

**IMPROVING THE WORK-LIFE-BALANCE OF WOMEN AND MEN**  
**GOOD PRACTICE AND STRATEGIC LESSONS FROM EQUAL**

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## IMPROVING THE WORK-LIFE-BALANCE OF WOMEN AND MEN

### GOOD PRACTICE AND STRATEGIC LESSONS FROM EQUAL

*This document has been prepared as part of a series of papers on **Strategic Lessons from the Equal Opportunities Strand of EQUAL**. The main purpose of these papers is to underpin and help to focus **transnational cooperation within the framework of the European Social Fund (ESF)**, as a means of promoting EQUAL principles and of mainstreaming EQUAL approaches that can be directly related to the new ESF priorities for action.*

*These Strategic Lessons seek to highlight, from a European perspective, what has already been achieved by EQUAL in relation to the new ESF thematic priorities and to demonstrate those EQUAL approaches that have a potential for wider transfer within the Union. They could thus be helpful to those who are running, or are planning to set up, transnational networks in one of the thematic priority fields of the ESF.*

*This document summarises outcomes from EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs), and transnational and national thematic networks that have been concerned with the reconciliation of family and working life. This document includes annotated references to the EU policy context and relevant background material from EQUAL experience that can be accessed on-line through hyperlinks.*

## 1. BACKGROUND

### 1.1. THE CONTEXT

Reconciling a job and career with raising children and other family responsibilities and striving at the same time to participate in cultural and civic life presents an enormous challenge for many women in Europe. Reconciliation is still mainly perceived as a 'women's problem' and this is reflected in female employment patterns in almost all Member States. Women who have been absent from the labour market for some time encounter major difficulties when trying to re-enter it. One of the biggest of these hurdles is the lack of adequate and affordable care services. For example, the possibilities for full-time attendance is below 50% in more than half of the countries and not even 30% in a third of them. In many, facilities are too costly or the opening hours are not compatible with full-time work or jobs with atypical hours.<sup>1</sup>

Many women who are holding down a job also have to struggle to have a satisfying private life. Even if the flexibility of work organisation has increased in recent years, it is often the needs of enterprises for improved production processes and market competitiveness, which drive this flexibility. Consequently, the resultant flexibility does not necessarily contribute to a better reconciliation of work and private life. Part-time work is predominantly carried out by women, with 31.2% of women in the EU in part-time contracts compared with only 7.7% of men.<sup>2</sup> Statistics also show that some 37% of women with child care responsibilities work part-time, compared with only 17% of women who have no such responsibilities and 6.5% of men. Such part-time work offers fewer opportunities for training and career progression, lower salary levels and reduced access to supplementary payments and social protection benefits.

Striking a balance between work and family life is an enormous challenge for people who regularly work long, full-time hours or overtime or have atypical work schedules. Moving from an industrial society with synchronised rhythms of work to a service and information society has increased these patterns of work during the last decade.<sup>3</sup> In the EU15, more than 30% of all employees work on Saturdays, with the percentage of women being only slightly lower than that

<sup>1</sup> See [Joint Employment Report 2008/2009](#).

<sup>2</sup> Part-time arrangements vary greatly between Member States. See details in [Employment in Europe 2008](#).

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Silvera: *Articuler vie familiale et vie professionnelle en Europe*, 2002.

for men. Whilst night work remains a male domain, evening work has become a normal routine for 20% of female and 33% of male workers.

For both unemployed and employed women, the fact that they are providing the lion's share of unpaid care in the home exacerbates the problem of reconciliation. An equal distribution of family duties is still far from being a reality for most couples.

## 1.2. THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S RESPONSE

In light of this situation, reconciliation policies for both women and men are an important feature of the [European Employment Strategy](#). The European Employment Strategy links gender equality to the priorities of labour market policies. In order to reach the target of an overall employment rate of 70% by 2010, the specific target of a 60% rate for female employment must be achieved. The provision of care facilities for children in the context of the Barcelona targets, as well as for other dependants, is essential to a successful work-life balance as are flexible work arrangements. By 2010, the number of childcare facilities in each Member State should have been increased to 33% for children up to three years of age and to 90% for children between three years of age and mandatory school age.

The European Commission's '[Roadmap for equality between women and men](#)' also indicates that *"the Commission promotes the exchange of good practices between Member States, and ensures that the Structural Funds (especially the European Social Fund) finance structures and projects to promote reconciliation. The EQUAL initiative, in particular, has been promoting innovative approaches in this field."*

## 1.3. THE CONTRIBUTION OF EQUAL

Through two calls for proposals for projects in the Member States, a total of 188 Equal Development Partnerships (DPs) were chosen to work on the topic of 'Reconciling family and professional life' - 76 in 2001 and 112 in 2004. This represents a considerable investment of money, time and effort and it is certainly the largest body of experience and knowledge on this topic that has been established and exploited by any single European Programme or Community Initiative.

