

Work-Life Balance Strategies in Family Policy

European expert meeting
Key reflections and findings

September 2024



Background

Acknowledging the importance of work-life balance is crucial for maintaining personal well-being and mental health which encompasses various aspects, such as emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Therefore, a healthy work-life balance positively affects our personal relationships and helps cope with stress. This balance extends to family responsibilities, including care for both children and older family members.

According to 2019 Eurostat data, almost 90 million people in the EU have care responsibilities for children, and more than 12 million people in the EU take care of ill, older and/or disabled relatives. Work-life balance rights are being consolidated in public policy across Europe (in great part following the transposition of the EU work-life balance directive), and also increasingly in company policies which are building family-supportive workplaces.

The European Pillar of Social Rights puts a strong focus on work-life balance of parents and carers, with different initiatives to support families: legal frameworks like the EU work-life balance directive and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive; and policy frameworks like the European Care Strategy and the European Child Guarantee.

COFACE and NAMS organised a European expert meeting in Vilnius on 25th September 2024 to explore the intersection of two domains (mental health and work-life balance), bringing together stakeholders from academia, industry, government, and civil society to examine challenges, share best practices, and foster innovative solutions to support families in maintaining optimal mental health while navigating work-life demands.

In order to better understand the impact of work-life balance on family well-being we looked at the complex interplay between work-related stressors, family dynamics, and mental health outcomes for individuals and families. We explored strategies for fostering resilience within families, including communication skills, coping mechanisms, and mutual support networks, as well as strong rights-based public policies to support families and employer-driven initiatives that promote and healthier balance between work and life.

This meeting, attended by 100 participants from 26 European countries, aimed to:

1. Explore the intersectional dimensions of work-life balance, considering how factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity intersect with family dynamics and mental health outcomes.
2. Promote the integration of family-friendly working conditions, mental health services and family-friendly policies into organisational structures that best meet families' needs.
3. Facilitate dialogue and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including employers, employees, policymakers, researchers, and community organisations, to develop comprehensive strategies for supporting family mental health in the workplace.

The keynote presentations are available at www.coface-eu.org

Programme

9.15-9.30 Welcome and round of introductions

Minister Vytautas Šilinskas
Rasa Zemaite, Director of NAMS
Annemie Driescens, President of COFACE

9.30-11.00 Study session 1: The evolution of family policies in Europe

This session set the context looking at the place of work-life balance and mental health in family policies from the perspective of research, policy and practice. We explored how this is evolving and shaping family policies.

Speakers:

- **Willem Adema**, Senior Economist, Social Policy Division, OECD
- **Silvija Stanić**, Director, Parents Association Step by Step, Croatia
- **Teresa Roščinska**, adviser of Horizontal Policy and Project Management Group, Ministry of Social Security and Labour, Lithuania

Chair: **Attila Böhm**, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, COFACE

11.00-11.30 Stretching break

11.30-13.00 Study session 2: 1000 days of parenthood and the mental load

This session examined the distribution of informal childcare activities for children between partners within the household, and how care is shared within families. We discussed policy pointers to address these pressures, and the development of psychological and social support to assist families with different mental health challenges such as post-natal depression.

Speakers:

- **Vytautas Peciukonis**, Research Officer, European Institute for Gender Equality
- **Martino Serapioni**, Research Programme Coordinator, European Observatory on Family Policy
- **Vilma Ražauskienė**, Researcher at Institute Of Sociology At The Lithuanian Centre For Social Sciences

Chair: **Rasa Zemaite**, Director of NAMS, Lithuania

13.00-14.00 Lunch break

14.00-15.30 Study session 3: Caring for the caregivers

Caring for someone else can be very rewarding but can also lead to challenges, especially in the absence of any professional support. Due to the lack of adequate support, too many family carers in Europe suffer from an unbearable responsibility and a permanent state of anxiety, linked to a variety of factors. Some carers are also considered the “sandwich generation” caring for both young and older family members.

