



Brussels, 8.5.2018
COM(2018) 273 final

**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on the development of childcare facilities for young children with a view to increase
female labour participation, strike a work-life balance for working parents and bring
about sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe (the "Barcelona objectives")**

Executive summary

The availability, accessibility and affordability of high quality childcare facilities are crucial for enabling women, and men, with caring responsibilities, to participate in the labour market¹. High quality early childhood education and care is also an important tool to tackle possible social disadvantages of children² and is good for the cognitive and social development of children from an early age³.

As far back as 2002, the Barcelona European Council⁴ recognised this situation and set objectives with regard to the availability of high quality and affordable childcare facilities for pre-school children, through two targets, i.e. 90 % of children from age 3 until mandatory school age and 33 % of children under 3.

The aim of this report is to assess, as part of the implementation of the Commission's Communication supporting work-life balance for working parents and carers⁵, to what extent Member States have progressed towards implementing the Barcelona objectives since the last report in 2013.

All in all, the Barcelona target has been generally reached for children under the age of 3 for the EU-28, covering 32.9% of children in the EU, even if important differences persist among Member States.

The target of 33 % has largely been reached in 12 Member States according to the most recent data of 2016, while in 7 EU Member States out of 12 between 33 % and 49 % of children have access to childcare and in 5 EU Member States 50 % or more of children have access to childcare. In remaining 16 Member States, less than 33% of children have access to childcare, with 10 Member States where less than 25 % of children in the smallest age group participate in childcare.

The Barcelona target has not yet been reached for children from 3 to mandatory school-going age. As of 2016, 86.3 % of children from 3 to the mandatory school-going age participate in formal childcare or attend preschool. The Barcelona target has been reached in 12 Member States and all the rest of 16 Member States have not yet reached the target.

Availability and use of childcare is influenced by several factors: namely legal entitlement to childcare, accessibility and quality. Also the adaptability of the services to the needs of parents, including distance to the childcare facilities and opening hours adapted to working patterns and needs, plays an important role.

As caring responsibilities are the main reason for low female labour market participation, counting to 370 billion euro a year of loss for Europe, the Barcelona objectives, adopted by the European Council in 2002, are still of crucial importance in 2018.

¹ Commission's Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016/-2019

² Commission Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage', COM (2013)112 final of 20.2.2013 and SWD(2017), 258 final.

³ Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework (ET2020), OJ 2009/C 119/02.

⁴ Presidency Conclusions, Barcelona European Council 15-16 March 2002

⁵ Commission's Communication 'An initiative to support work-life balance for working parents and carers', COM(2017) 252 final of 26.4.2017.

1. Policy context

The underrepresentation of women is one of the most persistent problems affecting the labour market in all European Union (EU) Member States. The overall gender employment gap, that is the difference in employment rates of women and men, is 11.6 percentage points, going up to 18.2 percentage points in full-time equivalents.⁶ The resulting economic loss amounts to 370 billion euro a year.⁷

The main reason for low female labour market participation is the caring responsibilities disproportionately born by women compared to men. Women have caring responsibilities at various times in their lives, but all the more so when they have young children. In 2016, the average employment rate of women with one child under 6 was 9 percentage points lower than that of women without young children, with the difference amounting to above 30 percentage points in several Member States. In some Member States, 25 % of inactive women are inactive due to caring responsibilities.

The availability, accessibility and affordability of high quality childcare facilities are crucial for enabling women, and men, with caring responsibilities, to participate in the labour market.

As far back as 2002, the Barcelona European Council⁸ recognised this situation and set objectives with regard to the availability of high quality and affordable childcare⁹ facilities for pre-school children, through two targets:

"Member states should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010

- *to 90 % of children from age 3 until mandatory school age; and*
- *to 33 % of children under 3 years of age."*

The European Council required these targets to be reached by 2010. In its 2013 report assessing the state of play, the European Commission concluded that these were not reached for either category of children, 0 to 3 and 3 to mandatory school-going age¹⁰.

In 2013, the European Commission's report on the Barcelona objectives¹¹ stated that, although progress was made since 2002, the provision of childcare was still not in line with the Barcelona targets and that significant improvements were needed to achieve a satisfactory level of availability, especially for children under 3 :

- Only 6 Member States managed to reach the targets for both age categories (0-3; 3 to mandatory school-going age) in 2011¹²;
- 3 Member States reached only the target for children from 3 until mandatory school age¹³;
- 4 Member States reached only the target for children from 0 to 3¹⁴.

⁶ Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 2016.

⁷ Eurofound (2016), *The gender employment gap: challenges and solutions*.

⁸ Presidency Conclusions, Barcelona European Council 15-16 March 2002, available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/71025.pdf.

⁹ The reference to 'care', 'childcare' and 'formal childcare' in the Barcelona objectives includes education, insofar as children are given care not only in childcare facilities but also in pre-schools before the mandatory school-going age. Childcare facilities for children under mandatory school age therefore include day nurseries and other day care centres such as family day care, professional certified child minders in the home of the child or the childminder, pre-school education or equivalent mandatory school education and centre based services outside school hours. Early childhood education and care and preschool education are equally used as synonyms in this report.

¹⁰ In this report, to stay in line with the terminology used in the Barcelona Council conclusions, mandatory school age or mandatory school-going age refers to mandatory primary school-going age, in most countries around the age of 6.

¹¹ European Commission, Barcelona objectives (2013), available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/130531_barcelona_en_0.pdf.

¹² Belgium, Denmark, France, Sweden, Slovenia and the UK

¹³ Germany, Italy and Estonia.

¹⁴ Luxembourg, Netherlands, Spain and Portugal.

The Commission's report not only focused on the availability of childcare, but also included accessibility, affordability and quality of available childcare.

Indeed, a full labour market participation of women requires childcare to be available full-time and to meet the demands of work during the parents' working hours and school holidays. What's more, childcare is really only an option if female workers can afford it and feel sufficiently assured of its high quality.

This is why the Barcelona objectives, and the included targets, were also restated in the European Pact for Gender Equality (2011-2020) and referred to in the Europe 2020 Strategy.

Besides the regular monitoring of the implementation of the Barcelona objectives, the availability of affordable and high quality childcare is monitored as a key way of increasing women's labour market participation in the European Semester process. This is the EU's annual economic governance framework aimed at monitoring, preventing, and correcting problematic economic trends¹⁵.

In the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Commission adopted on 26 April 2017 the work-life balance initiative, a set of legislative and non-legislative measures modernising the current legal and policy frameworks regarding family leaves¹⁶, flexible working arrangements and formal care services, and tackling economic disincentives for second-earners to work. Improving the quality, affordability and accessibility of childcare is an important part of this initiative, which is done by regular monitoring of the targets, improving data collection and promoting the use of the European Structural and Investment Funds to invest in social infrastructure.¹⁷

Affordable and high quality childcare services do not only help reconciliation of work with family life, conducive to labour market participation of women and strengthening gender equality. They also help children integrate socio-economically and develop their skills from an early age.¹⁸

The 2013 Commission Recommendation on 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage'¹⁹, endorsed by the Council in November 2013, urges the Member States to invest more in policies on children to strengthen their rights, reduce child poverty and improve well-being of children. It is part of a much wider 'social investment package' (SIP) giving Member States policy guidance on life-long social investment. The Recommendation stresses that there is ample evidence that disadvantaged children who benefited from childcare services are less likely to drop out of secondary school and face unemployment, thus avoiding a number of other social problems.

Furthermore, the 2009 Education Council adopted education and training benchmarks under the Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework (ET2020)²⁰, including one for children between 4 and the mandatory school-going age²¹. According to this benchmark or target, at least 95 % of children

¹⁵ In 2017, 6 countries received a country specific recommendation to address issues related to childcare as part of obstacles to female labour participation. In 2018, childcare was highlighted as a point of attention in 17 country reports, focusing on specific country relevant aspects, such as availability, affordability, accessibility of childcare and female employment participation.

¹⁶ Family leave includes maternity, paternity and parental as well as carers' leave.

¹⁷ See Commission's Communication 'An initiative to support work-life balance for working parents and carers', COM(2017) 252final of 26.4.2017.

¹⁸ Evidence on the importance of high quality childcare is also provided by several research projects financed under the EU's 7th Framework Programme for Research and the Horizon 2020 Societal Challenge 6 (Europe in a changing world, Inclusive, innovative and reflective Societies). These projects address the role of Early Childhood Education and Care as far as inequalities and poverty & children's well-being and development are concerned, as well as the choice of different child care options, taking into account families' specificities (socio-economic, cultural) and different institutional contexts.

¹⁹ See, SWD(2017), 258 final.

²⁰ Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework (ET2020), OJ 2009/C 119/02.

