Job Quality, Gender and Generations: A Comparative and Exploratory Analysis of European Countries

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Abstract: This study conducts a comparative analysis of European countries regarding job quality and its relationship with gender and generational cohorts, using data from the 2021 European Working Conditions Survey. The research focuses on the subjective evaluations of job quality by European workers and examines how gender and generations may be related with these perceptions. The study operationalizes job quality using the European Intrinsic Job Quality Index, a multidimensional measure encompassing various aspects such as autonomy, interaction, intensity, and meaningful. The results show relevant variations in Intrinsic Job Quality across European countries. The study also finds that gender and generations play a role in shaping the perception of job quality. The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing debate on the importance of job quality for wellbeing and highlight the need for targeted interventions to improve job quality, particularly taking into account specific groups. The study's results also underscore the importance of considering the subjective evaluations of job quality in policy-making and the need for more comprehensive measures of job quality that capture the diverse experiences of workers across Europe.

Keywords: Job Quality; Gender; Generations; Europe

1. Introduction

The construct of job quality sits at the heart of the European labour market discourse, not merely as an abstract concept, but as a vital determinant of individual well-being and economic productivity (Knox, Warhurst & Pocock, 2011; Picatoste et al., 2021;). It carries weighty implications for workers' day-to-day lives, influencing their satisfaction, health, and overall sense of purpose (Findlay et al., 2017). Beyond the individual, job quality bears economic consequences: it affects productivity levels, organizational effectiveness, and national competitiveness (Holman, 2013a). Thus, understanding the elements that constitute high-quality jobs becomes paramount in the development of enlightened public policies and strategic organizational planning.

The central aim of this study are twofold: firstly, to conduct an exploratory comparative analysis of job quality across various European countries, and secondly, to unravel the intricacies of how gender and generational factors intersecting relate with real perceptions of job quality. The essence of this exploration lies in the subjective experiences of the workforce—a dimension of job quality that while intangible, is pivotal in understanding the contours of job satisfaction and professional well-being. By prioritizing the subjective lens, this inquiry acknowledges the diversity of worker perceptions and values, and seeks to encapsulate the nuanced feelings of autonomy, recognition, and meaning that individuals derive from their work (Cascales Mira, 2021; Kortmann et al., 2022). Such an approach diverges from the traditional focus on objective indicators alone (Stefana et al., 2021), thus enabling a richer, more holistic view of job quality that captures not only the material conditions but also the emotional and psychological facets of the European work experience.

The decision to concentrate on subjective perceptions of job quality in this study stems from a recognition of the inherent individuality of work experiences. While objective measures of job quality provide essential benchmarks, they lack the depth and richness that come from understanding the lived experiences of workers themselves (Cascales Mira, 2021; Kortmann et al., 2022). Subjective assessments allow us to capture the nuances of how job characteristics are internalized and deemed significant by employees, thereby granting us access to the multifaceted reality of work life that objective data alone cannot reveal (Stefana et al., 2021). Tailoring policies and practices to enhance job quality without considering these personal perspectives risks overlooking the diverse and intricate ways in which job quality is experienced by different individuals.

This study responds to two main gaps reported in the literature. On the one hand, studies on job quality report the need for extending the analysis to compare job quality perceptions across different countries or regions (Clark et al, 2021). On the other hand, the lack of research on the differences in job quality between genders

and age groups (Crespo et al, 2017; Antón et al, 2022). The analysis of potential differences between generations in terms of job quality is virtually non-existent. Considering that the focus of this study is on the subjective nature of job quality, the analysis of generational differences gains another relevance, taking into account the documented differences existing between several generations with regard to various aspects related to work (Boccuzzo & Gianecchini, 2015; Stiller, Garthe & Hasselhorn, 2023). As such, the present study aims to set the stage for: (1) explaining the differences in subjective job quality between countries based on the institutional and cultural theories, (2) supporting the concept of subjective job quality, and (3) examining the role of gender and generations in job quality.