Speakers

- **Sylvia Van Walleghem**, Researcher at KU Leuven in Magentaproject, Belgium
- **Sarah Loriato**, Policy Officer on Employment and European Parliament Liaison, AGE Platform Europe
- **Sandra Norvilienė**, Human Resources Manager, Employment Partner Retiva, Lithuania.

Chair: **Elizabeth Gosme**, Director, COFACE

15.30-16.00 Stretching break

16.00-17.30 Study session 4: Building family-supportive workplaces

This session took a look at workplace dynamics and their impact on the work-life balance of families such as the pros and cons of telework, company policies to support family-related leaves, and the impact of workplace discriminations.

Speakers:

- **Tina Weber**, Research Manager, Eurofound
- **Marta Pompili**, Policy Officer responsible for Gender Equality, EQUINET
- **Inga Ruginienė**, President, The Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation

Chair: **Kinga Joó**, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee

17.30 Conclusions and next steps

Welcome

Minister Vytautas Šilinskas, Lithuanian Minister of Social Security and Labour, **Rasa Zemaite**, Director of the Lithuanian National Assembly of Active Mothers and **Annemie Drieskens**, President of COFACE welcomed participants in the Lithuanian Parliament.



COFACE advocates for a systemic two-generation approach in policy making to support children and their family in different life transitions from birth to old age. Policy and support systems need more than ever to be inclusive, flexible, connected and complementary to ensure all families can be resilient to internal and external shocks.

The expert meeting had the ambition to guarantee all families the possibility to reconcile their work with their private life. A healthy work-life balance is crucial and affects family relationships. For COFACE, it is clear that achieving work-life balance is a shared responsibility of policy makers, employers and families.

- **European-national-local policy makers play a key role in providing support services for families and implementing social rights.** Legislation is crucial, such as the EU Work-life balance directive, a milestone for families offering European minimum standards on paternity leave, parental leave, carers leave and flexible work arrangements. COFACE and its members push for the full implementation of this directive and for the development of carers leave and the better recognition of family carers.

- **National policy-makers play a key role in driving national reforms.** In May 2024, a declaration called “The importance of families in Society” was signed in Vienna by European Ministers of Family affairs. They all acknowledge that work-life balance is a main pillar of family policy and recognise the importance of the involvement of the private sector in implementing work-life balance policies and measures.
- **Employers and social partners in general are important partners.** It is positive that many employer-driven initiatives today offer support and flexibility to parents and carers and allow teleworking. The blurred lines between work and family life and the pressure to be always available, 24/7, are a risk and can have severe long-term consequences for mental health and strain our family relationships. While in many cases, such as for many care sector jobs, teleworking is not a reality nor possibility. We need to recognise the role of families and adapt to our workplace culture. We need to take appropriate steps to build Family friendly workplaces where workers can maintain mental health while navigating work-life balance demands.
- **Families matter, and they hold a key role in finding a healthy work life balance.** The COFACE motto is “Family is teamwork, encouraging families to have a dialogue and find ways to better share the care. A more equal sharing of the caring responsibilities between women and men helped by their children, enables families to better reconcile paid work and family life.

Study session 1: The evolution of family policies in Europe

The first session of the expert meeting set the context looking at the place of work-life balance and mental health in family policies from the perspective of research, policy and practice.

Willem Adema, Senior Economist, Social Policy Division, OECD

Willem set the scene with his presentation by providing a cross-national overview of family policies. First, he highlighted the main objectives of family policies such as anti-poverty, gender equality, improving use of resources- workers-labour market participation and enabling people to have children at the time of their choice. These objectives change across countries and times. For example, the objective of reconciliation of work and family life has become more important over recent years. Moreover, he shared data on how the levels and nature of family benefits vary across the OECD countries based on cash transfers, services and tax breaks for families.

