironing, it is even around 75%. There are two clear exceptions, namely repairs in and around the house and maintaining the garden, for which employees indicate that they take up only about 35% of these tasks, with their partner doing the vast majority of the work. If we take the time aspect into account, it is noticeable that for most tasks the difference between partners increased in 2023 compared to 2022. The largest increases can be found in what we call the 'traditionally female tasks' such as laundry, childcare and household organisation. On the one hand, this could mean that the longer one of the partners (and specifically here mainly the woman) works in a shorter working week while the other partner still works in a longer full-time working week, the greater the inequality in the distribution of work in the household. Given the skewed distribution of unpaid work that already exists within heterosexual couples, this inequality may only be magnified if the woman works in a shorter working week. On the other hand, it could also be that the perception here does not so much reflect the reality, but rather the fact that the differences become more visible to employees after working in the 32-hour working week for a longer period.

**Table 5a.** *Perception of the share of housework and care work taken up by the worker relative to total work done by worker and his/her partner*

	2022	2023
Doing the laundry	68,52%	74,17%
Cooking	63,33%	65,95%
Ironing	74,79%	75,18%
Cleaning	61,17%	65,15%
Repairs in and around the house	35,93%	36,23%
Grocery shopping	60,65%	61,32%
Maintaining the garden	35,02%	32,61%
Taking care of children etc.	58,89%	65,15%
Household organisation	65,56%	75,66%

*“It just comes from a different work situation that things just can’t be different. I always assume I have more free time myself and even feel it’s a bit my duty to take on more tasks. I am a busy bee. We have already made certain arrangements but have yet to make them work. I would like him to take a bit more initiative himself to do certain things without me having to ask several times.”*

(60 y/o, no resident children)

*“The biggest burden is on me, the ‘mental load’. I find it difficult to share this with a partner. It takes a lot of effort to bring him into this. I keep trying, but some habits are hard to change.”*

(47 y/o, with resident children)

In several of the open-ended responses, the aspect of ‘mental load’ and its uneven distribution comes up. Dean et al (2022) define mental load as the combination of the cognitive work involved in a family, such as thinking of, deciding, planning and organising the members of a household and all that is required around it, and the emotional work involved, such as caring for and being responsible for the family. This kind of work is often invisible and difficult to measure. Women generally take a much greater share of this mental burden (Daminger, 2019). This mental burden, which many women at Femma also experience, may give rise to an additional sense of unequal division of labour in the household.

Despite the perception of this more unequal distribution of unpaid work in the household in 2023, we see that satisfaction with the organisation and distribution of household or child care and also the experience of household stress remain stable.

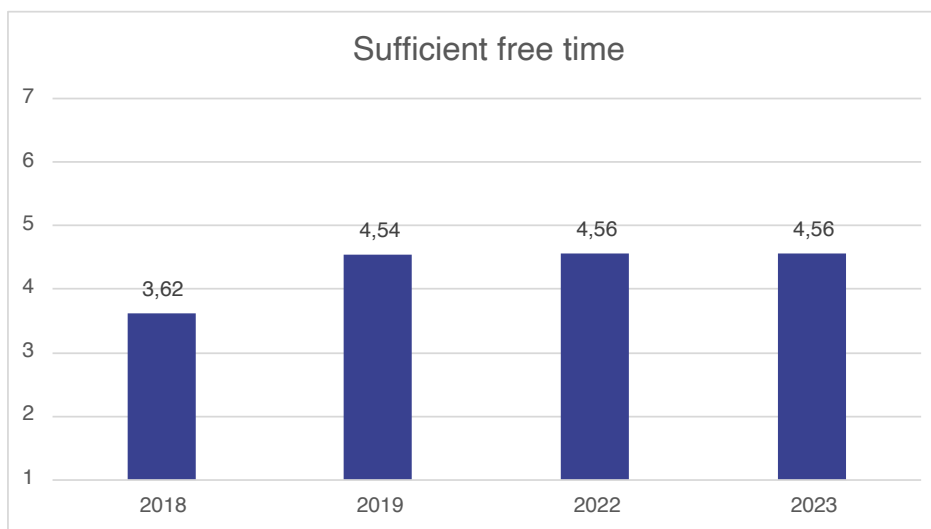
### **Leisure**

Leisure is another important part of private time. A lot of ‘leisure scholars’ in the early and mid-20th century were convinced that with increasing technology and digitalisation, we would have to spend less on paid work and enter a kind of ‘leisure society’ (Veal, 1987). As the hours of paid work reduced, the time we could spend on leisure would increase. The predicted leisure society did not materialise, but we can still wonder how a reduction in the working week affects the experience of leisure time.