²¹ In the Education and Training Strategic Framework (ET2020), mandatory school-going age is referred to as the age for starting compulsory primary education.

from 4 to mandatory school-going age should participate in early childhood education and care²². The objective of the ET2020 is to improve national education and training systems to make the EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

Besides the Barcelona objectives, the Commission regularly monitors the implementation of the education and training targets included in the ET2020, including the target for children from 4 until mandatory school-going age.²³ In 2017, it found that 94.8 % of children were participating in early childhood education and care on average in the European Union. The ET 2020 target may therefore be considered to be generally reached. In the light of this finding, in its Communication on Work-Life Balance, the Commission announced a review of the existing ET2020 target. It confirmed this in its Communication of 17 November 2017 on strengthening European identity²⁴ suggesting that the 95% target could be extended to children from 3 years until mandatory school age. Such a revision would entail an increase of the existing Barcelona target for children between 3 years old and mandatory school age by 5 %. In addition, the Commission committed to consider the quality of childcare systems.

In May 2018, the Commission presented a proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, as part of the Education Package²⁵, accompanied by a Commission Staff Working Document. The aim of the proposal is to encourage and support Member States in their efforts to improve access to and the quality of their early childhood education and care systems. The underlying rationale is that the early years of a person's life are the most formative for developing the basic skills and learning capacities that can influence greatly later education and job prospects and broader life achievements and life satisfaction.

The European Pillar of Social Rights, endorsed by Member States on 17 November 2017, has confirmed the importance of formal childcare structures. The 'Social Scoreboard' accompanying the Pillar monitors the implementation of principle 11 of the Pillar on childcare, in particular of children under 3 years.

All of the above shows that access to affordable and high quality early childhood education and care serves three main purposes:

- to enhance the labour market potential of women with children;
- to develop the cognitive and social abilities of pre-school children;
- to strengthen the social inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds²⁶.

The aim of this report is to assess, as part of the implementation of the Commission's Communication supporting work-life balance for working parents and carers, to what extent Member States have progressed towards implementing the Barcelona objectives since the 2013 report. This assessment, together with the conclusion that the ET2020 has generally been reached, shows that time may have come to consider an overall coherent revision of all targets for children between 0 and the mandatory school-going age.

²² Early childhood education and care, the term used in the Education and Training Strategic Engagement, is used in this report as synonymous with childcare, the term used in the Barcelona objectives.

²³ European Commission (2017), Education and Training Monitor 2017, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2017_en.pdf.

²⁴ Communication from the Commission to the EP, Council, EESC and CoR on Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture – the European Commission's contribution to the Leaders' meeting in Gothenburg on 17 November 2017, COM (2017) 673final.

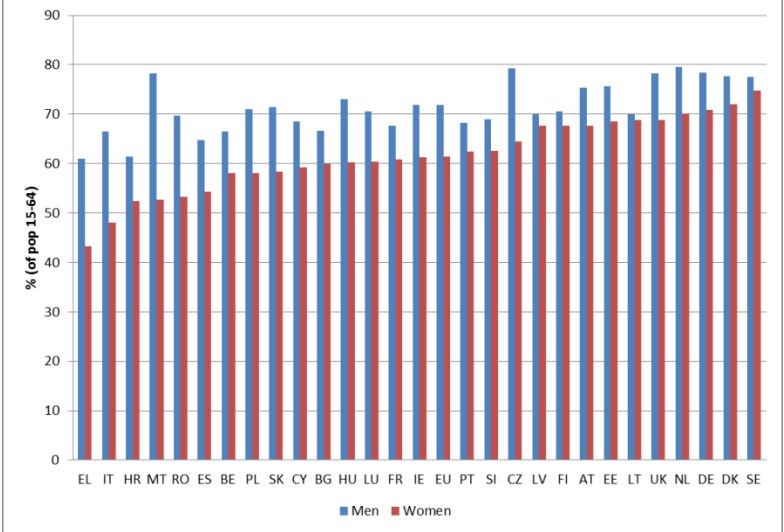
²⁵ Commission Proposal for Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.

²⁶ Taking stock of the 2013 Recommendation on 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage', SWD(2017), 258 final.

2. The importance of childcare to increase women's labour market participation

While female labour market participation has increased, there is still an employment gap between female and male labour market participation in all Member States. For the EU-28, the gap is 11.6 percentage points and 18.2 percentage points in terms of full-time equivalent. Lithuania has the lowest gap (2 %) and Malta the highest (27 %).

[Figure 1: Employment rate of women and men aged 15-64, 2016, %]



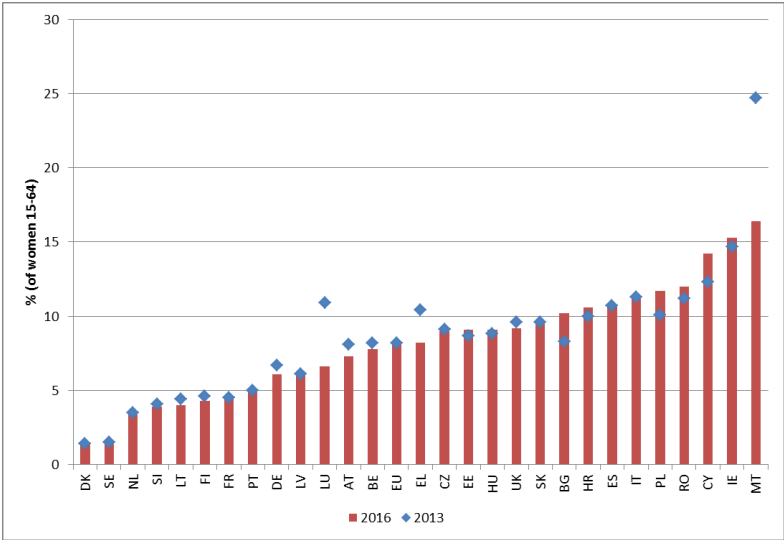
Source: LFS 2016

The gender employment gap is closely related to caring responsibilities.

Even if in most Member States the dual earner model (both partners working full-time) or the modified breadwinner model (one partner working part-time and the other one full-time), have replaced the male breadwinner model, the gender gap in terms of inactivity and part-time work remains significant - 31 % of women work part-time, compared to 8 % of men. The Netherlands has the highest rate of part-time workers with 76.4 % of women and 26.2 % of men working part time.

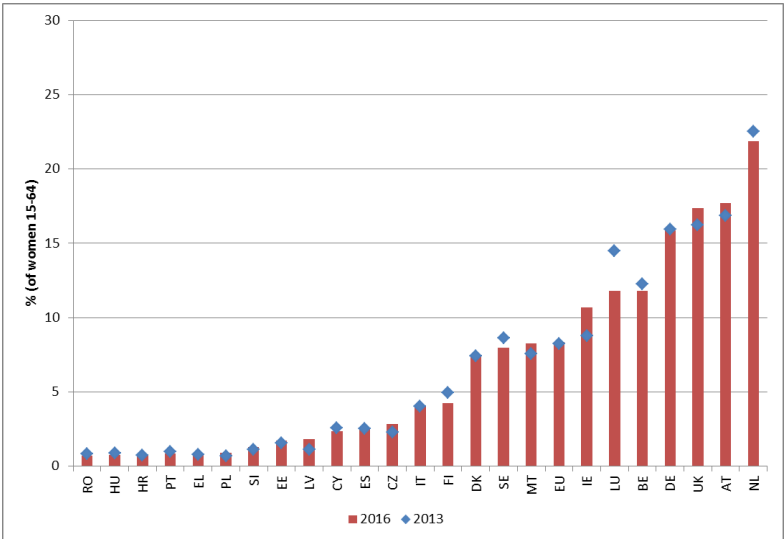
Differences across Member States are very striking when considering the reasons why women withdraw from the labour market or work part time (Figure 1 and 2). Indeed, more than 10% of women in Malta, Ireland, Cyprus, Romania, Poland, Italy, Spain, Croatia and Bulgaria are inactive because of their personal or family responsibilities, mostly for looking after children or incapacitated adults (Figure 2 below). In addition, more than 10% of women are working part-time in the Netherlands, Austria, the UK, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and Ireland because of caring responsibilities (Figure 3 below).