Willem further provided insights and emerging trends in family policies based on OECD data:

- Paid leave for parents is just over one year on average in the OECD
- Typically, countries with long leaves are paid less (apart from Estonia)
- The youngest children are least likely to participate in ECEC
- There is high Dutch ECEC participation, but it is often part time (1 or 2 days per week)
- Fertility rates are falling across all OECD countries since the 1980s- which is a big family policy driver at the moment
- Growing childlessness rates in Japan, Spain, and Italy (countries struggling with work-life balance)
- Decision to have children is related to direct and indirect costs of raising them
- Fertility rates are positively associated with employment rates of men and of women and also public spending on services

- Fertility rates are negatively associated with housing costs and poor labour market conditions
- But there are also other aspects at play including changing attitudes towards parenting and gender norms

To tackle these emerging challenges, family policies need to promote measures of reconciliation of work and family, focus on direct costs of raising children and prepare for a low fertility future. This also gives a greater role to migration policy. Willem highlighted the importance of integrating gender equality and labour market participation with family planning and financial support to address declining fertility rates and evolving social norms.

He concluded the presentation pointing out that family policies must adapt to changing economic, social, and demographic factors to ensure that families can thrive, balancing work and family life effectively while preparing for future challenges.

Silvija Stanić, Director, Parents Association Step by Step, Croatia

Silvija shared reflections on the mental health challenges experienced by families whom she works with in Croatia and highlighted some key recommendations.

Silvija began by reflecting on the privilege of participating in discussions on work-life balance, emphasising that many people do not have the same opportunities. She acknowledged that while many of us have work, families, education, and social support, we are also in a position to influence changes and improvements that could benefit others.

However, she also pointed out that despite this privilege, people are not immune to experiencing anxiety, stress, burnout, and psychological strain - issues that affect overall mental health.

Silvija raised important questions regarding how workplaces address mental health issues, particularly those considered 'light' psychological problems. She noted that there is widespread prejudice and stigma surrounding mental health problems, which hinders effective support. Despite this, many people across Europe face mental health challenges, and the workplace can play a key role in addressing them.

It was stressed that investing in work-life balance not only improves employees' overall well-being but also enhances productivity and efficiency.

Specific benefits she noted included:

- Fewer sick leaves: Workers with access to effective work-life balance policies are less likely to take time off for mental health reasons.
- Tailored solutions: work-life balance solutions must be flexible and reflect the diverse realities of different jobs. What works in one sector may not apply to another, and policies should take these variations into account.

Silvija concluded by highlighting that companies that implement work-life balance policies are viewed as socially responsible. She emphasised that there are many good examples of businesses that have adopted successful work-life balance practices, demonstrating a commitment to both their employees' well-being and overall productivity.

Teresa Roščinska, adviser of Horizontal Policy and Project Management Group, Ministry of Social Security and Labour, Lithuania

In her presentation, Teresa shed the light on the Lithuanian realities when it comes to reconciling work and family commitments.

Teresa started by introducing the current Lithuanian and EU measures in place for support for families, which were updated in 2023. In terms of parental leave, 2 months are available for fathers and 2 months for mothers (non-transferable) which can be used until the child is 20 months old. Parents for 1 child under 12 or under 18 with a disability have the right to a parent day off every 3 months. In the public sector there is a reduction of working time when the child is under 12. This measure aims to promote return to the labour market and hopefully will be transferred to the business sector.

Moreover, flexible working arrangements can be requested, there are increased parental leave benefits and improved social payments for children with disabilities. Childcare compensation allowance is guaranteed for 2025 for working parents, the universal child benefit was increased from 30 euros

to 90 euros and respite care is offered (1 month in total per year).

The Ministry's gender equality measures include the Gender Equality Action Plan 2023-2025 that aims to tackle gender inequality. The National Progress Plan from 2021-2030 includes objectives to create a supportive environment for families, and they are also working on an NGO project on women's unpaid care work which received a large investment from the government.

Key discussion points

During the question-and-answer segment of the session, the dialogue opened with a comment concerning the Austrian family bonus policy and its goal to reduce poverty in large families and stimulate birth rates.