EQUAL DPs that focused on gender equality developed [good practices](#) that helped to facilitate reconciliation between the different spheres of an individual's life. In many cases, DPs **combined a number of activities that addressed the different obstacles** to establishing a more satisfying work-life-balance. These included:

- Creating more, and better, care services for children and other dependents;
- Setting up family support services;
- Developing flexible, family-friendly working time arrangements and other work-life-balance policies in public and private organisations;
- Forging territorial alliances for reconciliation, in particular through harmonising the opening hours of local authorities, childcare facilities, schools, stores and service providers and relating them to the schedules of the public transport systems;
- Enabling men and women to overcome traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

The examples mentioned in the remainder of this text represent only a small part of the wealth of good practices generated by EQUAL throughout Europe. At European level, a Thematic Group (ETG 4) was established early in EQUAL's life time to capitalise on and disseminate the outcomes of both the reconciliation and desegregation DPs. The Thematic Group created a 'European Model of Comprehensive Approaches to Equal Opportunities.' This is now one of the main legacies of EQUAL and it contains a section on 'Improving the Work-Life-Balance of Women and Men,' which covers the key components of policies and practices that can, when implemented as a comprehensive territorial strategy, enable more satisfying balances in the daily reality of women and men.

## 2. MORE AND BETTER CARE SERVICES

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The creation of new care services in EQUAL produced a double result: jobs for unemployed women with no/low formal qualifications and labour market access for other unemployed or inactive women, who previously were unable to gain employment due to the lack of care services. EQUAL stimulated this kind of change, particularly in Belgium, France, Italy, Luxemburg and Spain, where the decisive factor was a combination of the components described below.

### 2.1. BASIC TRAINING AND ACCREDITATION FOR UNEMPLOYED WOMEN

Integrating assessment and the validation of informal skills through the Accreditation of Prior Learning [APL] or the 'Bilan de Compétences' into basic training for care workers contributed significantly to the sustainable labour market integration of long-term, unemployed and inactive women. Valuing and certifying skills acquired, for instance, through raising a family and running a household produced a recognised set of educational credentials for a target group that did not meet the entry requirements for the care training offered by tertiary education. Some approaches to long-term unemployed and inactive women were especially successful, for example, using a portfolio method, where prior learning and new achievements were collected in an individual progress record. Training often had to be designed to accommodate the needs of inexperienced learners and programmes that were modular, shorter and more focused than regular training courses proved to be valuable. Also, women in this target group appreciated schemes that were largely work-based, which enabled them to immediately apply their new competences.

- *Some 30 women received training that was specifically designed for family care, which means care for mixed age groups, thus reflecting the pattern in families with several children. The scheme was based on a Professional Standard for Childminders established by Estonia's Professional Council of Health and Social Work. Qualification requirements were defined on five levels in the Estonian professional qualification system. The new standard included level II and III and required that the care providers possessed a range of the knowledge and skills. The training reflected all the requirements in a highly practice-oriented way. The standard also contained specific skills and knowledge related to the needs of children with disabilities, as well as additional competences to initiate these youngsters in computer literacy and foreign languages.*

*[EE: Children taken care of, Mothers at work](#)*

- *In the UK, an EQUAL partnership helped to break down the barriers facing individual carers who worked or wanted to work. City & Guilds is the UK's leading provider of those vocational qualifications that assess skills that are of practical value in the work place. As a key partner in the project, this body developed the first ever qualification designed to help carers build confidence, recognise their considerable skills, and take the next steps towards new opportunities, including employment. Learning for Living ([www.learning-for-living.co.uk](http://www.learning-for-living.co.uk)) is an online resource which carers can use anywhere they have access to the internet. It also leads to the 'Certificate in Personal Development and Learning for Unpaid Carers' that is eligible for funding under the UK Government's proposed New Deal for Skills - a programme designed to help people move from low to higher skilled work.*

*[UKgb: ACE National](#)*

- *Led by the Caritas Confederation, a DP in Luxemburg developed a training model that enabled people to work as auxiliary educators and childminders of children who were 4 years of age or younger. The target group included women and men who had not finished school, but wished to continue or re-start their studies, and women who, after having raised a family, were seeking to build a new career in childcare. A balanced mix of theoretical knowledge and practical skills was provided. Structured in modules, the theoretical part dealt with teaching and learning methods, the psychology of child development, nutrition and hygiene and it also covered legal issues in the field of childcare. The practical training was work-based and led to the employment of 17 formerly unemployed or inactive women in two new kindergartens created thanks to EQUAL.*

*[Lux: FogaFlex](#)*

EQUAL partnerships were very aware of the risk of splitting the labour market into two tiers by introducing a job category for care workers with lower qualification levels. Therefore, integrating the new approaches into regular training and pay systems was central to their activities and the strategies included: developing action plans with National Governments that included **new vocational profiles for care workers**; the early **involvement of social partners in the recognition process**; and **transferring and adapting models from other Member States**, such as France or the United Kingdom that had established APL systems.