The data collected in 2022 and 2023 do not allow us to make statements about the exact duration of time spent on leisure activities. We were able to do so in the 30-hour working week experiment in 2019, where we also collected time-spending data. We saw that in the shorter working week, time spent on leisure by full-time employees increased by about 1h20 per week and there was also half an hour more time for relaxation and doing nothing. In the questionnaires we administered in 2022 and 2023, we questioned the extent to which employees felt they had enough free time and the degree of leisure time pressure they experienced.

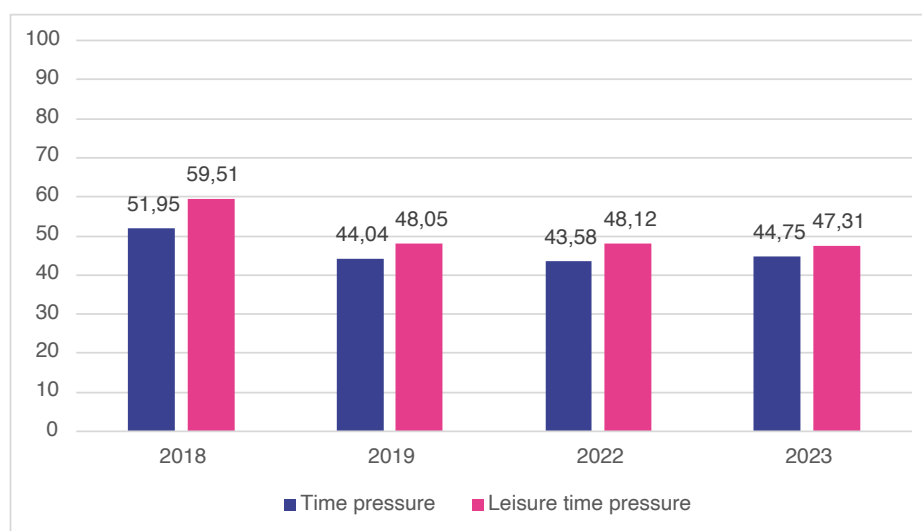
Figure 5.10 shows full-time employees' average experience of sufficient free time on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 represents far too little free time and 7 represents more than enough free time. The experience of sufficient free time is about the same over the years 2019, 2022 and 2023 (in the 30-hour work week and 32-hour work week, respectively) with an average of 4.5. This average is significantly higher than that of 2018 when employees were still working in a 36-hour work week. Thus, the shorter working week gives them a bit more free time, which makes them consider this time as more sufficient.

**Figure 5.10.** Average experience of full-time workers for adequate leisure time on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 represents far too little free time and 7 represents more than enough free time)



We also see the more sufficient free time experienced by employees reflected in a sharp drop in leisure time pressure. In Figure 5.11, we see that the leisure time pressure (with a max of 100) was still around 59 in 2018. In 2019, during the 30-hour working week, it had already dropped to 48. And in 2023, already a year and more into the 32-hour work week, it has fallen a little further to 47.3 (although the latter difference is not significant). With the leisure time pressure scale, we gauge the experience of leisure and, more specifically, the pressure around leisure time. Items used for this include, for example, 'I have too much leisure time' (reverse coded), 'I find it difficult to relax in my leisure time', 'Often in my leisure time I don't get around to doing the things I really want to do', ... We can therefore say that the stress and pressure experienced around leisure time decreased in the shorter working week for full-time employees and that this decrease remains stable the longer one is in the shorter working week.

**Figure 5.11.** Time pressure and leisure time pressure (0 - 100) over the years for full-time workers



As with leisure time pressure, we see that general time pressure also decreases in the shorter working week years (see also Figure 5.11). General perceived time pressure includes leisure time pressure, as well as additional items that deal with general time experience/pressure such as 'I never have time for myself', 'A day has too few hours for me', 'I don't have time to do the things I want to do', and so on. This general time pressure also decreased significantly between 2018 and 2019 and then remained stable at this same reduced level in the 32-hour work week.