[Figure 2: Inactivity due to personal and family responsibilities (looking after children or incapacitated adults and other family or personal responsibilities), women, %]



Source: LFS 2006-2013

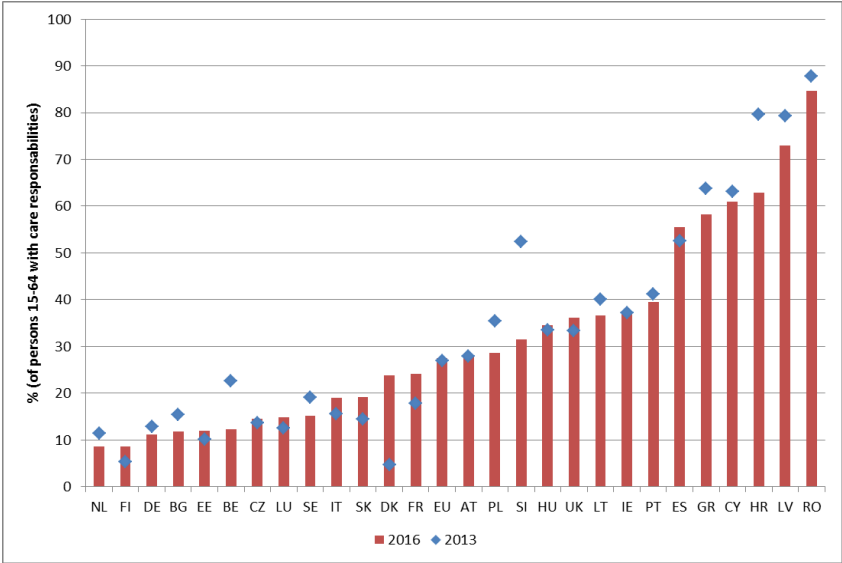
[Figure 3: Part-time work due to personal and family responsibilities (looking after children or incapacitated adults and other family or personal responsibilities), women, %]



Source: LFS 2006-2013

A closer look at the underlying reasons for inactivity and part-time work shows that around 20 % of the people with caring responsibilities are inactive or work part-time due to a lack of care infrastructure. This ranges from more than 80 % who are either inactive or work part-time in Romania and Latvia to more than 30 % of people in Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia and Poland to less than 10 % in the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden.

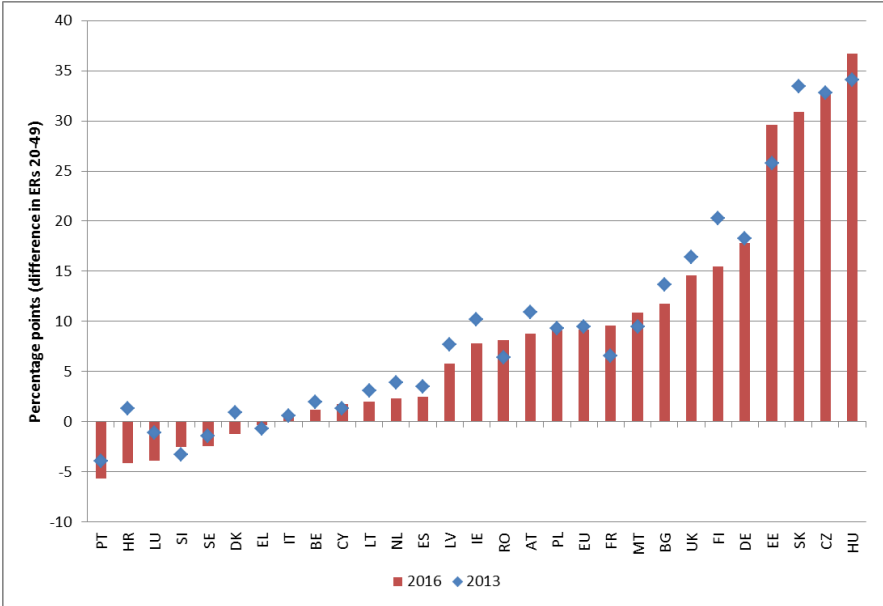
[Figure 4: Women who are inactive or work part-time due to care responsibilities who report a lack of suitable care services, %]



Source: LFS 2006-2013

Insufficient childcare infrastructure affects female labour market participation. The negative impact of parenthood on the employment of women has been recognised as a significant challenge in Hungary, the Czech republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Germany, Finland and the UK²⁷.

[Figure 5: Employment impact of parenthood on women, %]



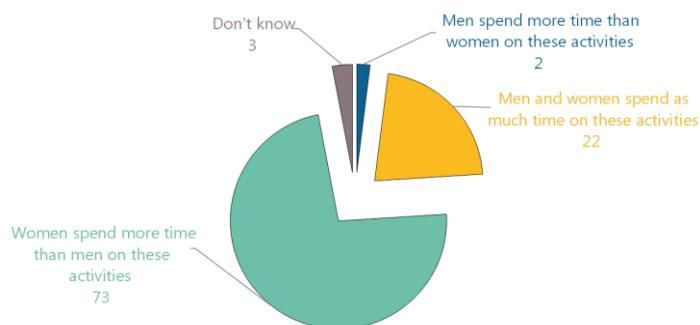
Source: LFS 2006-2013

Lower female labour market participation and the lack of formal childcare infrastructure are also linked to a traditional perception of women’s role in society. Nearly three quarters of European citizens confirm that women spend more time than men on household work and caring activities. This is often the result of societal norms that ascribe women the role as the main caretaker of children and the family household. In a recent Eurobarometer survey, more than 4 in 10 Europeans (44 %) believe

²⁷ See relevant Country reports 2017 in the context of the European Semester, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2017-european-semester-country-reports_en.

the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family. In one third of EU Member States this goes up to 70 % or more²⁸. Nearly three quarters indicate that women spend more time than men on household and caring activities. 22 % believe that men and women spend equal amounts of time on these activities. There is however a slow change between generations. The youngest respondents are slightly more likely to say that men and women spend equal amounts of time on household and caring activities: this is the case for 26 % of respondents between 15 and 24, compared to 21% of respondents aged 40 or more.

[Figure 6: Which of the following statements regarding the share of housework and caring activities in households do you think best applies nowadays?, (% - EU)]



Source: *Special Eurobarometer 465 (2017)*

The survey shows that a lot of work still needs to be done in all Member States. The Gender Equality Index published by the European Institute for Gender Equality in 2017 highlighted that compared to 10 years ago 12 countries have moved backwards when it comes to the gender balance in time spent on care, housework and social activities. Only every third man cooks and does housework every day, whereas most women do so every day (79 %). With an average score of 66.2 for gender equality, the EU is still a long way away from having a gender-balanced society.²⁹

Caring responsibilities are also distributed unequally among women and men in paid employment. The 2015 European Working Conditions Survey shows that in households with the youngest child under 7, women spend on average 32 hours a week on paid work and 39 hours on unpaid work, whereas men spend 41 hours a week on paid work and 19 hours on unpaid work.³⁰ While both men and women increase their unpaid working hours when they have children, the proportion of housework done and care given by each is far from equal. This remains the case throughout life, including towards the end of working life. A woman's working life is therefore more likely to be affected by such responsibilities.

The unequal role of women as caretakers is reinforced by the insufficient provision of accessible and affordable high quality childcare for children under 3. The European ngo on family organisations, COFACE³¹ highlights the importance of this, suggesting three ways of helping women achieve a

²⁸ Special Eurobarometer 465 (2017), Gender Equality 2017, [EBS 465], available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2154>.

²⁹ In the past 10 years, the score has increased by only 4 points. European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (2017), Gender Equality Index 2017 – Measuring gender equality in the European Union 2005-2015 Report, available at: <http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/eige-publications/gender-equality-index-2017-measuring-gender-equality-european-union-2005-2015-report>.

³⁰ Eurofound (2016), Sixth European Working Conditions Survey, available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/european-working-conditions-surveys/sixth-european-working-conditions-survey-2015>.

³¹ COFACE (2017), *Who cares? A study on the challenges and needs of family carers in Europe*.

work-life balance: (1) financial resources to assist parents in various ways; (2) family-friendly working arrangements; (3) accessible, high quality, affordable childcare services.

The lack of available childcare facilities determines to a great extent whether women with children can continue working³². A recent study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) confirms the key link between childcare and female labour market participation:

'Affordable and high quality ECEC with an adequate number of hours per week can contribute to an increase in the participation of women in the labour force. Working parents, mothers in particular, are more likely to drop out of the labour market or work fewer hours to take up childcare duties, especially when children are young. Therefore, women need high quality, affordable Early Childhood Education and Care to be able to return to work with confidence that their children are well cared for, and in order to achieve a better work-life balance'.³³

Services that help parents to achieve a work-life balance therefore play a crucial role, besides other important measures such as attractive family leaves and family-friendly working arrangements adapted to the private situation of workers and tax and benefit systems that do not disincentivise second earners. The Barcelona objectives aim to break the self-perpetuating cycle that keeps women from participating in the labour market on an equal footing with men. Furthermore, family-friendly policies might also impact on reversing the trend of decreasing child birth rates in the Union.

3. Achieving the Barcelona target for children from 0 to 3

For the first time since the EU started monitoring the achievement of childcare objectives, the target for children from 0 to 3 has been reached on average in the EU-28. The overall rate reached in 2016 was 32.9 %.

However, there are huge differences among the Member States, as the table below on the provision of childcare infrastructure for children from 0 to 3 years shows..