## 2.2. IMMEDIATE TRANSITION FROM TRAINING TO THE WORKPLACE

Past experiences have shown that training women from disadvantaged groups and supporting them on the open labour market does not necessarily secure lasting employment. Therefore, EQUAL has linked training activities to the setting up of additional care services, which are both institutional and home-based. To prevent disadvantaged women from falling back into unemployment or inactivity, the partnerships have managed to have the new facilities up and running as soon as the training has been completed. Close cooperation with local governments has helped both to expand the services of existing care centres and to establish new service enterprises and thus, to create a large number of new jobs. Such positive outcomes have been greatly facilitated by involving not only the social service departments but also those that have a responsibility for economic development. In such situations, the focus of economic development on skills gaps and company needs has influenced municipalities to provide more and better care. Joining forces with economic development agencies and business consultants has also developed the support which is available to micro companies and encouraged NGOs to launch service cooperatives because not every individual can respond adequately to the challenge of self-employment.

- *A German DP linking the three largest social economy welfare federations in the country developed a labour market integration scheme that catered for 381 trainees and piloted job rotation in three local areas. Whilst staff of care institutions for the elderly undertook vocational training, their posts were filled temporarily by unemployed people, who thus gained work experience and an improved chance of a job offer. The results were excellent, and the project managed to place 70% of these replacements in permanent jobs. What made the project work was firstly the design of the training programme, which offered intensive support both for the trainees and for the host institutions. The second factor was the EQUAL partnership approach that enabled a highly efficient cooperation to be developed with the local and regional Employment Offices.*

### D: Dritt-Sektor-Qualifizierung in der Altenhilfe

- *In Spain, an EQUAL partnership operating in the Madrid area supported the creation of service companies to care for children and other dependents. This included training in infant or elderly care as well as in business management. The companies which were set up then received administrative support from the DP and financial support from the regional authorities. Three types of services were tested and are now part of regular provision: increased opening hours for existing care organisations, a service to pick up children before and after school and a home-based childcare service.*

ES: @ccede

## 2.3. LINKING CARE TO OTHER FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

Preliminary studies explored how the organisation of care and other family support services can boost female employment and help improve the work-life-balance of parents and other people with care responsibilities. Services that alleviate daily housework or provide suitable transport proved to be effective and involved:

- *Professionally led service agencies, set up thanks to EQUAL in France, Italy and Spain that converted domestic tasks into regular jobs. The same approach worked successfully for so-called 'odd jobs' ranging from minor household repairs to accompanying children or old people to leisure activities or to doctors' appointments. These service agencies experienced an increasing demand for many small tasks and some of them hired the service workers on a regular part-time or full-time basis. Others helped the women to find customers, and they*

then also assisted these customers with all of the necessary administrative procedures, such as calculating wages and drafting work contracts;

- *Inventing new ways of commuting in areas that are not well served by public transport. In one remote rural area, [an EQUAL partnership](#) bought mini vans and trained unemployed women as drivers in order to help them start a regular bus service. [A venture with similar aims](#) was launched in France, but this project introduced car sharing and bicycle rental as low-budget alternatives. In both cases, jobs were created and filled by women (and men) who had been formerly unemployed and, at the same time, the improved transport services opened up additional employment prospects for others.*

## **2.4. SECURING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE NEW SERVICES**

In the face of increasingly tight public budgets, new models of financing developed in EQUAL ensured the sustainability of the novel types of services mentioned above. Many projects launched public-private partnerships, involving local and regional authorities, employers, social partners, NGOs and service-users. This EQUAL partnership approach proved to be an ideal way of engaging the commitment of all these players because:

- *Benefiting from increased productivity and reduced absenteeism led employers to understand that financial support for needs-tailored care was a good business investment. Large companies contributed to the set-up and running costs of local facilities or, less frequently, created company-based childcare provision that also received subsidies from the local municipalities. Even SMEs that had previously seen these 'in-house' solutions as being beyond their means became partners in local care cooperatives. Tax incentives for businesses such as those that had been introduced in Italy, also played a catalytic role;*
- *Realising that adequate transport enables people to take advantage of more distant job opportunities stimulated key players to take action to ensure the survival of the services. Companies, local associations and tourist agencies became regular customers and thus helped to consolidate the new ventures. In a rural area with high unemployment rates, EQUAL was instrumental in creating a legal framework that allowed small municipalities to sub-contract transport services to the new businesses;*
- *It was possible to develop and strengthen two promising financing models. One model provided State Service Vouchers to disadvantaged families and single parents, whilst the other marketed commercial services for people who could afford to pay for this kind of support. In a few countries, partnerships succeeded in convincing companies to include these services in the benefits packages that they offer to their employees.*

## **3. WORK-LIFE-BALANCE POLICIES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ORGANISATIONS**

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The second major building block of EQUAL's strategies to improve the balance between working and private life was the introduction of comprehensive work-life-balance policies in public and private enterprises and organisations. The models that were developed included both new flexible work organisation and family support services.