A question was raised about the Croatian non-work Sunday. Silvija explained this is not considered as a work-life balance measure, since it is not the reality for many professions but more of an influence from religious institutions. There are 16 Sundays per year that can be chosen to work on.

There was a discussion on reforms towards a shorter (4-day) work week in Europe, and whether this could be beneficial for work-life balance. This could be effective if correctly implemented and not adding more stress and pressure for employees. Additionally, another source of pressure is inflation, meaning that in some cases people have to take up multiple jobs which causes additional stress.

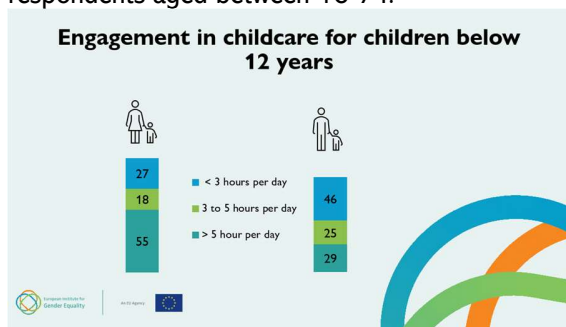
Attention then shifted to the Lithuanian initiatives to enhance work-life balance. Some family policy measures mentioned in the presentation are related to the implementation of the Child Guarantee, and they work across different ministries for this. The participants discussed the pros and cons of family policy being in one single ministry or spread across different ministries: on the one hand, the cross-sectoral approach means that family policy can be mainstreamed across different ministries (social, education, gender, migration); but on the other hand, the lack of coordination of measures across ministries can create barriers for families to access rights.

Study session 2: 1000 days of parenthood and the mental load

This session examined the distribution of informal childcare activities for children between partners within the household, and how care is shared within families. We discussed policy pointers to address these pressures, and the development of psychological and social support to assist families with different mental health challenges such as post-natal depression.

Vytautas Peciukonis, Research Officer, European Institute for Gender Equality

In his presentation, Vytautas shared key findings from EIGE's CARE Survey focusing on the involvement of women and men in unpaid care, social and leisure activities. The survey covered all 27 EU Member States, with more than 60 000 respondents aged between 16-74.



He pointed out that caring has socioeconomic costs. In terms of engagement in childcare for children below 12 years there is a big difference between men and women when care intensity is higher (more than 5 hours/day): around 55% of women surveyed spend at least 5 hours/day on childcare compared to 29% of men. On the other hand, he highlighted that informal long-term care shows better gender balance than informal childcare.

According to EIGE's findings, formal care services help to reduce the care load. In those countries where the use of formal childcare services is higher, the provision of highly intensive informal childcare tends to be lower (with some exceptions like Slovenia). Moreover, Vytautas underscored that caregivers struggle to access all the services they need as both child and long-term caregivers struggle with the unavailability and unaffordable

services and long waiting lists. He highlighted that investments in formal care services increases probability of gender equality.

He concluded giving key recommendations to strengthen, earmark and increase investment and funding in formal care services, to take targeted measures which challenge traditional gender roles and to ensure the collection of EU-wide gender statistics on unpaid care.

Martino Serapioni, Senior Research Programme Coordinator, European Observatory on Family Policy

Martino presented some key findings of the European Observatory report – "Towards greater family policy integration across Europe".

As a starting point, Martino put forward the critical nature of the first 1000 days in a child's life as a high-risk period for families, highlighting a pressing need for well-coordinated support and resources. He noted a considerable gap between existing family leave policies and the availability of formal childcare services. This misalignment places stress on families and underscores the need for a policy framework that enables smoother transitions between family leave and childcare availability, ensuring continuous support for working families.

Martino brought attention to different country-specific approaches to early childhood supports to families.

Finnish model: Finland was highlighted as an example of effective service integration, combining healthcare and social services into a unified support structure. This model allows families to access various essential services, including healthcare, parenting support, and social assistance, through a centralised, user-friendly system. Finland's approach illustrates how centralised services can create efficiencies and provide comprehensive support tailored to family needs.