The target of 33 % has largely been reached in 12 Member States in 2016: Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Luxembourg, Portugal, France, Belgium, Slovenia, Spain, Italy, Germany and Finland. In 7 EU Member States (Germany, Finland, Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Belgium and France) between 33 % and 49 % of children have access to childcare (see the cells in green). In 5 EU Member States (Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Luxembourg and Portugal) 50 % or more of children have access to childcare (see the cells in blue). Denmark is the absolute champion with more than the double of the target (70 %) reached.

The picture is less positive in the remaining 16 Member States. The cells in orange show that in 6 EU Member States (Malta, Estonia, Ireland, the UK, Latvia and Cyprus) between 25 % and 33 % of children aged 0 to 3 years old have access to childcare. In 10 Member States, less than 25 % of children in the smallest age group participate in childcare (see red cells). These include Greece, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia with a rate of less than 10 %.

³² Esping-Andersen outlined in 2009 that the lack of services to help women achieve a work-life balance would either lead to a 'childless low fertility equilibrium' or a 'low income-low employment equilibrium'. De Heneu, Meulders and O'Dorchai (2010), who analysed the effect of various public policies aimed at dual earner couples with children in 15 EU Member States, including childcare provision, child-related leave and tax and cash benefits, concluded that public childcare provision had the strongest impact on female labour market participation. In 2013, Ehrel and Guergoat-Larivière studied the effect of individual and institutional factors on female employment rates in 22 Member States and found that formal childcare (childminder or public childcare) and part-time work have a positive effect on female employment.

³³ OECD (2017), Starting Strong, available at: <http://www.oecd.org/education/starting-strong-2017-9789264276116-en.htm>

In conclusion, the Barcelona target for childcare for children from 0 to 3 has generally been reached in the EU. This is mainly due to the large coverage rate in the Member States that have reached the target.

[Table 1: Children cared for in formal childcare structures, 0 to 3 years, %]

GEO/TIME	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
European Union	29	27	27	28.4	30.3	32.9
Denmark	74	67	65	69.6	77.3	70.0
Netherlands	52	46	46	44.6	46.4	53.0
Sweden	51	52	55	56.8	64.0	51.0
Luxembourg	44	48	47	49.0	51.8	50.9
Portugal	35	34	38	45.0	47.2	49.9
France	44	40	39	39.5	41.7	48.9
Belgium	39	48	46	48.8	50.1	43.8
Slovenia	37	38	39	37.4	37.4	39.6
Spain	39	36	35	36.9	39.7	39.3
Italy	25	21	22	22.9	27.3	34.4
Finland	26	29	28	33.2	32.5	32.7
Germany	24	24	28	27.5	25.9	32.6
Malta	11	17	20	18.2	17.9	31.3
Estonia	19	18	21	19.4	21.4	30.2
Ireland	21	31	29	27.4	30.6	28.6
United Kingdom	34	27	30	28.9	30.4	28.4
Latvia	16	23	23	21.6	22.9	28.3
Cyprus	25	26	25	25.5	20.8	24.8
Austria	14	14	17	16.0	22.3	20.6
Romania	2	15	6	2.6	9.4	17.4
Croatia	13	11	11	17.1	11.8	15.7
Hungary	8	8	10	14.4	15.4	15.6
Lithuania	9	8	10	22.9	9.7	15.2
Bulgaria	7	8	11	11.2	8.9	12.5
Greece	19	20	14	12.8	11.4	8.9
Poland	3	6	5	5.5	5.3	7.9
Czech Republic	5	3	2	4.4	2.9	4.7
Slovakia	4	5	4	6.5	1.1	0.5

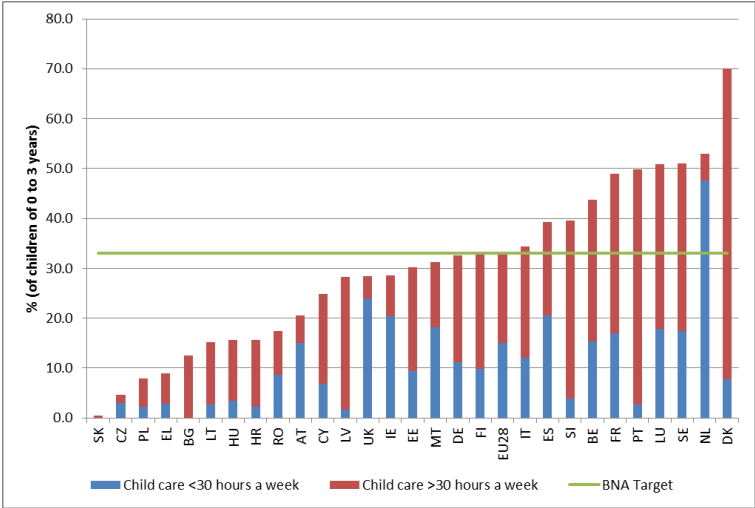
Source: EU-SILC 2016

It appears that since 2011 there has been a considerable increase in childcare coverage for children under 3 in a number of countries. This is most striking in Malta (increase of 20 percentage points, from 11 % to 31 %), Romania (15 percentage points, from 2 % to 17 %), Estonia (11 percentage points, from 19 % to 30 %), Italy (9 percentage points, from 25 % to 34 %), Germany (9 percentage points, from 24 % to 33 %) and Ireland (8 percentage points, from 21 % to 29 %). On the other hand, there have been significant drops in childcare coverage for this age group in Greece (10 percentage points, from 19 % to 9 %) and Slovakia (3 percentage points, from 4 % to less than 0.5 %).

Across Member States, there are differences in how many hours children usually spend in childcare facilities: in half of the countries studied childcare for children from 0 to 3 years is used mainly on a part-time basis (less than 30 hours a week),. This is the case in the Netherlands (where 3 women out of 4 work part-time) the UK, Ireland and Austria. On the other hand, full-time childcare (30 hours or

more a week) is used most among children attending childcare in Bulgaria, Lithuania, Hungary, Latvia, Denmark, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Luxembourg, Belgium, Poland and Greece.

[Figure 7: Children in formal childcare or education by age group, from 0 to 3, % and time spent in childcare]



Source: EU-SILC 2016

4. Achieving the Barcelona target for children from 3 to the mandatory school-going age

As of 2016, 86.3 % of children from 3 to the mandatory school-going age participate in formal childcare or attend preschool, meaning that the Barcelona target has not yet been reached, even though some progress has been made since 2011.

The Barcelona target has been reached in 12 Member States: Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Ireland, Estonia, Italy, Portugal, Germany and Slovenia (see green and blue cells in Table 2). Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, and Spain, have exceeded the target with 95 % (see the cells in blue). In 8 Member States (France, the Netherlands, Ireland, Estonia, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Slovenia), between 90 % and 95 % of children participate in childcare or preschool care (see the cells in green in Table 2).

On the other hand, 16 Member States have not yet reached the target. In Austria, Malta, Luxembourg and Hungary, more than 85 % of children participate in childcare or preschool (see the cells in orange in Table 2). In Finland, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, the UK, Poland, Romania, Greece, and Croatia, less than 85 % of children participate in childcare or preschool (see cells in red in Table 2). Less than 65 % of children in Croatia, Greece, Romania and Poland participate in childcare or preschool.

[Table 2: Children cared for in formal childcare structures, from 3 to the mandatory school-going age, % over time]

GEO/TIME	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
European Union (EU28)	83	83	82	83.1	83.3	86.3
Belgium	98	100	98	97.8	98.8	98.6
Sweden	95	96	96	94.8	96.2	96.6
Denmark	98	94	99	95.2	97.2	95.9
Spain	85	92	90	93.2	92.0	95.2
France	95	95	92	95.8	93.6	93.9
Netherlands	89	89	86	87.2	90.7	93.5
Ireland	82	89	89	89.3	92.0	92.9
Estonia	92	93	91	94.0	92.9	92.8
Italy	95	91	90	90.6	85.9	92.6
Portugal	81	86	85	88.7	89.9	92.0
Germany	90	91	89	88.7	89.6	91.8
Slovenia	92	92	91	90.3	90.9	89.9
Austria	84	80	79	85.7	85.3	88.7
Malta	73	91	92	99.4	88.4	88.1
Luxembourg	73	80	73	73.9	81.9	87.2
Hungary	75	75	85	86.3	89.1	86.8
Finland	77	77	79	80.6	82.8	83.9
Latvia	72	79	79	79.2	82.3	81.9
Czech Republic	74	75	76	75.7	77.5	81.0
Cyprus	73	74	80	79.6	81.4	78.5
Lithuania	70	74	74	80.1	73.8	78.4
Slovakia	75	71	74	74.7	67.6	77.3
Bulgaria	62	89	78	71.6	71.5	74.7
United Kingdom	93	72	71	70.0	72.8	73.4
Poland	43	36	38	42.5	43.0	61.0
Romania	41	59	51	55.8	58.2	60.8
Greece	75	76	69	56.5	67.1	55.6
Croatia	51	40	47	40.2	52.9	51.3