### **3.1. CONVINCING EMPLOYERS**

Flexibility of work organisation has increased significantly in recent years. However, it is often the needs of enterprises with respect to the production process and the competitiveness of the markets that drive this flexibility. Consequently, it does not necessarily contribute to a better reconciliation of work and family life. There is not enough understanding on the part of employers that flexible, family-friendly work organisation can enhance the overall performance of a company.

Many companies, and particularly SMEs, shy away from the introduction of work-life-balance policies because they assume they cannot afford the costs. To overcome the reticence of employers, EQUAL partnerships collected and studied success stories from throughout Europe. Hard facts such as those presented in the following examples motivated companies to introduce

family-friendly personnel policies. An Irish DP set out to improve the reconciliation of working and family life for both women and men. Cooperating with six large public and private companies and the public authorities, it was geared to integrating a gender dimension into personnel policies and to bringing about organisational change in terms of diversity.

- *In order to establish the business case for work-life-balance, WLBN carried out an extensive literature review of what was happening in the US, Canada and the UK, and also in Ireland. In addition, it established statistics in support of the issue and how it impacts on the bottom line - the profit margin of a company. The research showed that if the workforces' needs are considered in the strategic thinking and planning of the organisation, productivity is higher; absenteeism is lower and hence the real savings to the company are manifested in retaining a higher skilled, productive staff. These findings were supported by a report from the UK Department of Trade and Industry that indicated that stress related absences cost UK industry £7.1million per week. The report also emphasised that if just 10% of non-working mothers returned to work after maternity leave, as a result of more flexible working arrangements, employers would save £39million per year. Such statistics enabled the DP to build a case to convince Irish employers of the need to harness the untapped female potential.*

[IRL: Work-Life-Balance Network \(WLBN\)](#)

In its research, a French DP assembled a number of arguments, which it could use to convince employers that with the emerging skills gap, recruiting women was essential.

- *The report pointed out that women represented a larger potential of untapped human resources than men and that they were also better prepared for tasks in the service sector. Another important point was the potential waste of public and company resources that had been invested in women's education and training if women drop out of the labour market due to the lack of family-friendly work arrangements. The research also indicated that a successful work-life-balance of employees had an influence on productivity. Absenteeism, turn-over and difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified staff were often the result of the reconciliation dilemma. A recent study<sup>4</sup> emphasised that work satisfaction is strictly proportional to income and level of education. This means that the least qualified section of the workforce is increasing its job mobility and that companies need strategies to attract and retain workers.*

[FR: Rennes égalité des temps](#)

Equipped with business arguments and good practice cases, the DPs started out to contact companies to win them over as pro-active partners of their activities. Led by a local government, the Spanish DP @CCEDE cooperated with an Employers' Organisation and a Trade Union to build up relationships with the management of targeted companies.

- *Companies were contacted via telephone and then in-depth interviews were led with HR managers. The aim of this exercise was to get an overview of the work-life-balance measures already in place and to launch a dialogue on developing and implementing the most appropriate, flexible work arrangements in each company. At the end of this explorative process, 709 companies agreed to analyse the situation of their women employees concerning recruitment, promotion and wage differentials. As a result, the HR managers started to develop a vision of reconciliation policies they could implement in their companies. The relationships established through the DP's approach, facilitated direct feedback from HR managers during the implementation of those measures. Moreover, the approach produced a 'Domino' effect, as it raised the awareness of other companies operating in the same area.*

[ES: @CCEDE](#)

DPs also succeeded in convincing shop stewards and work councils, and also regional and even national trade unions to become partners or to support their aims and activities. The WLBN DP in Ireland, for instance, took account of the fact that there is a substantial gap in knowledge of the

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<sup>4</sup> Dares, 2004 : La place du travail dans l'identité des personnes en emploi, Premières Synthèses Informations, janvier 2004, n° 01.1

meaning of work-life-balance and developed a short awareness raising and training programme for shop stewards, in partnership with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU).

- *This programme, which explained equality, diversity and work-life-balance concepts and issues, was subsequently integrated onto every shop stewards training course and delivered on behalf of ICTU. In addition, the Technical Electrical and Engineering Union (TEEU), the largest craft, manufacturing and engineering union in Ireland approached WLBN to deliver the course during their shop stewards training, and this happened several times. The coverage and scope of the training meant that a number of participants, in a variety of companies and sectors, were exposed to equality, diversity and work-life-balance training. It is important to note that this session on work-life-balance has now been established as a core part of the curriculum for shop stewards' training.*

[IE: Work Life Balance Network \(WLBN\)](#)

### **3.2. WORKING TIME FLEXIBILITY BENEFITING EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS**

To design work-life-balance programmes that benefitted both employees and employers, DPs carried out company and/or sector-specific surveys. Mostly, this included an analysis of existing reconciliation policies and a needs assessment for both workers and companies. The DP, operating the Red Local Consortium, a local network for reconciliation in the Madrid region, combined a literature review on flexible work arrangements in companies, involving the local, regional, national and European level, with a study analysing the situation of workers and the reconciliation policies of local enterprises.