*"The biggest advantage is that I feel less rushed. Your work and family usually take precedence in your allocation of time. The day off in the week means that now there is also more time for e.g. sports, hobbies, household chores, without feeling that you are cramming that between time for work and time for your family. Monday to Thursday you are mainly focused on work, Friday the day is free to fill in and at the weekend there is more time for family."*

(39 y/o, with resident children)

## 5.4 Well-being

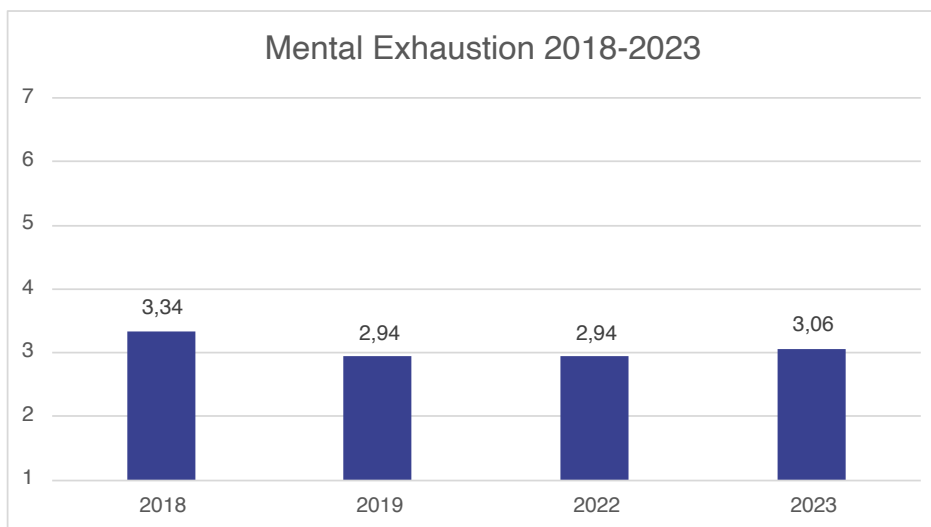
The perceived stress around time expressed as time pressure already gives us a first impression of the evolution of employees' well-being. However, the questionnaires also contain some other indicators that can give us an insight into their mental and physical well-being. Below, we look at mental exhaustion, absenteeism, sleep problems and general happiness.



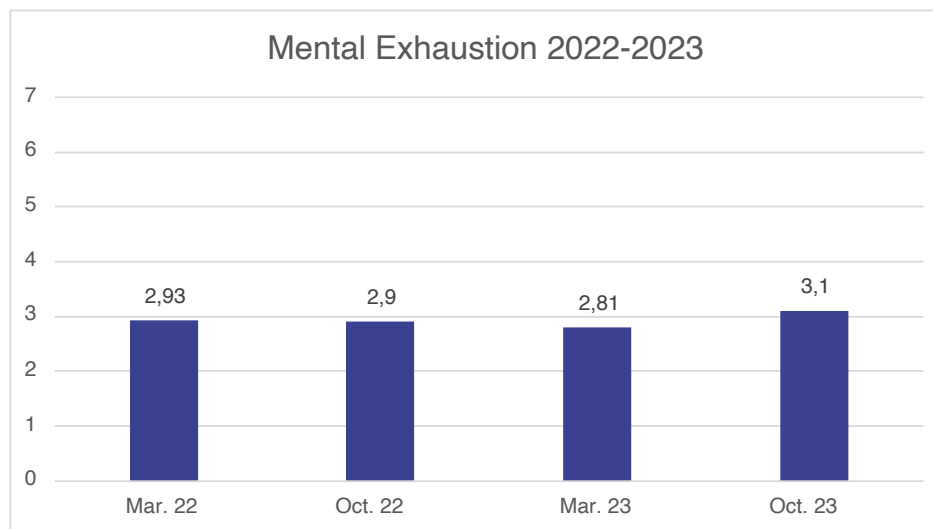
### *Mental exhaustion*

The scale of 'mental exhaustion' forms a dimension and an important indicator of burnout and mainly refers to mental well-being related to work (with spillover into private life). Some items from this scale are: 'I feel mentally exhausted by my work' or 'At the end of a working day, I feel empty'. The averages of the 'mental exhaustion' scale are shown for full-time employees in Figures 5.12 and 5.13. Figure 5.12 shows the evolution over the years from 2018 (in the 36-hour work week) to the 30-hour work week and finally to the 32-hour work week in 2022 and 2023. We do see a small decrease in mental exhaustion between 2018 and 2019, after the transition to a 30-hour work week, thereafter it remains more or less stable with a very slight increase in 2023. Figure 5.13 shows the evolution of mental exhaustion over the four measurements in 2022 and 2023. Whereas mental exhaustion remains stable and even decreases very slightly over time in March 2022, October 2022 and March 2023, perceived exhaustion increases again in October 2023. This is probably where the effect of the absent management in October 2023, which caused an increased pace of work among certain groups of employees, comes into play again