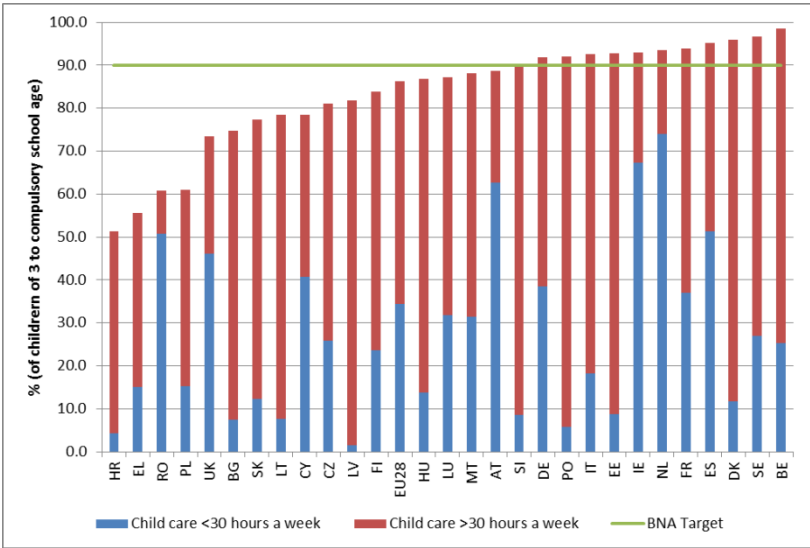
Source: EU-SILC 2016

The overall rate has only slightly increased since 2011, but there has been a considerable increase in childcare participation rate for children from the 3 until the mandatory school-going age in a number of Member States. This is most striking in Romania (increase of 20 percentage points from 41% to 61%), Poland (18 percentage points, from 43% to 61%), Malta (15 percentage points, from 73% to 88%), Hungary (15 percentage points, from 73% to 88%), Luxembourg (14 percentage points, from 73% to 87%), Ireland (11 percentage points, from 82% to 93%), Portugal (11 percentage points, from 81% to 92%), Spain (10 percentage points, from 85% to 95%), Latvia (10 percentage points, from 72% to 82%) and Lithuania (8 percentage points, from 70% to 78%).

On the other hand, there has been also a drop in care rates for this age group in various EU Member States, such as the UK (20 percentage points, from 93% to 73%) and in Greece (19%, from 75% to 56%).

In the majority of Member States, 52% of children in this age group attend childcare or preschool for 30 hours or more a week, whereas 34% of children in this age group, particularly the majority of children in Romania, the UK, Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands, attend childcare or preschool for less than 30 hours a week.

[Figure 8: Children in formal childcare or education by age group, from 3 to the mandatory school-going age, % and time spent in childcare or education]



Source: EU-SILC 2016

Since the education and training target set in 2009 has been reached (formal childcare attendance of 95 % of children from the 4 until the mandatory school-going age), this means that the main challenge in this Barcelona target group is the 3 to 4 years of age. As a result, in its European Identity Communication of November 2017 the Commission suggested extending the Education Target of 95 % to all children from 3 to the mandatory school-going age.³⁴

5. Factors that affect reaching the Barcelona objectives

5. 1 Expenditure on childcare

Public expenditure can play an important role with regard to the availability, affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare. The percentage of GDP spent on childcare varies considerably across the EU. It is the highest in Sweden, Denmark, France and Bulgaria. The focus of spending on age groups also varies. In some countries, the focus is mostly on childcare for children from 3 to the mandatory school-going age.

[Table 3: Public expenditure on childcare and pre-primary education and total public expenditure on early childhood education and care, % of GDP, 2013]

³⁴ See Communication from the Commission to the EP, Council, EESC and CoR on Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture – the European Commission’s contribution to the Leaders’ meeting in Gothenburg on 17 November 2017, COM (2017) 673 final and the proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.

	Total	Public spending on 0-3	Public spending for 3-mandatory school age
Sweden	1.6	1.1	0.5
Denmark (d)	1.4		
France	1.3	0.6	0.7
Bulgaria (c)	1.2	0.1	1.1
Finland	1.1	0.6	0.5
Belgium	0.8	0.1	0.7
Luxembourg (d)	0.8		
United Kingdom	0.8	0.1	0.7
Lithuania (c)	0.7	0.1	0.6
EU average (e)	0.7		
Netherlands	0.7	0.3	0.4
Romania (c)	0.6	0.3	0.3
Hungary	0.6	0.1	0.5
Germany	0.6	0.2	0.4
Italy	0.5	0.1	0.4
Slovenia (d)	0.5		
Spain	0.5	0.1	0.4
Ireland (d)	0.5		
Austria (d)	0.5		
Slovak Republic	0.5	0.1	0.4
Malta (c)	0.5	0.0	0.5
Poland (d)	0.5		
Czech Republic (d)	0.5		
Cyprus (c,g,h)	0.4	0.0	0.4
Estonia (d)	0.4		
Portugal (d)	0.4		
Latvia (b)		0.1	
Croatia (b,d)		0.2	
Greece			

Source: OECD Family database

Some countries have chosen to invest in a comprehensive system of childcare.

The **Danish** childcare system, for example, is quite comprehensive. Municipalities provide parents with childcare, regardless of their employment status, from when their children are 26 weeks old until they reach the mandatory school-going age. Childcare is divided between nurseries (0 to 2) and kindergartens (3 to 6), as well as private childminders who usually mind children in their homes. The municipality supervises privately owned facilities or private childminders. Childcare is considered important for securing the welfare, health and learning of children, and their social inclusion. High quality standards are set for childcare. It is mostly publicly financed. Parents only pay a fee based on their income and the number of children. Opening hours can be adapted to local needs. Denmark is one of the countries with the highest spending on childcare in terms of GDP, which is a deliberate choice in order to give all children an equal chance in life as early as possible.

Belgium has a similar system of nurseries, alongside private childminders for children in the youngest age group (0 to 2.5), and kindergarten, from 2.5 years until the mandatory school-going age. For the younger age group, in terms of affordability, fees are tax deductible and often income-related and are capped at a certain amount for children under 2.5 attending childcare. Access to kindergarten, usually based on the premises of primary schools, is free of charge during school hours. However, outside these hours, childcare might be an issue for working parents. There is a system in place for monitoring the quality of all formal childcare services, which is quite extensive and monitors both public and private services. Preferential access to childcare facilities can be given to certain disadvantaged groups, for instance jobseekers in the Brussels region.

Childcare in the European Semester and EU funding

In the context of the European Semester, childcare is considered a major factor enabling the employment of women. Recommendations are given to Member States where the lack of childcare constitutes an obstacle to female labour market participation.

In 2017, the lack of affordable and high quality childcare was reported in 12 country reports and six Member States received a country-specific recommendation on the subject or on female labour market

participation in general.³⁵ In 2018, childcare was mentioned in 17 country reports, in 2 of them, France and Belgium, in a positive light, in the others as a cause for concern.³⁶

Member States have the possibility to prioritise funding for childcare using the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds), such as the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, as well as the European Agricultural Fund for Regional Development (EAFRD). Approximately EUR 1.2 billion from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) were allocated to early childhood education and care infrastructure in the period 2014-2020 to tackling national or regional capacity problems as well as to ensuring the quality of buildings and equipment for early childhood education and care services. The European Social Fund (ESF) promotes equal access to high quality early-childhood education and care.³⁷ These investments have been effective both in creating jobs for women as well as in facilitating mothers with children's re-ingratiation in the labour market and improving parents' work-life balance, as shown by examples of ESF projects in **Estonia** (where 1 200 childcare places will be created) and in the **Czech Republic** (where 20 000 childcare places will be created). The Czech Republic has redirected funding in response to a country-specific recommendation on the matter, so far creating 9 000 nursery and kindergarten places. The observed continued rise in the demand for childcare facilities indicates that this measure has a strong impact on the labour market (re)integration of parents with small children. Also, through the European Agricultural Fund for Regional Development (EAFRD), in the context of the LEADER initiative, financial support can be allocated for the provision of childcare facilities in rural areas as part of the local development strategy.

In addition, the European Funds for Strategic Investment (EFSI) are available for funding of ECEC projects (both private and public investments). However, no specific requests have been received so far for projects on ECEC in particular.

