Beyond the work-life balance

All in the labour market face the challenge of reconciling work with their private life. This challenge has an EU-wide impact on equality in society, on demographics and on the economy. Improving work-life balance is a key factor to encourage women’s economic independence and progress towards the employment target of 75% by 2020.

Beyond its impact on jobs and growth, a more favourable work-life balance would encourage fathers’ participation in childcare, as well as contribute to the well-being of children – mainly by lowering the risk of poverty if both parents are employed. Furthermore, improving work-life balance would mitigate the (partial) withdrawal from the labour market for persons caring for others and could also have positive effects on birth rates. The ageing population and looming labour shortages are two of Europe’s greatest future challenges, that will be reinforced if people feel that there are obstacles to choosing a life with children.

The current regulatory framework tends to encourage women to take family-related leave rather than men. Childcare costs and time constraints may make part-time work an attractive option to reconcile work with family commitments. However, part-time work is rarely a temporary situation: many women with children work part-time on a long-term basis, with adverse consequences on their economic independence. A “motherhood penalty” is one of the causes of persistent gender gaps in pay\(^1\) and pensions\(^2\).

Throughout the years, the EU has developed a global approach promoting a “reconciliation policy mix” to ease the constraints faced by parents. This comprises affordable and quality care services and infrastructure for children and for other dependents; arrangements for adequate family-related leave; flexible work arrangements for both women and men and neutral tax and benefits systems which make (full-time) work pay for both parents, while encouraging sharing of unpaid care work.

The Commission supports the development of reconciliation policies in several ways, according to its competences and using all instruments at its disposal:

- **EU legislation** provides individual rights and supports women’s participation in the labour market and work-(family) life-balance for women and men;

- **Country Specific Recommendations** are made in the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy to Member States lagging behind;

- **Funding**, in particular the Structural Funds, and the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, to support childcare infrastructure and projects;

- Monitoring of Member States’ performances in the field of childcare facilities towards the Barcelona targets\(^3\);

- Building of knowledge on reconciliation issues, through the improvement of data collection and specific studies\(^4\), and;

- The organisations of awareness raising events and exchanges of good practices between Member States on reconciliation policies.

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\(^1\) The gender pay gap stands at 16.5% in 2012 for the EU as a whole (Eurostat).

\(^2\) The gender gap in pensions is much higher than the gender pay gap and stands at 39% (ENEGE 2013).

\(^3\) COM(2013)322

\(^4\) Gender equality in the workforce: Reconciling work, private and family life in Europe, statistical reports European Commission 2014