**Figure 5.12.** *Perceived mental exhaustion for full-time workers over the years 2018-2023*



**Figure 5.13.** *Perceived mental exhaustion for full-time workers across the 2022 and 2023 measurements*



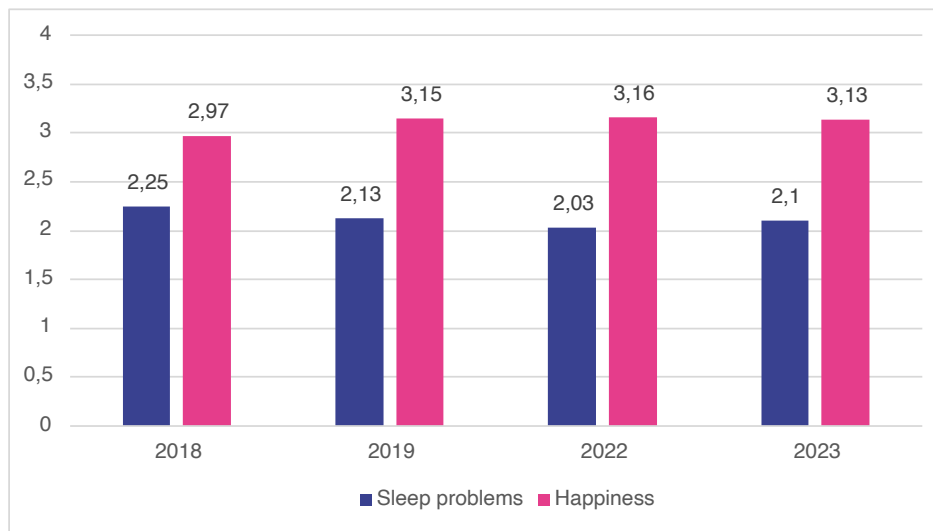
### *Absenteeism*

With regard to absenteeism, we cannot draw any conclusive conclusions. The impact of Covid-19 during certain years, does not make interpretation easier. Employee absenteeism at Femma shows an increase of 3 percentage points over the period from 2018-2024. However, it does not show a linear line. Absenteeism fluctuates over the years and depending on the type of absence, you can see different fluctuations. However, over the period 2022-2024, there is another decrease, especially in long-term absenteeism.

### *Sleep problems*

Previous research has already shown that a shorter working week can have a positive impact on the number of hours slept and the quality of sleep, and thus would reduce sleep problems (e.g., in the experiment in the Swedish rest home Svartedalen this was the case, Lorentzon, 2019). In our questionnaire, we also added some statements about the experience of sleep and sleep problems. These were combined into the 'sleep problems' scale, which included the following items: 'I often get up at night', 'I usually toss and turn a lot at night'. As shown in Figure 5.14, there seems to be a small decrease in sleep problems between 2018 and 2019, however, the differences over the years are not significant. Unlike the Swedish experiment, we found no effective reduction in sleep problems for full-time employees at Femma thanks to the shorter working week.

**Figure 5.14.** Sleep problems and happiness over the years for full-time workers (range 1-4)



### Happiness

A final indicator of well-being is overall happiness. Happiness here was surveyed as follows: 'How happy are you, all things considered?' (on a scale of 1 to 4). Although here too we observe a small increase in happiness feelings from 2019, with the introduction of the 30-hour working week, this increase is not significant. We can say, however, that happiness feelings remain fairly stable and the difference between the 30-hour working week in 2019 and the 32-hour working week in 2022 and 2023 has no impact on happiness feelings.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to understand the longer-term effects of a shorter working week. Results on the impact of the 30-hour working week on the work and personal lives of employees at Femma were already published in 2020. The introduction of a permanent 32-hour working week from 2022 onwards provided an opportunity to also examine the impact over several years, in this case, two years.

Overall, the results from this report are in line with the results from the 30-hour working week experiment. Thus, job satisfaction, work pace, work-life conflict, satisfaction with distribution of unpaid work in the household and well-being indicators remain relatively stable compared to 2019. We do not see the 2 more hours worked in the 32-hour week compared to the 30-hour week reflected in the results. It seems that the 32-hour week has about the same effect as the 30- hours working week. Of course, some things are already better aligned in the 32-hour working week and certainly after more than a year of working this way. For instance, in the run-up to the 30-hour working week, the organisation was scrutinised and adjustments were made where necessary (new teams etc.). These changes were then re-evolved and fine-tuned. By 2022, the teams were more settled in. Nevertheless, we can say that we do not find any signs of hedonic adaptation in these results and there does not seem to be the Hawthorne

effect (because of the frequent surveys over a two-year period). In the longer term, the 32-hour working week continues to have a mainly positive impact, especially in private life and work-life combination. Both the 30- and 32-hour working weeks provide employees with a meaningful reduction in the working week. A working week of this length provides for the possibility of taking one extra day off per week (or two half-days). It is precisely these kinds of blocks of time that prove important in providing quality time. It is the length of the block of free time that determines how usefully it can be deployed (Anxo et al., 2000). This is also reflected in the popular choice of a 32-hour working week in the form of 4 days. Employees can use this large block of extra time for different activities, usually some more functional activities such as housework followed or preceded by some more relaxing activities, and is time-locked.