5.2 Family work patterns and family models

Across the European Union, there are different models of female labour market participation, reflecting different family models and different practices of child rearing. Family models play an important role in the extent of female labour market participation. Even though the traditional male breadwinner model has been replaced in most countries by either the dual earner model or the modified breadwinner model (with one partner working full-time and the other partner working part-time), the work pattern after childbirth is more varied when it comes to family leaves and the labour market participation of mothers after maternity leave. Particularly at this moment in life when women are vulnerable when it comes to labour market participation, the availability of high quality childcare is an essential part of supporting their employment.

Besides childcare, well-designed work-life balance policies regarding leaves and flexible working arrangements play an important role in increasing female labour market participation. In this context, on 26 April 2017 the Commission presented a proposal for a Directive³⁸ to encourage fathers to take up family leave, through dedicated and non-transferable periods for each parent combined with an adequate level of compensation. The shared use of parental leave between women and men has been

³⁵ 2017 Country reports, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2017-european-semester-country-reports_en.

³⁶ 2018 Country reports, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2018-european-semester-country-reports_en.

³⁷ This is one of the investment priorities under the thematic objective 'Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and life-long learning'.

³⁸ COM(2017) 252 final, 'An initiative for Work-life balance for working parents and carers'; available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1311&langId=en>. See also Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on Work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017SC0202&from=EN>.

proven to increase female labour market participation. Flexible working arrangements also play a role in assisting workers to reconcile their job with demands on their private time.

5.3 Informal / privately organised childcare

Informal childcare can either supplement or replace formal childcare. Informal childcare is childcare provided by other people than the children's parents, generally by relatives such as grandparents, as well as friends, neighbours, unregistered child-minders, nannies and au pairs. It may also include privately organised care provided by a professional childminder hired directly by the parents, often in the child's home and not registered or monitored by the authorities. According to Eurostat³⁹, informal care was provided to 30.2 % of children (under the age of 3) and 28.7 % of children between 3 and the mandatory school-going age in 2016. The use of informal and private care is high, but is typically used on a part-time basis, which would indicate that most of it is supplemental. Use of informal care is highest in the Netherlands (around 60 % for children in both age groups), but virtually all of it is on a part-time basis, followed by Romania, Greece, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland, Cyprus and Portugal, where more than 40 % of children received informal or private care. In most of these countries, it is a mix of full-time and part-time care for the smaller age group, except for Cyprus, where more than half of the informal and private care given to children under the 3 is given on a full-time basis. For the children in the older age group it is primarily done on a part-time basis. In the Nordic countries, informal care is hardly used at all.

Even if parents may not feel a great need to use public childcare when sufficient informal and private care possibilities exist, the above data suggest that they are compensating the lack of public provision with informal and private care arrangements and that there may in fact be a demand for more formal childcare⁴⁰.

5.4 Legal framework for the provision of care

One way to ensure adequate provision of accessible and affordable high quality childcare is by establishing a legal entitlement to childcare. In most countries, there is a legal entitlement to childcare from a particular age of the child. However, the age from which this entitlement exists differs to a great extent across Europe. The time lag between the end of family leave⁴¹ and the entitlement to childcare, sometimes referred to as 'care gap', is usually a problem⁴².

There is a right to childcare from a very early age in Malta (as of 3 months; care is free for working parents and students), Denmark and Hungary (as of 6 months), Germany (but with a limited number of hours for parents not working full-time), Sweden and Slovenia (as of 12 months) and Estonia (as of 18 months). One could classify this childcare provision as a comprehensive entitlement from an early age.

In the second group of countries, the right to childcare starts at a later age, when the child would start pre-school. In practical terms, that means from the age of 2 ½ years in Belgium, and 3 years in Finland (part-time unless parents work full-time), France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg (part-time), Spain,

³⁹ The Eurostat (2016) EU-SILC survey variable 'Other types of care' refer to the direct arrangements between the carer and the parents (parents are often employers, pay directly the carer) and to unpaid care (free or informal arrangements such as exchange of services). Care provided by childminders without any structure between the carer and the parents (direct arrangements) have been excluded from the definition of 'formal care' in order to take into account only childcare recognised as fulfilling certain quality patterns.

⁴⁰ Heejung Chung and Bart Meuleman 2017, European Parent's attitudes towards public childcare provision – the role of current provisions, interests and ideologies, in: *European Societies*, 19:1, 49-68, DOI: 10.1080/14616696.2016.1235218.

⁴¹ The reference to family leave includes maternity, paternity and parental leave. Other forms of family leave, such as carers' leave, are not included here.

⁴² LEAVE network (April 2017), 'Relationship between Leave and ECEC entitlements', available at: http://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/Leavenetwork/overviews_2017/Relationship_between_Leave_and_ECEC_-_Final.pdf.

Slovakia, and the UK(part-time, from the age of 2 for children from disadvantaged background) and from the age of 4 in the Netherlands.

In the third group, children are entitled to childcare from the age of 5, usually one year before the school-going age. This is the case in Austria (only part-time), Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece and Portugal. In Poland, the right to childcare (pre-school) starts from the age of 6. One could classify this as an entitlement just before mandatory school-going age.

In the fourth group of Member States - Lithuania, Latvia and Romania - there is no entitlement to childcare at all..

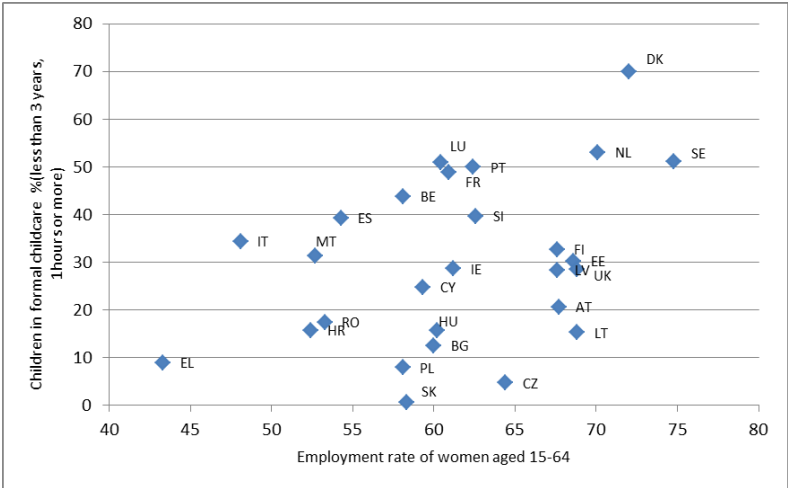
Looking at the combination of the above data with the level of compensation for family leaves, it appears that only in a small group of Member States there is no gap between the end of well-paid family leave and the entitlement to a childcare place (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Malta, Slovenia and Sweden). In another group of Member States, there is time lag between the more extended family leave, usually unpaid or very poorly paid, and the childcare provided (the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Hungary and Spain). In the remainder of the Member States, there is a time lag between the family leave and the entitlement to childcare.

However, a legal entitlement does not necessarily guarantee a place in a childcare facility. This explains why even in Member States where a legal entitlement exists, female labour market participation may remain low and/or the use of informal and private care may remain high.

5.4 Employment rate and the provision of care

There is link between employment participaton and childcare rates, even if it is not always clear to what extent this link is to be explained by a lack of demand or supply. Many reasons influence whether children participate in childcare. However, there are a number of countries whose female employment rates and childcare rates for children under 3 are both extremely low, such as Greece, Croatia, Romania, Malta and Italy.

[Figure 9: Employment rate and childcare rates of children from 0 to 3, %]



Source: LFS 2016 and EU-SILC 2016

5.6. Availability, cost, accessibility and quality of childcare

5.6.1 Availability of childcare places

Various factors influence the use of formal childcare services in different local contexts. The statistics provided by Eurostat make it possible to give a first indication whether current childcare facilities meet demand and to identify what needs to be improved.

According to Eurostat 2016, the lack of available places was mentioned as a major reason for not using childcare in Latvia, Finland, France, Estonia, Greece, Slovenia, Poland and the Czech Republic.