- *Focusing on local companies, and using of sample of 218 workers (118 men and 100 women), the DP carried out quantitative and qualitative research that showed that the main problem was not the lack of services, but the reconciliation costs, which must be met by the workers themselves in order to care for children or other dependants. Another part of the research screened the existing provision of work-life-balance arrangements in the local companies. It was found that only 84 workers living within the Red Local area knew that such schemes existed and there was a lack of company policies on flexible, family-friendly working time arrangements. Finally, the study presented a plan to implement innovative actions for reconciliation and flexible working conditions in the territory. It concluded that two major steps must be taken. The first was increasing the time which women and men could devote to family and social life and the second was transferring a larger proportion of childcare and care of elderly and sick people to the public sphere which, in turn, would create qualified jobs and professional careers for many women.*

[ES: @CCEDE](#)

The survey of the Equilibre DP, in France, focussed on the hotel and catering sector where the flexibility of working hours is crucial. However, ACCOR, the lead partner, was keen to gain a better understanding of the needs of its employees and to track good ideas for reconciliation.

- *The survey covered employees of the hotel and catering sector and also trainees and jobseekers, in five pilot regions, in France. Whilst respondents classified the ACCOR Group as an employer with good training and career opportunities, the results showed that, compared to other economic sectors, wages were only at a low to medium level, which required employees to look for affordable housing. This, in turn, meant that people lived in districts that were far away from their places of work and needed a lot of time to commute. A job in this sector also meant that an employee never had the same life-rhythm as his or her friends and family. The choice to have children was a real problem, if women and men wanted to become managers. However, the interviewees also proposed a range of activities to improve the situation. The DP considered the process of the survey itself as a very important first step to making a large number of people aware of the work-life-balance problems and to kicking-off a reflection about what could be done.*

[FR: Equilibre](#)

Based on their analyses, EQUAL DPs supported companies in condensing a normal full-time working week to four days, introducing periodic home working and tele-work, combining longer and shorter days and working longer hours over a defined period to accrue non-working blocks of time. These banked hours can, for instance, be used during schools holidays or family



emergencies. Employers came to recognise that both job performance and productivity can be increased through such solutions.

### 3.3. TACKLING THE DISADVANTAGES OF FLEXIBILITY

EQUAL DPs tried to ensure that people were not penalised through flexible working. From the beginning, they emphasised that, even if the new working time arrangements were particularly attractive to women with care responsibilities for children and other dependants, they should not be labelled as 'women-only programmes' but address both women and men. A French DP worked with food industry employers in Brittany where companies were facing difficulties in attracting and retaining a qualified workforce. Women (and men) with small children could not take up vacancies because they involved shift work that was incompatible with the opening hours of childcare services.

- *The DP adapted a model that was based on the fact that whilst some production units are running full blast early in the morning and requiring large work teams, they may function with a much smaller team during the later part of the day. The DP piloted the model with a company whose production was organised in two shifts of eight hours. The participants of this 'young parents' scheme' worked in two different teams every day, and thus, increased the workforce in certain units during peak hours. The jobs could also be performed during the day, instead of working very early in the morning or in the evening, when childcare centres were not open. This produced a clear win-win situation for both employers and employees!*

#### [F: Développement des conditions favorables à l'activité des femmes en Finistère](#)

Improving qualification levels and time management skills was one of the approaches used by the Cityctac-tactic DP, in France, to tackle the disadvantages of the flexible working time arrangements at Monoprix supermarkets.

- *One of the local pilot projects was implemented at the store, in Lille, to help employees gain free time and improve their living conditions and access to training. The DP offered basic ICT training and Internet skills to employees. This was intended to help them to meet the most essential job skills requirements and to save precious time through using the Internet in their private lives, but the women found it difficult to afford the time for training. The DP's innovative scheme changed the situation, as employees were able to barter each hour they spent on this training for an hour of housework, supplied by a local social economy enterprise and paid for by the company.*

#### [FR: Cityctac-tactic](#)

In some Member States, EQUAL managed to change atypical working patterns that severely hampered reconciliation. In France, EQUAL partnerships linked new work schedules to a process of reassessing and reorganising working environments and job content and this resulted in:

- *Dismantling the broken shifts that were the usual pattern for the cleaning of all the municipal buildings of the city of Rennes. Previously, the predominantly female staff had to work an early morning and a night shift to make enough income. Thanks to EQUAL, they were able to have full-time jobs and to opt for a schedule from 7.30 to 15.30 or from 10.45 to 18.45. Previously one person had been assigned a certain number of square metres but under the new arrangement two women shared the work of cleaning a larger space that was calculated in such a way that one could replace the other in case of absence. As a result of the arrangement, absenteeism dropped by 30%;*

#### [FR: Rennes Egalité des Temps](#)

- *Reducing the alarming turnover and absenteeism of the female staff of a large hotel chain; For example, a new solution was found for receptionists who had been covering the two busiest periods – the morning when guests were checking out and the evening when new arrivals were piling up. The free hours in between did not really help to improve family life, since employees had to leave for their second shift just as their children or partners would be returning home. The establishing of a multi-skills programme was the turning point, as*

employees were able to be trained to undertake more than one job. As a result, a person could work a full day, first as a receptionist and then as a waiter.