Through a comparative lens, it is anticipated that the study will elucidate distinctive patterns of subjective job quality that are intricately woven with the threads of gender, unveiling nuanced disparities and insights that can significantly inform policy discourse and organizational strategies. Additionally, this research is poised to bridge a conspicuous chasm in extant literature by delving into the intergenerational dimensions of subjective job quality. With the workforce composition becoming increasingly age-diverse, understanding the aspirations and needs of various generational cohorts in relation to job quality becomes paramount. By investigating these generational differences, the study aims to offer a perspective on how the subjective nature of job quality intersects with generational factors, a discourse that has heretofore not been comprehensively explored within the European context (Crespo et al, 2017).

2. Literature Review

The theoretical framework that informs this study is grounded in institutional and cultural theories that provide a multifaceted perspective on job quality. Institutional theories suggest that job quality is largely influenced by an amalgam of regulations, labour market institutions, norms, and organizational structures within a country (Holman, 2013b). These institutions act as mechanisms that shape employment relations, worker protections, and ultimately, the quality of work that individuals experience. For example, industrial relations systems, education and training regimes, social welfare provisions, and employment legislation are instrumental in establishing the contours of job quality (Frege & Godard, 2014). Cultural theories complement this perspective by positing that job quality is not merely a consequence of institutional arrangements but also a reflection of deeper societal values and beliefs (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2022). Such theories elucidate how cultural norms dictate what is valued in the workplace, such as autonomy, work-life balance, and job security, which in turn infuse subjective interpretations of job quality (Holman, 2013b). Together, these theoretical lenses enable a more holistic understanding of why job quality differs across European countries, thereby underscoring the influence of both the structural characteristics imposed by institutions and the cultural fabric that weaves workers' perceptions and attitudes toward their jobs.

Job quality is an elusive concept, surrounded by scholarly debate both in terms of its definition and the methodological approaches to its measurement. The crux of the debate rests on whether job quality should be quantified through objective indicators or assessed via subjective evaluations. Objective measurements typically include quantifiable characteristics of work, such as employment contracts, remuneration levels, hours worked, and workplace conditions (Muñoz de Bustillo, 2011; Stefana et al., 2021). On the other hand, subjective measurements consider the workers' perceptions and experiences of their work, such as their reported job satisfaction, perceived job security, and the meaningfulness of the work they do (Cascales Mira, 2021; Kortmann et al., 2022). Advocates of objective measurements argue for a consistent, cross-individual comparative approach, which could offer empirical grounds for policy action. However, proponents of subjective assessment assert that job quality is inherently experiential and must account for workers' diverse values, expectations, and personal circumstances, thus capturing the multidimensional nature of job quality in a more nuanced manner (Leschke & Watt, 2014). The implications of these contrasting approaches are significant, with each bearing direct consequences on labour market policies, workplace interventions, and ultimately the wellbeing of the workforce. Integrating these dimensions, therefore, is not just methodologically challenging but critical for accurately reflecting job quality in the European labour market.

In exploring the intrinsic dimensions of job quality, one must consider the salient indicators that encapsulate the essence of desirable work conditions from the worker's perspective. Autonomy in the workplace, cited frequently in literature, refers to the degree of control and discretion an employee has over their tasks and methods of work (Knox et al., 2011). A closely related indicator, skill utilization, measures the extent to which workers can apply their knowledge and competencies in their current roles, which, as suggested by Simões et al. (2017), is intricately linked to job satisfaction and innovation within an organization. Job security emerges as another pivotal indicator of Intrinsic Job Quality (IJQ), reflecting the stability and predictability of employment

deemed vital for an individual's well-being (Findlay et al., 2017). These indicators are increasingly quantified and analyzed through comprehensive indices such as the European IJQ Index (Cascales Mira, 2021), which offer nuanced insights into the multifaceted nature of job quality. By incorporating factors such as diverse working conditions, contractual stability, and the meaningfulness of work, these indices lay a critical empirical groundwork for examining the various shades of job quality across differing societal contexts within Europe, setting the analytical framework upon which the subsequent examination in this paper is based.