[Table 4: Reasons for not using formal childcare services for children under the mandatory school-going age]

GEO/REASON	Financial reasons	Distance	No places available	Opening hours not suitable	Quality not good	Other
European Union (EU28)	16.2	1.5	3.9	2.5	0.7	7.4
Belgium	7.9	0.0	2.1	1.1	0.4	6.9
Bulgaria	6.3	0.3	2.3	0.3	0.3	1.2
Czech Republic	6.3	0.5	4.6	1.1	0.4	6.5
Denmark	0.7	0.4	0.4	1.6	0.2	2.9
Germany	4.9	0.2	3.2	2.5	1.1	2.3
Estonia	20.4	2.1	7.4	0.3	1.2	20.7
Ireland	37.6	2.1	1.4	0.2	0.1	5.6
Greece	23.7	2.4	6.8	3.7	1.9	0.1
Spain	51.8	1.3	2.1	3.9	0.2	28.4
France	13.6	2.0	8.7	5.3	0.6	8.5
Croatia	4.4	0.0	1.7	0.0	0.0	1.6
Italy	22.8	4.4	3.4	4.2	1.9	14.9
Cyprus	39.9	2.4	0.7	0.8	2.0	1.1
Latvia	24.8	5.4	15.6	2.9	2.9	9.0
Lithuania	29.6	9.0	2.3	0.9	0.4	12.6
Luxembourg	9.1	1.7	4.7	1.7	0.9	4.3
Hungary	18.7	1.4	1.7	2.0	0.7	7.1
Malta	10.6	0.4	3.5	2.2	0.7	36.6
Netherlands	18.5	0.0	0.7	1.6	0.5	9.2
Austria	11.7	0.5	3.9	1.1	1.1	6.1
Poland	4.6	4.2	4.7	2.5	1.1	9.1
Portugal	14.2	1.8	2.5	1.9	0.4	3.4
Romania	30.9	6.7	2.6	0.3	0.0	7.8
Slovenia	7.7	1.8	4.7	1.3	0.3	6.8
Slovakia	29.5	6.2	3.7	3.4	1.3	14.8
Finland	6.6	2.1	8.6	4.3	0.2	8.8
Sweden	0.7	0.3	1.2	1.8	0.1	6.8
United Kingdom	25.9	0.6	2.6	1.3	0.4	5.7

Source: EU-SILC ad-hoc module on services 2016

5.6.2 Cost of childcare

Overall in the EU-28, the majority of parents pay for childcare from 0 to 3 at full or a reduced price⁴³. In some countries this is even the case up to mandatory school-going age, particularly if there is no entitlement to childcare.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the average cost for childcare is 15% of net family income for OECD countries. The out-of-pocket cost varies from 2.7 %

⁴³ EU-SILC Survey 2016, available at: <https://data.europa.eu/euodp/data/dataset/Zktkst5yj10Yav1iKET7w>.

in Austria to 33.7% in the UK for an average dual-earner family and from 2.9% in Denmark and 41.6% in Ireland for a single parent⁴⁴.

The social gradient plays in role in the chances of a child under 3 to participate in formal childcare, as shown by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development⁴⁵. In France and Ireland, this inequality is particularly pronounced as participation rates for children in low-income families are, at 18% and 12% respectively, less than a quarter of those for children from high-income families (81% and 57%).

High costs act as a barrier to the use of childcare and effectively discourage parents, particularly mothers, from working. This was most recently confirmed by the Eurostat data for 2016 (table 4 above), which show that the cost factor plays a significant role in the decision not to use formal childcare facilities in many countries, in particular Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and the UK.

It appears that across the EU 4 % of parents have great difficulty affording formal childcare. This is mostly the case in Hungary, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece, where the overwhelming majority has difficulties in affording it with 20 % or more of parents having great difficulty. In the EU, 8 % of parents have moderate difficulty and 19 % have some difficulty in affording the costs for childcare.

[Table 5: Level of difficulty affording formal childcare services for children under the mandatory school-going age, %]

GEO/LEV_DIFF	Great	Moderate	Some	Fairly easy	Easy	Very easy
Hungary	21.6	18.4	30.2	23.0	5.9	0.9
Cyprus	21.2	32.0	26.5	14.5	5.6	0.3
Romania	19.5	19.8	43.8	8.8	4.2	3.9
Ireland	12.5	15.0	28.7	19.9	17.7	6.1
Malta	10.4	12.1	24.5	39.9	7.2	6.0
Greece	8.7	15.6	70.2	2.7	2.6	0.3
Portugal	8.1	15.7	36.0	27.4	12.2	0.8
United Kingdom	8.0	8.7	25.7	32.5	13.3	11.8
Slovakia	6.4	11.7	31.6	38.1	8.9	3.1
Spain	6.1	16.2	22.0	32.2	21.5	2.0
Italy	6.1	8.9	32.4	35.9	16.3	0.3
Croatia	5.7	6.8	36.5	25.0	24.6	1.4
Austria	5.1	6.2	18.3	27.1	23.7	19.7
Belgium	4.4	9.9	13.7	20.3	34.0	17.7
European Union (EU28)	4.2	7.8	19.0	32.7	23.3	13.1
Sweden	3.9	2.3	7.3	26.5	27.1	32.8
Netherlands	3.7	7.2	11.7	21.4	46.8	9.1
France	2.9	10.0	19.8	44.4	18.7	4.4
Slovenia	2.5	8.8	25.0	27.9	25.0	10.8
Czech Republic	2.1	10.5	24.8	33.2	19.7	9.8
Lithuania	2.0	18.8	52.5	22.3	3.3	1.2
Poland	1.5	8.9	30.4	38.0	18.3	2.9
Germany	1.4	2.5	6.5	33.7	32.0	23.8
Finland	1.4	2.9	13.4	30.2	28.4	23.7
Luxembourg	1.3	7.4	14.5	35.9	29.5	11.4
Bulgaria	1.2	7.8	42.8	32.8	15.0	0.4
Denmark	0.2	3.6	9.5	27.3	32.6	26.8
Estonia	0.0	28.9	15.4	55.7	0.0	0.0
Latvia	0.0	4.8	34.5	33.6	21.4	5.7

Source: EU-SILC ad-hoc module on services 2016

⁴⁴ OECD (2016), Society at a glance, OECD social indicators.

⁴⁵ OECD (2016), Who uses childcare? Background brief on inequalities in the use of formal early childhood education and care among young children.

The Member States take different approaches to tackling the costs of childcare. Some Member States provide **minimum levels of free childcare**, either for both age groups (e.g. Malta) or for the group from 3 to the mandatory school-going age (e.g. Germany, the UK). Since 2017, **Malta** provides free childcare for children whose parents work or are in education. The government settles the costs at the end of each month. Parents are allowed to send their children to a childcare centre of their choice, and benefit from free childcare ‘equivalent to the hours worked by the parent with the lower workload, plus one hour extra for commuting’. This measure aims to create an incentive for mothers to return to work or to remain in formal employment. Recent employment statistics already indicate that the provision of free childcare increases the labour market participation of mothers. There are plans to extend the access to childcare to all families.

In **Ireland**, where cost was identified as a major barrier, a new scheme was introduced in 2010, the so-called early childhood care and education scheme (ECCE), providing limited free places on a part-time basis (15 hours in total, that is 5 times 3 hours a week) within private childcare centres for children from the age of 3 years and 2 months. In 2016, the offer was extended to children from the age of 2 years and 8 months. Parents using this scheme could top up the number of hours by paying extra. While this development is a step forward, it is not possible for all families to cover the additional costs and this particularly limits the possibilities of low-income families to use the scheme.

Subsidies for new parents (e.g. in Belgium, Netherlands, the UK), and **tax breaks for families** (e.g. in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Netherlands) are additional measures to address the costs of childcare. In **Germany**, the fees vary according to the provider, but are income related. Lower-income families can apply for a reduction and can be entitled to free childcare. All families can avail of tax allowances, in the form of a tax reduction or exemption for a certain amount of the childcare costs.

In, for instance, Belgium, Germany, France, Netherlands, Sweden and Slovakia, a combined approach of a **means-tested childcare fee system ensures that low income families** have to pay very little for the use of childcare, while the cost is also '**capped**' for all other families. In several EU Member States, private childcare infrastructure is also publicly subsidised. In **Sweden**, for instance, the Education Act stipulates that fees for childcare should be 'reasonable'. Every child from the age of 3 has the right to 525 hours of childcare free of charge. All municipalities also apply a system of maximum fees, with a cap for each family. The childcare facilities are entitled to a government grant to compensate for the loss of income and to ensure high quality care services.

Another set of measures focuses on the specific needs of children from low income households or big families, such as free or discounted meals in nurseries and kindergartens, for instance in **Hungary**, or funding for healthy meals for impoverished children in **Belgium**.

A few Member States, such as the Czech republic, Germany, France, Portugal, Slovakia, have developed targeted programmes to help socially disadvantaged groups to access childcare services. In **Slovakia**, measures have focused on children from low income families, who are exempted from paying, and childcare facilities work with community centres to develop specific outreach programmes for marginalised communities.

In other Member States, such as in Belgium, Finland, Sweden and Denmark, the focus is on universal access. In **Finland**, for instance, there is the universality principle for subsidised services, whereby municipalities must provide a place for all pre-school children, regardless of whether parents work or not. These services should also accommodate atypical working patterns of parents. A project co-financed by the European Social Fund focuses on childcare services for children whose parents work night shifts.