[FR: Equilibre](#)

### 3.4. MEETING CARE AND OTHER FAMILY NEEDS

Another successful approach to meeting reconciliation needs and at the same helping companies attract and retain qualified staff was the introduction of help desks. In [Germany](#), [Italy](#), [Spain](#) and [Portugal](#), EQUAL training programmes enabled women, both employed and unemployed, to provide counselling and practical advice to other employees.

- *One of the DP members of the French Equilibre project was 'Bien Etre A la Carte,' a tailor-made service programme designed and paid for by the ACCOR group to accommodate the needs of its employees, and sold as a commercial service to other companies. The aim was to help people find quick solutions to practical problems, in order to be more productive at work. Although 'Bien Etre A la Carte' existed before the launch of EQUAL, a number of employees targeted by the Equilibre project benefitted from its solutions that included everything from a fully-fledged concierge service to a hotline, providing information and advice on appropriate childcare or domestic services.*

[FR: Equilibre](#)

The help desks, in many cases, become permanent facilities and also ensured that people on parental leave could stay in touch with their company. They facilitated participation in training and in regular or occasional part-time work. During, and especially towards the end of, parental leave, the help desk supported returners in preparing for any changes in the workplace that may have occurred during their absence.

- *In the Con-tempo DP, the help desk focused on the period following the return to work after a period of maternity or parental leave, which is a very difficult moment for many women. The mothers have to reorganise their life and to cope with the new demands of the world of work. An exchange of ideas and experiences with peers helped them to feel less lonely and enabled them to re-establish a positive relationship with their jobs and colleagues. The DP organised training sessions and discussions to address these issues and also to update the returners on worker's rights and equal opportunities legislation.*

[IT: Con-Tempo](#)

- *The German Gender Net DP offered services related to parental leave that, in Germany, is extremely generous in terms of time, offering up to three years. In total, 85 % of those entitled to parental leave are actually making use of it and are predominantly female. This can create a difficult situation for companies in terms of replacement staff and retraining on return and so to help both parents and enterprises cope, the DP offered a variety of support services. It encouraged those on parental leave to stay in touch with the world of work and to participate in training programmes tailored to their specific needs. Counselling and advice was offered to employers and HR managers to initiate and develop on-going contact with their employees during the leave and family-friendly working time solutions which facilitated their return.*

[D: Gender Net](#)

### 3.5. TURNING WORK-LIFE-BALANCE SCHEMES INTO A PROCESS OF CHANGE

In some countries, work-life-balance programmes such as those described above were only the beginning of a long-term process of change. Milestones were reached and the progress made indicates that lasting impact will be achieved, as follows:

- *In Italy, [Portugal](#) and [Spain](#), EQUAL involved the social partners in a geographical area or economic sector, and succeeded in influencing the content of collective bargaining. Awareness raising and training for decision-makers in trade unions and employers' organisations led to "Memoranda of Understanding" being signed. These committed employers and unions to negotiating work-life-balance measures for women and men as part of collective agreements and to include relevant EQUAL achievements as part of these*

measures. In Spain, collective agreements granted reduced working hours and flexible leave schemes for parents and employees with care responsibilities that went beyond the current legal provision;

- *In Ireland, a large partnership linking six major companies operating in key economic sectors developed a model for a 'continuum of change.' The idea was that organisations moved through four developmental stages that were described as formative, broadening, deepening and mature. To enable all partners to embark on this continuum, EQUAL established a Work-Life-Balance Group in each of the participating organisations that involved representatives of management and trade unions who together assessed the work-life-balance provision of the company. The next step was to apply the work-life-balance criteria that were based on research and good practices and to identify from which stage of the continuum the organisation should begin. Diagnostic checklists produced by the partnership assisted the organisations during the evolutionary processes that produced considerable, positive, cultural change.*

## 4. TERRITORIAL ALLIANCES FOR RECONCILIATION

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Many EQUAL partnerships forged territorial coalitions aimed at turning a local area or region into a better place to live and work, particularly for people with care responsibilities. Time Bureaus or Agencies, created and/or strengthened by EQUAL, especially in France, Italy and Spain provided the most successful examples in this context. They attempted to harmonise 'city times' or in other words the opening hours of a range of facilities and services to make them more suitable for working parents.

### 4.1. JOINING FORCES FOR CHANGE

Creating local powerful, pro-active alliances was the most important factor in the operation of efficient and successful Time Agencies and four strategies proved to be particularly effective:

- **Placing the agencies under the direct responsibility of a mayor** or high-level regional decision-maker helped to emphasise the policy priority accorded to eliminating gender disparities in the use of time;
- Pleading **business cases** for the approach was essential in developing a common vision of the benefits that would accrue to the region and also to each partner;
- Convening committees or commissions **assembling the top decision-makers**, as this intensive cooperation of decision makers and, where appropriate, practitioners paved the way to **inter-agency approaches**, which were crucial to the success of these activities;
- **Involving various groups of citizens** in surveys that identified the most alarming 'time eaters' in their daily lives. In parallel, studies were carried out to explore the needs and constraints of companies in terms of more flexible work organisation. Information campaigns, town meetings and round tables created **a new 'societal dialogue' in the territory**.