Flemish model: The Flemish region provides a model focused on parenting support, preventive healthcare, and social integration, co-located within a single "house" or centre. This integrated hub approach provides families with easier access to services and fosters community engagement, emphasising preventive support and early intervention in a consolidated and accessible environment.

German model: Germany offers diverse models that vary by region, showcasing the country's flexible, decentralised approach to family and early childhood services. These models allow for customisation based on regional needs and preferences, though participants noted potential challenges in ensuring consistency and accessibility across different areas.

Italian model: Italy's 2015 "La Buona Scuola" reform created an integrated education system for children aged 0-6 under the Ministry of Education, replacing the previous dual structure. The reform introduced unitary ECEC settings ('Poli per l'infanzia'), which have the potential to become integrated reference points for local family support, particularly in education and social services. Local authorities play a key role in the reform's success through cross-institutional coordination and the creation of combined day-care and preschool services.

Vilma Ražauskienė, Researcher at Institute of Sociology at The Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences

Vilma shared findings from her PhD research project called From Expectations to Reality: The Dynamics of First-Time Mothers' Attitudes Towards Gender Norms in Relation to the Childcare and Its Implications for Family Policy in the Context of (De)Familialism.

To set the context, Vilma provided background on the persisting gender employment gap within the EU. The gender employment gap, defined as the difference in employment rates between men and women aged 20-64, remains significant across the EU, with a target set in 2019 to halve this gap by 2030. As of 2022, only two EU regions have met this target, highlighting the need for more effective interventions.

It was discussed how traditional gender norms play a critical role in perpetuating gender disparities in employment, specifically impacting women's access to leadership roles, hiring opportunities, and responsibilities related to care. Factors such as limited access to childcare, discrimination in hiring, and occupational segregation further exacerbate these inequalities, particularly for mothers.

Moreover, she referred to the Horizon Europe project PATHS2INCLUDE which is actively researching gender norms' contribution to the gender employment gap across Europe, particularly the motherhood employment gap. This project uses

data from the European Social Survey and the World Values Survey, measuring gender role beliefs and attitudes. The project's aim is to understand how traditional and non-traditional gender norms affect women's employment choices, job types, and caregiving responsibilities.

The aim of Vilma's research was to examine how gender norms influence employment decisions among first-time mothers. Findings highlighted that attitudes toward gender norms are dynamic and influenced by the age of children, with care demands often increasing gender role expectations over time. This 'traditionalising effect' illustrates how motherhood can solidify traditional roles, especially when external support is limited.

Vilma underscored the four models of (de)familialism and their implications for gender roles:

- **Familialism:** Families serve as the main support system, intensifying gendered caregiving roles.
- **De-familialism:** Reliance on state or market support over family for caregiving responsibilities.
- **Optional Familialism:** Flexibility for families to choose between family and external caregiving support.
- **Extended Familialism:** Broader support networks that include extended family or community, reducing caregiving pressures on immediate family.

Each model's potential impact on gender roles and the employment gap was explored, with participants noting that greater de-familialism or optional familialism could help reduce the gender employment gap by balancing care responsibilities.

Key discussion points

There was a suggestion to expand the research of Vilma to include mothers with multiple children, noting that views on childcare responsibilities can also change significantly after multiple children, as the partner potentially takes on more childcare responsibilities. Vilma acknowledged the potential for expanding research in this area and agreed that additional perspectives from mothers with multiple children could provide valuable insights.

Another participant inquired about the current study's focus and diversity. Vilma explained that the main objective was to assess shifts in perspectives after the first child, emphasising that diverse family needs should be reflected in State policies to support families effectively during the

first 1,000 days. She highlighted that families vary widely, requiring adaptable options at the State level.

There were questions about the next steps and potential actions at the EU level using the findings of the European Observatory on Family Policy. As a response, Martino indicated that the research is part of a four-year cycle, currently ongoing, meaning there is still substantial work ahead in this area. However, the findings are already being used to guide and influence dialogue at the EU level in the framework of the European Child Guarantee for instance, as well as in relation to the use of EU funds to improve family support services.