A critical concern in the sphere of job quality pertains to the persistent disparities observed between genders. Seminal studies, such as those by Stier & Yaish (2014), and more recent analyses by Clark, D'Ambrosio & Zhu (2021), have drawn attention to the significance of occupational segregation and the resulting inequality in job quality. These works delineate the substantial role played by entrenched social roles and expectations in the perpetuation of gendered labour markets where men and women are differentially represented across occupational fields and hierarchies. The labour market is often seen through the lens of segmentation theory, with women disproportionately occupying positions in the secondary segment characterized by precariousness, lower pay, and lesser opportunities for advancement. Santero-Sanchez et al. (2015) and Ficapal-Cusi et al. (2018) provided empirical evidence of such segmentation in gender-dominated industries like hospitality and highlighted an often-observed disparity in job quality. Additionally, legal frameworks, which are effectively the formalization of social values, have a profound influence on job quality, as shown in studies by Antón et al. (2023) and Jones, Cook, and Connolly (2023). These studies offer substantial grounding for the argument that despite progress in gender equality, legally enshrined policies continue to have a differential impact on the job quality experienced by men and women, further underlining the complexity of the motherhood penalty and gender discrimination in the workplace. The literature, therefore, substantiates the existence of a complex interplay between gender, social roles, market segmentation, and legal imperatives that coalesce to systematically shape the job quality landscape in ways that often disadvantage women.

Generational differences have become a focal point in examining perceptions of job quality, with researchers acknowledging that various age groups may have divergent experiences and expectations regarding their work. Simões, Crespo and Pinto (2017) suggest that job quality is not a monolithic construct, as what is considered a quality job may vary significantly between younger and older generations. This is further explored by Friedrich and Vicari (2023), who delve into the complexity of job quality in the context of continuous digitalization and its differential impact across generations. They reveal that younger workers may perceive technological advancements as an enhancement to their job quality, through increased flexibility and opportunities for skill development. Conversely, older workers might experience these changes as a threat to job security and an increase in job demands. Despite these findings, the literature still lacks a deep, systematic analysis of how different generations define and prioritize elements of job quality.

A critical appraisal of existing scholarship reveals conspicuous lacunae, particularly in the realm of comprehensive comparative studies that extend beyond the borders of individual countries. Such research is essential to fully comprehend how institutional and cultural differences sculpt the landscape of job quality and well-being (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024). Moreover, gender and generational disparities in the perception of job quality have been flagged as critical areas warranting further scrutiny (Crespo, Simoes, & Pinto, 2017). While the dimensions of job quality outlined by Cascales Mira's European Intrinsic Job Quality Index (EIJQI) (2021) offer a nuanced understanding, there remains a pressing need to delve into the dynamics of these disparities and their ramifications for policy. Furthermore, Clark, D'Ambrosio & Zhu's (2021) emphasis on workplace gender diversity has shed light on the intricate interrelation between gender-diverse work environments and employee well-being, signalling a call to action for more granular investigations. Such inquiries must aim to untangle the complex interplay of variables within diverse socio-economic contexts, addressing critical questions of equality, representation, and fairness in European labour markets.

3. Methods

This study draws on a quantitative methodology by leveraging secondary data from the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) conducted in 2021 (Eurofound, 2022). Recognized for its comprehensive scope and the richness of its data, the EWCS provides pivotal insights into the job quality experienced by workers across various European contexts. The full sample of the EWCS is 71758 participants distributed by 37 countries. For the purpose of this study, only participants declaring being employed were considered. As such, the sample of this study is 62126 participants.

We operationalize IJQ through the lens of the European Intrinsic Job Quality Index (EIJQI), a multidimensional measure that captures the essentials of job quality, such as autonomy in decision-making, the nature of interpersonal interactions, work intensity, and the meaningfulness of work (Cascales Mira, 2021). The dimensions that emerged from the data analysis in the European Intrinsic Job Quality Index model are the workers' capacity for discretion over their work (Autonomy), the social environment in which the workers interact (Interaction), the effort in terms of psychological demands (Intensity), and the social utility of the work carried out (Meaningful). All the variables of IJQ are measured in a five-point scale. The two variables of the dimension "Intensity" were reversed in order to align with the other variables and reflect the low-high job quality. One variable from the dimension "Interaction" was not included due to the lack of data in 2021 EWCS database.