### 4.2. HARMONISING 'CITY TIMES': PUBLIC AUTHORITIES AS PIONEERS

By creating one-stop-shops, local and regional governments generated the momentum for the activities of all partners. Based in a single location, one-stop-shops helped people save precious time by catering for almost every type of demand from getting a copy of a birth certificate, through using health and social care services, to setting up an appointment with a careers guidance or placement officer.

- *In France, EQUAL was instrumental in the emergence of 'neighbourhood town halls' that had opening hours that suited the work schedules of the population.*
- *The DP 'Rennes Egalité des Temps' created another kind of one-stop-shop. These centres specialised in early childhood and educational activities, financial aid and health issues like family planning, pregnancy care and supporting couples in crisis situations. In some locations this impressive variety of services was complemented by an emergency childcare centre, a leisure time hub for children, a toy library and a unit for daily life advice.*

- A very specific one-stop-shop was developed in the city of Poitiers by the '[Coordination des temps de vie dans les territoires](#)' DP, which has now been adopted by many other cities. The approach centred on the start of the school year and before the school began, parents could find all the relevant information in one place. Everything that had previously taken two half days, could be dealt with in less than 45 minutes and, in addition, parents could enrol their children in extra-curricular activities, buy transport coupons and get luncheon vouchers. These 'guichets uniques' were also a showcase for non-profit organisations and an opportunity to welcome newcomers to the city.

An important feature of these territorial alliances was the widening of the concept of reconciliation. DPs not only enabled women and men to lead fuller and more satisfying lives that include time to socialise with friends and time to participate in cultural and civic activities.

- A study carried out by a French DP revealed that the timings and venues of cultural events almost entirely excluded people with care responsibilities and ways of remedying this situation were tested in the city of Rennes. For instance, midday concerts were organised in an industrial complex and the offer was a package that included lunch and drinks, all for a reasonable sum of somewhere between 6 to 10 euro. Each concert was fully booked and 80% of the audience was female. Another example was the 'Happy Hours' at the Rennes Theatre where performances took place between 18.00 and 20.00, so that people could go to the theatre straight after work and parents could also leave their children in the theatre's crèche.

[FR: Rennes Egalité des Temps](#)

### 4.3. SMARTER TRANSPORT SOLUTIONS

For years, gender equality bodies and NGOs have been pushing to adapt bus and train services to the needs of working women, in most cases unsuccessfully. EQUAL helped to link that goal to both the policy priorities of local or regional governments, and to the business interests of transport companies. This was very much in line with the aim of governments to reduce environmental pollution and traffic jams through minimising individual car travel.

- In Barcelona, a DP worked with the Metropolitan Transport Corporation and the bus services of the neighbouring local communities to integrate the different systems, which had been operating independently. The pilot actions developed thanks to EQUAL included the analysis of an urban bus line, to check if and how its route connected the areas and services which were the most crucial to people with family responsibilities. Other pilots facilitated the mobility between the communities where people live and their places of work in industrial zones, and the transport between the different municipalities and the commercial areas.

[ES: Tempora](#)

- In Italy, the municipality of Prato participated in an EQUAL DP and joined forces with the employers' consortium of a huge industrial zone. The consortium was keen to reduce the pollution caused by the daily traffic jam of its employees driving to work. Car sharing and a transport system using electric and low-emission cars were introduced. Whilst the municipality invested in the cars, the consortium covered the running costs of the new service, significantly reducing both pollution and the employees' commuting time.

[IT: 'Il Laboratorio del Tempo'](#)

## 5. LEARNING NEW, AND UN-LEARNING OLD, GENDER ROLES

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EQUAL promoted equality in unpaid care and family work through strategies and concepts that triggered changes in roles and task sharing between women and men. In some Member States, these activities were combined with strategies that addressed young people, and even children and challenged stereotypes during the crucial stages when gender roles are determined. A variety of actions were tested and carefully monitored and the most successful of these are presented below.

## 5.1. MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

In terms of measurable changes, the most significant EQUAL media campaign was implemented in the Netherlands. It was shaped like a marketing strategy for a new commercial product. Led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Dutch campaign adopted the slogan of [‘Men Taking the Lead’](#).