While the experience is generally positive, there are a number of issues, especially in relation to paid work, that organisations should be mindful of when introducing a shorter working week. For example, some employees report taking fewer breaks, feeling less white space in the task package, having less contact with colleagues and experiencing more work pressure at peak times. These issues are important for well-being, creativity and, ultimately, productivity. Being mindful of this can only enhance the experience of the shorter working week.

With regard to unpaid work, we see that the introduction of the shorter working week also has a longer-term effect on the distribution of household work between partners. If only one partner of a couple switches to the shorter working week, he or she may take on more household chores, just as happens now with part-time workers. Unlike with part-time work, however, in the shorter working week on top of taking on slightly more household chores, you do not have a financial setback. In order for the shorter working week not to enhance gender stereotypical behaviour, it is important that it is equally accessible to men and women.

The shorter working week is certainly not the 'silver bullet solution' that answers all challenges. Nor is there a blueprint for implementing the shorter working week in just any business or organisational context. Each company and organisation requires a specific approach, specific to the characteristics of the organisation and the sector.

Yet this report shows that the shorter working week also has a lot of positive effects and potential in the longer term to provide an appropriate answer to how we can combine work, care and leisure in a quality manner in the future.

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## Annexes

Scale	Items	Range
<b>Pleasure in work</b>		1-4
	I do enjoy starting the working day	1-4
	I still find my work fascinating every day	1-4
	I have fun at work	1-4
	I look up to my work	1-4
	I like the challenge in my work	1-4
	I feel my work is meaningful	1-4
<b>Work pace</b>		1-4
	Do you need to work very quickly?	1-4
	Do you have too much work to do?	1-4
	Do you have to work extra hard to get something done?	1-4
	Do you work under time pressure?	1-4
	Need to hurry?	1-4
	Are you facing a backlog of work?	1-4
	Would you like to slow down in your work?	1-4
<b>Collegiality</b>		1-5
	Femma World Women has a good team spirit and collegiality	1-5
	The working atmosphere within Femma World Women is good	1-5
	I can ask my colleagues for help if necessary	1-5
	Ideas can be expressed openly without being condemned because of this	1-5
<b>Work-life conflict</b>		1-4
	Your responsibilities at work taking precedence over your family life?	1-4
	You are brooding at home about problems at work?	1-4
	You are experiencing problems with childcare because of your work?	1-4
	Do the demands of your job make you less involved with your family/family/friends?	1-4
	You feel like you are behind the times in your home situation?	1-4
	You have so much work to do that you don't get around to your hobbies?	1-4
	The demands of your work make it difficult to feel relaxed at home?	1-4

<b>Time pressure overall (= together with leisure time pressure)</b>	<b>Recoded to 0-100</b>
Too much is expected of me	1-5
I never get updated	1-5
I never have time for myself	1-5
A day has too few hours for me	1-5
I have to cancel appointments often	1-5
I have to do more than I want to do	1-5
I don't have time to do the things I want to do	1-5
More is expected of me than I can handle	1-5
<b>Leisure pressure</b>	<b>Recoded to 0-100</b>
I often don't get around to doing the things I really want to do in my spare time	1-5
I too often have to consider others in my free time	1-5
I find it difficult to relax in my free time	1-5
I have too much free time	1-5
When I am free, too many leisure facilities are closed	1-5
It takes a lot of effort to plan my leisure activities	1-5
There are so many things I want to do in my free time that I very often feel like I am running out of time	1-5
Too many of my leisure activities are fragmented	1-5
<b>Mental exhaustion</b>	<b>1-7</b>
I feel mentally exhausted by my work	1-7
At the end of a working day, I feel empty	1-7
I feel tired when I get up in the morning and another working day lies ahead of me.	1-7
I feel 'burned out' by my work.	1-7
I feel frustrated with my job.	1-7
I think I am too committed to my work.	1-7

<b>Sleep problems</b>	1-4
I often get up at night	1-4
I usually lie awfully tossing and turning at night.	1-4
I often wake up several times at night.	1-4
I feel like I only sleep a few hours.	1-4
I find that I usually sleep well at night. (reverse coded)	1-4
I usually feel I am short of sleep	1-4
When I wake up at night, I find it hard to fall back asleep	1-4
I usually feel well rested after getting up. (reverse coded)	1-4