Another participant inquired about which countries provide exemplary practices and recommendations, specifically those that encourage fathers' involvement in childcare. The response from Vilma noted that mandatory quotas for fathers to take parental leave have shown success in increasing paternal involvement. Additionally, she mentioned that uncoordinated parental leave policies and childcare services often result in parents resorting to private childcare, highlighting a need for more coordinated public support services.

Furthermore, participants raised concerns about how an ageing population and climate change will increase the demand for long-term care services, indicating the need for proactive policy planning. One participant asked about countries of the EIGE survey which stood out as exceptions (e.g. Slovenia with evidence of high family intervention while there are high levels of formal care services), and how these exceptions should be interpreted. Vytautas noted that these outliers require deeper research to understand how and why they succeed, which could inform policy recommendations for other regions.

There was further discussion on family centre models. Namely how family centres measure their impact on families and whether they collect data to demonstrate their effectiveness. The impact and implementation of such models is crucial. A Finnish participant explained that while the family centre model in Finland is promising, its implementation has challenges, particularly regarding reporting, location, and accessibility for NGOs. She emphasised the need for advocacy to improve the model's reach and effectiveness.

A participant noted that Lithuania's family centres currently support families with children up to the age two and suggested expanding services to include children aged three to six, as this is a critical period for early childhood development, including the detection of autism and language milestones.

Study session 3: Caring for the caregivers

Caring for someone else can be very rewarding but can also lead to challenges, especially in the absence of any professional support. Due to the lack of adequate support, too many family carers in Europe suffer from an unbearable responsibility and a permanent state of anxiety, linked to a variety of factors. Some carers are also considered the "sandwich generation" caring for both young and older family members. This session focused on the experiences of carers and recommendations for addressing their needs through policy changes.

Sylvia Van Walleghem, Researcher at KU Leuven (Magentaproject), Belgium

Sylvia started with a presentation of Magenta, a programme which supports parents of children with disabilities. They offer workshops for both parents and professionals, aimed at empowering families and improving resilience, especially during the first 10,000 days of a child's life. Magenta helps parents manage care and work responsibilities through time management and shared care strategies. They work with both disability-specific and general services, fostering family quality of life.

Aims towards families

- Empowering parents
- Increase resilience (first 10,000 days)
- Supporting the search for a personal balance between life, work & care taking!
- Facilitating making informed choices



The framework for support includes factors like health, finance, relationships, and emotional well-being. Magenta also uses this framework in training sessions for professionals. Magenta targets professionals both in the care as in the employment sector (career and job coaches). A 2022 study from Bophti in Australia revealed that family quality of life tends to worsen over time due to long-term care responsibilities, job loss, lack of respite care, and increasing challenges as the child ages. Many older carers suffer from chronic illnesses.

Recommendations from Magenta include:

- **Integrated Policy:** Policies should address the balance between support to workforce and support to carers, investing equally in both.
- **Choice:** Carers should have the right to choose whether they work or provide care.
- **Support:** Family carers should have access to tailored services and respite care at home.
- **Consider invisible tasks:** Policies should consider the invisible work of carers: which, for instance, includes the time they spend in organising, coordinating, seeking support.
- **Time/Care leave systems:** should be flexible and appropriately funded.
- **Employer Flexibility:** Greater flexibility from employers is crucial, allowing carers to take time off at short notice.
- **Recognition of Informal Carers:** More recognition and support should be given, particularly for young carers and those juggling care with returning to work.
- **Burden Management:** There should be systems in place to prevent burnout during pivotal moments, such as transitions to adulthood of the children cared for.

