



Mutual Learning Programme
Peer Review on 'Making work pay for mothers'
18-19 May 2015, St Julian's (Malta)

Executive Summary

The Peer Review focused on the **measures that countries can take to increase the accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare provision**. The discussions also considered the **broader institutional context, such as leave entitlements, working conditions and other forms of 'family-friendly' initiatives effective for increasing the active labour market participation of parents**, especially mothers. Finally, participants discussed how factors at the individual level – such as education and income level – can affect parents' ability to work and impact upon childcare policies aimed at supporting working mothers.

The event was hosted by the Employment and Training Corporation. It brought together Ministry officials and independent experts from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Slovakia, as well as representatives from the European Commission.

In April 2014, Malta introduced a free childcare scheme for children under the age of three to incentivise more parents, particularly mothers, to return or to remain in work. In a national context of low female employment rates (51%), the free childcare scheme is specifically targeted at parents who are employed and paying social security contributions, including single parents. The scheme is also open to parents who are studying (defined as those in education leading to a recognised diploma or degree). Parents eligible for the scheme are allowed to send their children to a childcare centre of their choice, free of charge.

The scheme has been positively received by working parents, service providers and the public in general. Nearly all childcare centres in Malta (97.5 %) have joined the scheme which is run through a Public Private Partnership (PPP) agreement¹. Before the introduction of the scheme in April 2014, there were 1,600 children of working parents in childcare. By December 2014, this had increased to 2,567 children; it is expected to rise to 3,200 children by the end of 2015. Working parents save in childcare costs, making work pay, and child care providers are ensured a stable income. As a result, an additional 200 mothers are estimated to have entered the workforce in low-to-medium skill jobs and 50 new childcare providers were employed in the sector. Estimates indicate that scheme would be financially self-sustaining once a 40 per cent coverage ratio is achieved. As reported, from a cost benefit analysis perspective, most probably benefits already outweigh the costs if the work-life balance factor is taken into account.

¹ Dr A. Borg (2015), *Host Country Paper: Free Childcare – A fix to the family and paid work conflict?*, available through <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=14011&langId=en>

The Maltese government succeeded in implementing the scheme in a very short time, but this has created some challenges in relation to managing demand and ensuring the availability of qualified child carers. It was also highlighted that the eligibility for the scheme does not target children from the most disadvantaged households, such as those coping with mental health problems, drug addiction or other issues. In future, the childcare scheme could be adapted to ensure that it also reaches the unemployed, the inactive and those most in need, offering them additional support measures in order to take up paid work.

Considering the state of play in Europe as a whole, Member States have introduced a number of measures to support the participation of mothers in the labour market and promote the reconciliation of private and professional life. These range from supported childcare to a developed family leave framework and flexible working arrangements. In many cases, employed parents combine multiple aspects of the 'family-friendly framework' (e.g. using both formal childcare and flexible working hours). In consequence, it is difficult to attribute labour market impacts to a single policy aimed at supporting working parents².

There are many factors affecting women's decision to return to work after having children. These include factors at the individual level (e.g. mother's education level and age), the cultural level (e.g. norms about mother's participation in the labour market) and the institutional level (e.g. the welfare regime, family-leave framework, and access to childcare).

In order to foster real gender equality, it is fundamental to consider the rights and roles of men in relation to the family and work (paid and unpaid). Supporting and incentivising fathers to take up paternity/parental leave – for example, through offering non-transferable and well-paid leave entitlements – can have many positive impacts. These include enabling fathers to spend more time with their children, facilitating the return to work for mothers, and challenging gender stereotypes more generally.

The event recognised that neither women nor men are homogeneous groups – policies must cater to the diversity within these groups. Relatedly, there is a strong need to encourage a better evaluation culture to assess impact of measures on different groups and identify properly what works and what does not work.

The European Union continues to play a key role in keeping the focus on women's labour market participation through Country Specific Recommendations (as part of the European Semester), financial support to remove obstacles to childcare services, support for fathers' engagement and consultations on key issues. Mutual learning activities provide an excellent opportunity to contribute to better policy-making and implementation.

The key policy messages from the Peer Review can be summarised, as follows:

Childcare:

- There should be **affordable provision of childcare for working parents**, which should be free for some specific groups, particularly those most in need.

² Dr K. Mantouvalou (2015), *Thematic Paper: Making work pay for mothers: An EU perspective*, available through <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=14010&langId=en>.

- Member States must develop **national quality criteria** for childcare services, for example by considering the links between childcare and early years education and ensuring ratios for the number of children relative to staff members, etc.
- **Additional measures should be implemented to support the complex needs of disadvantaged groups and enable them to access childcare services**, irrespective of their employment status (such as the long-term unemployed, job-seekers, migrants, single parents, persons with mental health issues, addiction, etc.). This requires a coordinated approach involving social services and other relevant authorities.

Family leave:

- It is important to **enable parents to make informed decisions** by offering them guidance and real choice.
- **Whilst family leave arrangements should be available to mothers, it should not be mandatory for mothers to take these**, excluding the necessary leave for health and safety reasons.
- **Leave should be well remunerated and shared between parents**, with quotas reserved for fathers and economic incentives to increase father's take up. It should be **possible to transfer the leave to grandparents and other carers**, to reflect the different realities of modern families.
- **Flexibility to combine family leave arrangements with other work-related arrangements** (flexible working conditions).

Flexible working conditions:

- Proper support should be in place to allow mothers to make informed decisions about the long-term impacts of flexible working on their careers and pensions.
- More efforts should be made to **encourage fathers to take up flexible working**.
- Steps should be considered to **incentivise employers to introduce flexible working** conditions, in order to retain working parents.

Challenging gender stereotypes:

- **Gender-sensitive education and media campaigns are needed** to raise awareness and challenge gender stereotypes.
- Role models and champions are also key to challenge perceptions and attitudes.
- The EU has a role to play in these efforts, particularly by **monitoring the implementation of the Barcelona targets**, keeping the **focus on female labour market participation in CSRs** and **offering ESF funding for fathers' engagement**.

Further information

Full report, presentations and background papers will be available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1070&langId=en&newsId=2204&moreDocuments=yes&tableName=news>