Generational cohorts were computed from the variable "age". Although there is no consensus on the year bands of generational cohorts, most of the literature (Chawla, Dokadia & Rai, 2017; Hoole & Bonnema, 2015; Park & Gursoy, 2012) defines generational cohorts as follows:

Table 1: Generational Cohorts

Generation	Year of Birth Band	Age Band
Baby Boomers	1946 - 1963	58 - 75
Generation X	1964 - 1979	42 - 57
Generation Y	1980 - 1999	22 - 41
Generation Z	2000 - 2005	16 - 21

Source: authors

The analytical approach of this research started with an exploratory factor analysis in order to examine the relationships of interdependence existing between the set of items proposed by the study of Cascales Mira (2021) with data from the 2015 EWCS. The data outputs extracted were based on the analysis of the KMO and Bartlett's sphericity test, while factor extraction used the principal components method and the Eigenvalue greater than one criteria, with the varimax rotation. The next step was to calculate the mean values for the IJQ and for each dimension (intensity, autonomy, interaction, and meaningful) for all the 37 countries. Finally, a correlation analysis was performed in order to explore the relation between IJQ and gender and the generational cohorts for each country.

The results of the exploratory factor analysis revealed four factors, with the items grouping in the four dimensions (intensity, autonomy, interaction, and meaningful) proposed by the study of Cascales Mira (2021). The total variance explained is 67.24% with a KMO of 0.748 and the dimensions present similar variances, between 15% and 20%. As such, in all the indicators, the exploratory factor analysis revealed the same results already proposed by Cascales Mira (2021) with data from 2015.

Table 2: Intrinsic Job Quality dimensions (exploratory factor analysis)

Factors	Auto-values			Saturations Squared From Rotation		
	Total	% variance	% cumulative	Total	% variance	% cumulative
1	3.043	30.434	30.434	1.996	19.964	19.964
2	1.553	15.534	45.968	1.731	17.313	37.277
3	1.114	11.142	57.110	1.502	15.015	52.292
4	1.013	10.127	67.237	1.494	14.945	67.237

Source: EWCS 2021

4. Findings

The first set of findings are related with IJQ across European countries. The mean scores for each country were calculated based on participants individual responses. Figure 1 shows the European map with the position of each country in relation to the European average. More details can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix.