The 2013 Commission Recommendation on 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' demonstrates that providing affordable high quality childcare services may be considered as a good example of a win-win social investment strategy, because it boosts children's development while enabling parents to do paid work. In most cases, the extra tax revenue (over the course of life) generated by the increased participation of parents in the labour market is enough to cover the cost of the childcare. If affordable high quality childcare is not available, the costs of formal care for two children can, in some countries, amount to more than one fifth of the disposable income of a low-income couple. In April 2017, as part of the Social Pillar Package, the Commission⁴⁶ reiterated the importance of continuing to work to this issue.

Local initiatives are sometimes set up for the benefit of specific socially disadvantaged groups. A series of cities have adopted a strategy to address their particular needs. The NGO Eurocities has collected good practice examples which can be used as inspiration. One of these examples is **Nantes**, a city in **France**, which has embraced a concept of the provision of integrated childcare services, particularly to break the cycle of disadvantage. Multi-purpose childcare services are set up in poorer areas of the city, which offer a series of childcare services. Next to regular or flexible childcare there is also 'emergency' childcare available for parents who have to attend a job interview, for example,.

Some Member States introduced also fiscal incentives for companies linked to the provision of childcare services for their employees. **Austria** allows a deduction from taxable income for companies when they either provide childcare services internally or give benefits to employees in the form of childcare services⁴⁷; **France**, **Germany** and **Poland** have a similar approach. Italy recently introduced changes to the taxation of productivity bonuses in 2017 which can now be erogated in the form of welfare measures by companies to their employees⁴⁸. In **France** and **UK**, employers can provide their employees respectively with 'universal service vouchers' (CESU) and childcare vouchers, which can be used as payment for homebased childcare⁴⁹. In **Finland**, other incentives for compensating the costs for employers linked to work-life balance are based on the insurance-based social security system; in addition, if an employer organizes temporary childcare for an employee's sick child, the benefit the employee gets is not considered as a taxable income (maximum period of tax-free childcare benefit is four days per sickness).

5.6.3 Accessibility of childcare

Access to childcare is not only determined by the existence of formal structures, but also by the specific features of the services, such as opening hours, location, and languages spoken, as well as access to transport. Table 4 indicates that **distance** to the childcare facility and the **opening hours** are less significant than the cost and the availability of places as reasons for not using formal childcare services. While 15 countries are above the EU average of 1.5 % regarding the distance to the childcare facility, Lithuania (9 %), Romania (6.7 %) and Slovakia (6.2 %) have the highest rates. In **Portugal**, European Structural Investment Funds have been quite instrumental in extending better childcare infrastructure over the last 15 years to rural areas, with the result, however, as in many countries, that there are shortages in urban areas.

⁴⁶ Commission Staff Working Document on 'Taking stock of the 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage', SWD (2017) 258 final.

⁴⁷ Benefits to employees up to € 1.000 per child and year for child care are free of taxes and social security contributions.

⁴⁸ In this case there is a cap to the amount of the investment eligible (as it is linked to the productivity bonus).

⁴⁹ In the United Kingdom, the Childcare Voucher scheme provides an opportunity for an employer to offer childcare vouchers (including vouchers in return for a reduction in employee's pay – known as a 'salary sacrifice'). This may affect the amount of tax credits an employee can receive.

Also the opening hours of the childcare facilities do not fully meet childcare needs. While 7 countries are above the EU average of 2.5 %, the rates are particularly high for France (5.3 %), Finland (4.3 %), Italy (4.2 %) and Spain (3.9 %).

Eurofound's "Early Childhood Care: Accessibility and Quality of Services report"⁵⁰ shows that various initiatives can help to integrate **children with special needs** into childcare facilities. The quality of childcare depends as much on political recognition and the sustainable and sufficient funding of inclusive measures such as the ownership and commitment of the educators and their willingness as well as administrative support to continuously follow training on inclusive methods. Inclusive teaching and an inclusive environment also rely on the communication and cooperation between local authorities and childcare facilities as well as educators and parents. In addition to national funding, the ESF provides financial support for inclusive projects at childcare facilities. In **Poland**, an ESF co-funded project 'toddler' was made available to develop formal childcare for children under the age of 3. The project takes specific needs of disabled children into account.

5.6.4 Measures to increase quality

Lack of quality of childcare services may be a barrier for parents and have a negative impact on the use of those services. The quality of the services depends on the number of children in the facilities, the level of professionalism of the teachers and the teaching programme, as well as the quality standards of the premises, such as the physical environment and hygiene. A well-developed quality framework could include measures such as the use of a registration and inspection system for all registered providers of childcare services, measures to enhance the professionalisation and life-long learning of staff, measures to make it more attractive to work in the childcare sector, for instance by providing good working conditions.

In May 2018, in its proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care, the Commission presented a comprehensive quality framework for early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems⁵¹ based on five principles: access and affordability for all families; qualification and continuous development of the workforce; development of the curriculum with holistic teaching values in a participatory way with children and parents; monitoring and evaluation of the early childhood education and care services and facilities; and governance and funding. This framework was developed with the assistance of education experts from a series of Member States. The aim of the quality framework is to strengthen childcare and pre-school care facilities in order to ensure high quality education and care services for children, as well as the inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and of children with special needs. It also aims to increase the trust in childcare facilities, in order to guarantee women real opportunities to join or remain in the labour market when they have children.

6. Conclusions: Reaching the Barcelona targets - a corner stone for women's labour market participation and a better work life balance of working parents

The Barcelona objectives, adopted by the European Council in 2002, are still of crucial importance in 2018. Employment targets have not yet been achieved for women and considerable gaps in employment rates remain between women and men. Ample evidence shows that this is mainly due to care responsibilities. The Barcelona objectives remain highly relevant to promote gender equality and form an important part of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, inclusive and sustainable growth with a

⁵⁰ Eurofound (2015), Early Childhood Care: Accessibility and Quality of Services, available at:

<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2015/social-policies/early-childhood-care-accessibility-and-quality-of-services>.

⁵¹ A proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Systems and the accompanying staff working document.

view to enhancing female labour participation. Childcare is a crucial element for work-life balance of working parents under the European Pillar of Social Rights. Indicators on childcare rates are monitored in the European Semester and included in the social scoreboard. Where relevant, funding from the European Structural and Investment Funds is geared to address shortcomings in the Member States.

The Barcelona target has been generally reached for children under the age of 3 for the EU-28, as 32.9 % of the children under the age of 3 participate in childcare. However, this overall average hides important differences between Member States. While considerable progress has been made in countries like Malta, Romania, Estonia, Italy, Germany and Ireland, the rate of childcare in some of the forerunners influences very much the overall result for the EU. Indeed, 4 Member States exceed 50 %: Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Luxembourg. On the other end of the scale are the worrying rates of less than 10 % in Greece, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The Barcelona target has not yet been reached for children from 3 to mandatory school-going age. However, the rate is progressing: it has increased from 83 % in 2011 to 86.3 % for the EU on average. A series of Member States are forerunners and reach a target of more than 95 %, namely Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and Spain. Considerable progress was made in Romania, Poland, Malta, Luxembourg, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Latvia and Lithuania. The lowest rates, i.e. less than 65 %, are found in Poland, Romania, Greece and Croatia which still considerably lag behind.

Several factors influence the availability and use of childcare. A first important element is a legal entitlement to childcare, which exists in most Member States, but the age from which this entitlement exists varies very much (starting from the end of maternity leave of the mother, to only at the age of 2.5 or 3, or even before reaching the mandatory school-going age). The existence of a legal entitlement however is not necessarily a full guarantee that Member States provide formal care services.

Besides a legal entitlement, the availability, affordability and high quality of childcare services influence very much the uptake of childcare services by parents. Costs vary widely among Member States and may be prohibitive in some Member States, such as Ireland. Prohibitive costs do not only affect female labour market participation, but also disproportionately affect children from low income families. Also the adaptability of the services to the needs of parents, including distance to the childcare facilities and opening hours adapted to working patterns and needs, play an important role.

High quality care must furthermore include pedagogical goals and values and the professionalism and continuous development of the childcare staff. Monitoring and assessment of these elements are crucial; these elements are addressed in the Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. .

The Commission will continue its monitoring of the situation with regard to childcare in the European Semester, particularly for those Member States lagging behind. It will continue to identify the specific problems with regard to availability, affordability and high quality care in each of the Member States. It will further continue to promote the use of European funding to assist Member States to tackle some of the challenges.

In addition, now that the first of the Barcelona targets has been generally reached and good progress is being made on the second target and that the Education Target 2020 has generally been reached, time may have come to consider a review of these targets following consultation with Member States. Such a review, if undertaken, would contribute to the European Union's efforts to foster smart, inclusive and sustainable growth; in particular it would contribute to reaching the Europe 2020 target of a 75 % employment rate and the creation of competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy based on a

high level of national education and training. This requires addressing the employment impact of parenthood on women, the need for work-life balance for working parents, strengthening the existing childcare facilities and increasing the availability of affordable and high quality services overall.