- *The DP’s message was simple: if more men were prepared to become more involved with tasks at home, more women would be able to enter the labour market and to reconcile their working and family lives in a more satisfying way. The DP used a sophisticated mix of activities to initiate ‘discussions at people’s kitchen tables,’ as the first decisive step towards change. These discussions were stimulated by a bombardment of commercials on TV and on the radio, supported by press conferences, a website, a series of talk shows and countless events throughout the country. Together with large companies, NGOs and with the country’s top football team, the project organised activities to let fathers experience the fun and satisfaction they can be gained by spending quality time with their kids. The impact of the DP’s efforts was monitored and according to the final analysis, 59% of men and 52% of women reported that they had discussed the division of family tasks at least once a month. Between April 2003 and May 2004 the number of men who had negotiated task sharing agreements rose from 67% to 88%, whilst the percentage among women remained stable at 72%.*

*[NL: Journey along Cultures](#)*

Transnational cooperation and European thematic work have transferred these good practices from the Netherlands to EQUAL Partnerships in other Member States such as Belgium and France, where the Ministry of Labour has included this type of activity within the range of measures that are eligible for financing from the European Social Fund between 2007 and 2013.

## 5.2. LEARNING BY DOING MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Practical training in, and exposure to, new roles and tasks has proved to be particularly successful when account is taken of the specific cultural context. In France, where kindergartens or schools are rarely meeting points for parents, new neighbourhood centres have been welcomed by both women and men.

- L’Ecole des parents (School for Parents), located in Paris, organised workshops through which parents learned about practical solutions to task sharing between mothers and fathers. Male participants claimed that learning from peers who were more advanced in trying out new gender roles helped them to seriously consider similar moves, for instance by taking parental leave. In other cities ‘parents’ cafés’ invited men and women to give voice to what they felt or thought about old and new gender roles. Parents were also encouraged to meet with, or without, their children and to embark on practical activities which involved role changes. Men and women discovered that they possessed skills that were often labelled as typical of the other gender, such as cooking, constructing technical toys, playing football, telling stories, making music or singing lullabies, and that they enjoyed using them.

*[FR: Coordination des temps de vie dans les territoires](#)*

Italian DPs based their strategies for attitudinal changes on the assumption that men liked to plan and implement projects over a certain period of time, as opposed to being permanently ‘condemned’ to household or care tasks. Thus, project work was used to pave the way for an improved and lasting male involvement in family duties.

- Laboratorio del Tempo, the City of Prato DP, took men on a journey of change and supported them in reaching a concrete goal: for instance completing a course in neonatal care, dedicating Saturday mornings to spending quality time with their children or preparing a meal for the family once a week, including shopping and cleaning up the kitchen afterwards. Through [‘men only’ courses](#) other Italian DPs helped men to assess and improve their skills in household management. The programmes provided learning by doing domestic jobs such as ironing, cooking, washing or cleaning a house. At the same time, they said that they had become more aware of both the value and the burden of unpaid family work.

### **5.3. ADDRESSING GENDER FROM KINDERGARTEN TO UNIVERSITY**

In working with children and young people, EQUAL highlighted the prevailing attitudes of current parents and explained the roles and the vocational choices that were available to future generations of parents.

- *Training and further education of kindergarten and primary school teachers developed by EQUAL enabled them to help boys and girls explore existing gender differences and reconsider stereotypical perceptions of men and women. For instance, role patterns discovered in the kindergarten groups were linked to the analysis of the different tasks performed by mothers and fathers at home. Role play and discussions triggered questions about the causes of inequality and on how the children envisaged their future adult lives. Almost inevitably, this process stimulated further discussions within the children's own families. Didactic material and tools prepared by the projects were used in the wider dissemination of this approach.*

*ES: Madrid a city of reconciliation*

- *A Spanish partnership created and tested innovative curricula for primary and secondary schools, which challenged traditional gender roles and also the subtle integration of the related stereotypes into science and technology. Rather than offering extra general courses on equal opportunities, these schemes used household processes, such as cooking, baking or ironing to explain certain phenomena in chemistry and physics. The model succeeded as youngsters, and particularly boys, began to realise the value of unpaid female work and to accept more responsibilities at home. The scheme created a lot of media attention and prompted much discussion amongst teachers and parents and as a result, the educational authority is now considering the general adoption of this EQUAL approach.*

*ES: Tempora*

## **6. SOME CONCLUSIONS FOR ESF OP DESIGNERS AND IMPLEMENTERS**

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The effective reconciliation of work and family life is one of the persistent obstacles that have hampered the equal treatment of women and men on the labour market. The EQUAL good practices presented in this document have generated significant changes, the full impact of which will only become visible over the next few years. However, EQUAL has successfully launched a process which incorporates the key elements of work-life-balance policies and practices in the local areas and regions as well as in the public and private organisations that have been involved in its Development Partnerships.

The EQUAL achievements include a wealth of curricula, methodologies and tools that can support administrations at national, regional and local level and also public and private organisations in improving the work-life-balance of women and men.

New ESF action up to 2013, and the resources which have been made available, could be harnessed to broadening this body of evidence and to accelerate the dissemination and transfer of good practice. Future transnational cooperation and exchange activities could focus on reinforcing and promoting approaches that extend the experience gained within EQUAL on reconciliation. This would reduce the 'implementation gap' and boost the quality of ESF mainstream action to promote a better reconciliation between the family and professional lives of the citizens, and particularly the female citizens, of the European Union.