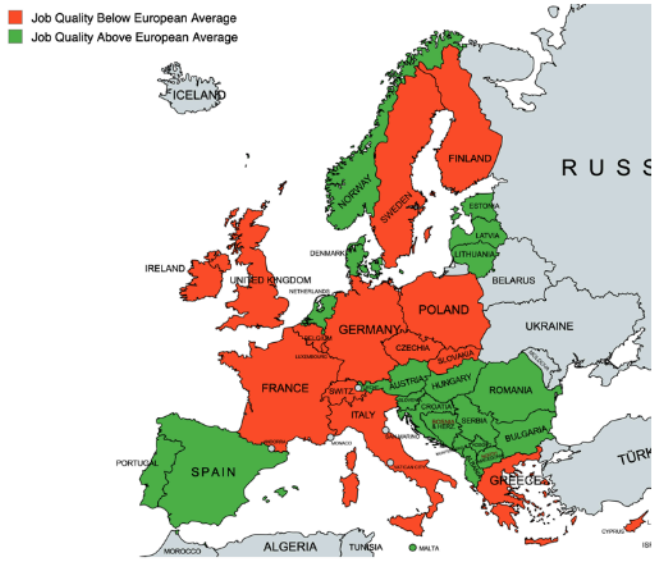

Figure 1: Intrinsic Job Quality in European Countries

Source: EWCS 2021

In geographical terms, the results allow you to identify three clearly distinct groups and one group with mixed results. The first distinct group is contradicted by the countries of the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and Spain); A second group consisting of countries in Southeast European (Bulgaria, Romenia, Hungary, Sérbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria). These two groups present IJQ values higher than the European average. A third group, consisting essentially of countries in the center of Europe (Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy and France), with intrisic Job Quality values below the European average. Finally, northern Europe has mixed results, with Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and the Balkan countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) to present an IJQ higher than average, and the British Islands (Ireland and the United Kingdom), Sweden and Finland with values below the European average.

The second set of results refer to the relation of IJQ with gender. For this purpose a correlation analysis was performed. Figure 2 shows the map of Europe, signaling the countries with significant correlations between IJQ and gender. Countries in grey revealed no correlation between this two variables. Appendix table A2 presents results in greater detail.

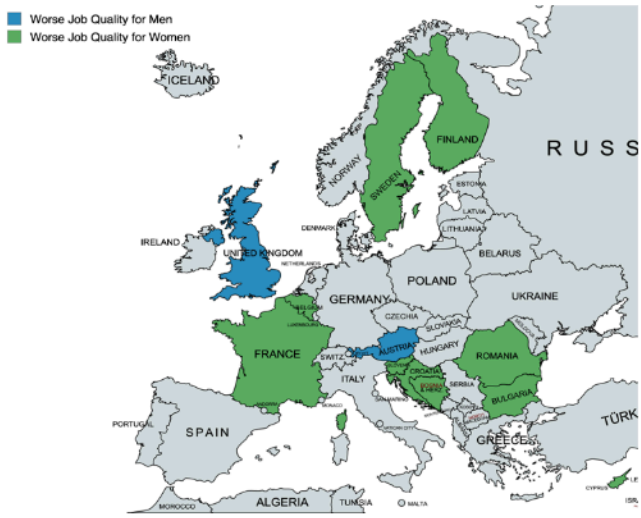

Figure 2: Intrinsic Job Quality and Gender in European Countries

Source: EWCS 2021

The results of the correlation between IJQ and gender reveal a great diversity. In fact, there are countries where the relationship between the two variables is nonexistent (most countries), and countries where the relationship is significant, but in opposite directions. For example, only 2 countries - the United Kingdom and Austria - reveal that there is a greater tendency for men to have a worst IJQ; While results for countries such as Finland, Sweden, Belgium, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Romania and Bulgaria show a greater tendency for women to have a worst IJQ.

Finally, the third set of results look at the relation between IJQ and generational cohorts. Figure 3 signals the countries with significant correlations between IJQ and generational cohorts. Countries in grey revealed no correlation between this two variables. Appendix table A2 presents correlational values in greater detail.

Regarding the relationship of generations with IJQ, the results show a clear tendency to reduce IJQ to younger generations. Such a result is significant in southern countries - such as Spain, Bulgaria and Greece - but also in some northern countries - such as Ireland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, and Latvia. Although many countries do not have a significant relationship between IJQ and generations, there is no single country where the relationship demonstrates a tendency to increase IJQ to younger generations.

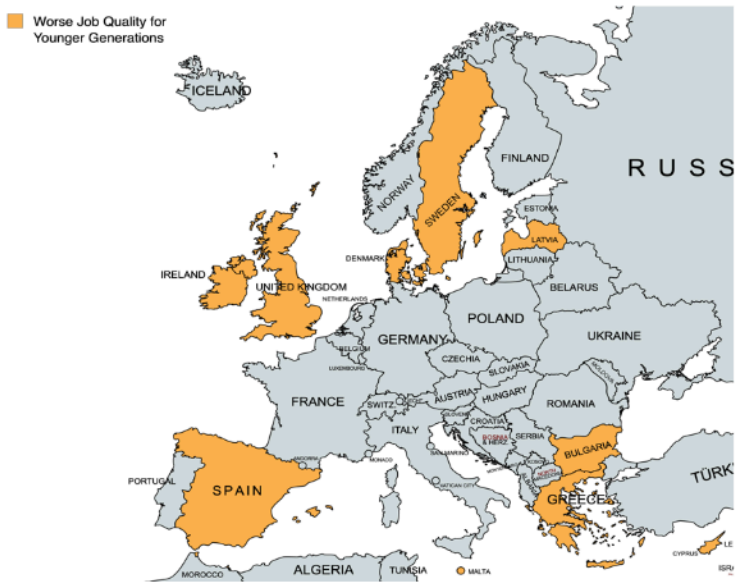

Figure 3: Intrinsic Job Quality and Generations in European Countries

Source: EWCS 2021

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this study was to examine IJQ in Europe, using the most recent data available from the 2021 European Working Conditions Survey (Eurofound, 2022). Additionally, this study looked to the relation of IJQ with gender and generational cohorts. The operationalization of IJQ followed closely the study of Mira Cascales (2021) that proposed a European Intrinsic Job Quality Index based on data from the 2015 EWCS.

The results revealed that IJQ is not uniform across European countries, but it is possible to identify country blocks: a Southwest and a Southeast blocks with a IJQ above European average and a Central block with a IJQ below European average. This results present some differences when compared with previous studies. For example, when compared with the study of Mira Cascales (2021) (see Table 3), using data from the 2015 EWCS, 6 years later some countries keep showing a high level of IJQ (such as Malta, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Slovenia, Estonia and Portugal), while others have worsened their relative position (Ireland, Denmark, Finland, and Luxembourg), notably some Nordic countries. In the opposite direction, IJQ seems to be improving in Eastern countries. This is not only demonstrated by the group of countries with IJQ above the European average, but also by the relative improvement of IJQ from countries such as Croatia and Hungary. Other previous studies (Green & Mostafa, 2012) also present the Nordic countries as the countries with the best levels of Job Quality, while in the present study these countries present mixed results, with Denmark and Norway above the European average, and Sweden and Finland below.

Regarding the IJQ dimensions, while “Interaction” and “Meaningful” present robust scores above 4.00 (on a five-point scale), “Intensity” presents the worst result with a European average of 2.66 (meaning that European employees perceive to have a relative high degree of intensity). Finally, “Autonomy” presents a medium-high result with an average of 3.63, with all countries between a lowest 3.44 and a highest 3.99.

Table 3: Countries with best IJQ (comparison)

Ranking	Present Study	Mira Cascales (2021)
1	Estonia	Malta
2	Bulgaria	Bulgaria
3	Lithuania	Ireland
4	Malta	Netherlands
5	Slovenia	Denmark
6	Portugal	Slovenia
7	Croatia	Finland
8	Hungary	Estonia
9	Netherlands	Luxembourg
10	Romania	Portugal

Note: in order to make the comparison accurate, only European Union members are included in this ranking

Regarding the relation of gender and IJQ, and despite the mixed results, the trend points to a lower IJQ among women. Notably, countries like Finland and Sweden, two Nordic countries known by their equality and diversity policies, are among those where this relation is significant. When looking at the relation between IJQ and generational cohorts, again the results are mixed, but with a clear trend towards a lower IJQ among newer generations.

Despite being exploratory, policymakers and managers can draw from this work some clues to address the issue of work quality. Firstly, the quality of work is not uniform, so it will have to be approached taking into account the particularities of each country/region. Furthermore, as it is an indicator of perception, prior expectations can be decisive. In this sense, the analysis of the cultural and institutional environment is fundamental to understanding the formation of expectations that lead to the perception of work quality in different European countries.

Despite being an exploratory study, it is important to mention that this work has some limitations. First of all, the option to consider workers' perception to measure quality at work, to the detriment of macro and more objective indicators. Although this option is based on the lack of studies with this approach (and the advantages that such approach can have), certainly the combination with more objective indicators may be an added value for later studies. Another aspect is still the cross-sectional nature of this exploratory study. This study is based on data at a specific time, not allowing to remove causal conclusions, so a longitudinal study and with a more sophisticated correlational analysis could allow other lessons to remove the IJQ and its relationship with gender and generations. Still, this study allows to launch reflection clues about the importance of the intrinsic dimension of the quality of work, but also on the dynamics underlying the development and improvement of the quality of work in Europe.

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Appendix

Table A1: Mean scores for Intrinsic Job Quality and its dimensions by country

	Interaction	Autonomy	Intensity	Meaningful	Intrinsic Job Quality
Europe	**4.26**	**3.63**	**2.66**	**4.29**	**3.71**
Austria	4.32	3.68	2.56	4.39	3.74
Belgium	4.09	3.46	2.68	4.21	3.61
Bulgaria	4.41	3.74	2.83	4.48	3.86
Cyprus	4.30	3.48	2.24	4.34	3.59
Czechia	4.09	3.50	2.65	4.18	3.60
Germany	4.15	3.65	2.57	4.27	3.66
Denmark	4.36	3.71	2.65	4.25	3.74
Estonia	4.49	3.99	2.87	4.47	3.95
Greece	4.22	3.55	2.25	4.18	3.55
Spain	4.37	3.62	2.59	4.43	3.75
Finland	4.27	3.66	2.38	3.95	3.57
France	4.05	3.45	2.62	4.15	3.56
Croatia	4.30	3.59	2.85	4.30	3.76
Hungary	4.42	3.70	2.62	4.32	3.76
Ireland	4.37	3.61	2.55	4.08	3.65
Italy	3.98	3.49	2.63	4.26	3.59
Lithuania	4.36	3.74	2.90	4.23	3.81
Luxembourg	4.21	3.57	2.57	4.26	3.65
Latvia	4.09	3.73	2.87	4.33	3.75
Malta	4.44	3.71	2.47	4.60	3.80
Netherlands	4.09	3.73	2.87	4.33	3.76
Poland	4.08	3.65	2.62	4.22	3.64
Portugal	4.30	3.59	2.86	4.46	3.80
Romania	4.40	3.60	2.50	4.57	3.76
Sweden	4.08	3.56	2.58	4.17	3.60
Slovenia	4.38	3.78	2.57	4.50	3.80
Slovakia	4.09	3.46	2.82	4.24	3.65
UK	4.28	3.66	2.50	4.03	3.62
Montenegro	4.09	3.46	2.82	4.24	3.65
North Macedonia	4.39	3.74	2.83	4.51	3.87

	Interaction	Autonomy	Intensity	Meaningful	Intrinsic Job Quality
Serbia	4.34	3.54	2.83	4.35	3.77
Switzerland	4.17	3.69	2.54	4.32	3.68
Norway	4.32	3.77	2.58	4.21	3.72
Albania	4.38	3.50	3.41	4.49	3.94
Bosnia & Herzegovina	4.32	3.64	2.93	4.45	3.83
Kosovo	4.52	3.78	3.00	4.52	3.95

Table A2: Correlations between Intrinsic Job Quality, Gender and Generations

	Gender	Generations
Europe	**-.025****	**-.011****
Austria	.52*	
Belgium	-.47**	
Bulgaria	-.083**	-078**
Cyprus	-.057*	-.085**
Czechia		
Germany		
Denmark		-.064**
Estonia		
Greece		-.074**
Spain		-.047*
Finland		-.059*
France	-.067**	
Croatia	-.090**	
Hungary		
Ireland		-.133**
Italy		
Lithuania		
Luxembourg		
Latvia		-.055*
Malta		-.058*

	Gender	Generations
Netherlands		
Poland		
Portugal		
Romania	-.097**	
Sweden	-.066**	-.083**
Slovenia	-.064**	
Slovakia		
UK	.080**	-.063**
Montenegro		
North Macedonia		
Serbia		
Switzerland		
Norway		
Albania		
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-.067*	
Kosovo		

* Correlation is significant at 5%

** Correlation is significant at 1%

Blank cells represent not significant correlations