Sarah Loriato, Policy Officer on Employment and European Parliament Liaison, AGE Platform Europe

AGE Platform Europe advocates for better support systems for informal carers, particularly older people, who often bear the burden of caregiving without adequate recognition or resources. Sarah's presentation centred on the need to promote a cultural change in the way care is perceived and to raise the status of this role, starting by moving beyond the traditional binary vision that separates professional and private life, and using the term "work-life integration" instead of work-life balance. She pointed out to the shortcomings of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, which fails to fully address the diversity of situations and unique challenges faced by caregivers, including the complexities of caregiving at the intersection of age and gender.

In her presentation, Sarah pointed out that 75% of informal carers report experiencing burnout due to the physical and emotional demands of caregiving. This highlights the urgent need for mental health support services specifically tailored to carers.

Moreover, 62% of carers who are employed fear losing their jobs due to their caregiving responsibilities. This fear stems from a lack of adequate job protections and flexible working arrangements for carers, leaving many in precarious employment situations. Current regulations surrounding carers' leave are insufficient. Many carers find it challenging to access leave, and employers often reject their requests without proper justification. Sarah emphasised the need for regulations requiring employers to provide clear reasons when denying carers' leave. She also stressed the importance of community-based care and support services such as respite care, trainings, counselling for carers, coupled with the integration of technological tools (e.g., telehealth, remote monitoring) to reduce the pressure on informal carers. Preventive care measures and greater access to affordable care services could help alleviate some of the burdens that informal carers face.

In terms of recommendations from AGE Platform Europe, Sarah advocated for extending the definition of "carer" to better embrace the complexity of informal care with tailored solutions including older and retired individuals, as these groups are often excluded from policy considerations despite playing significant caregiving roles. She also highlighted the call of AGE Platform Europe for stronger provisions in the EU Work-life Balance Directive to support informal carers more effectively.

This includes:

- **Increased Carers' Leave:** Advocating for more generous leave entitlements for carers, which would allow them to manage their caregiving duties without risks of losing their employment.
- **Affordable Community-Based Care:** Expanding access to affordable and high-quality care services at the community level, which would provide much-needed support for carers and those they care for.

Sarah concluded with a consensus on the importance of advocating for changes in both national and EU-level policies to provide better support for informal carers. Extending the definition of carers, improving job security, enhancing mental health support, and advocating for affordable care services should be prioritised. As for next steps, she referred to continued advocacy for revisions to the EU Work-life Balance Directive, engaging with policymakers to push for

more comprehensive support systems for older carers are needed as well as to explore opportunities to integrate technological tools that assist carers in managing their responsibilities more effectively.

Sandra Norvilienė, Human Resources Manager, Employment Partner Retiva, Lithuania

Sandra's presentation focused on the significant challenges faced by two key groups in the labour market: carers, particularly those in the sandwich generation, and people with disabilities. The conversation explored how employers' biases, inflexible policies, and a lack of proper support contribute to these barriers.

Many employers are hesitant to hire individuals with disabilities, often due to misconceptions about their capabilities or the perceived costs of accommodations. In reality, the required accommodations are frequently minimal, but stereotypes persist, limiting employment opportunities for this group.

Carers, particularly those from the sandwich generation who are responsible for both children and elderly parents, struggle to re-enter the workforce after caregiving periods. The lack of flexible work options and understanding from employers creates significant challenges for these individuals.

The gender pay gap remains a persistent issue, with many women accepting lower pay in exchange for flexible working arrangements. Employers are often reluctant to offer flexibility beyond the legal minimum, further exacerbating inequality in pay and work-life balance.

Sandra formulated recommendations for employers to support caregivers' needs:

Mentoring and career support for new employees.

Employers should provide mentoring programmes and career support tailored to new employees, especially for carers and individuals with disabilities. This support will help them integrate more smoothly into the workplace and overcome initial challenges.

Offer flexible work arrangements and emotional support. Flexibility in working hours and remote work options should be offered to accommodate carers' and employees with disabilities' specific needs. Emotional support programmes, such as

access to mental health resources, are also crucial for fostering a supportive work environment.

Improve workplace inclusivity and benefits. To address the barriers faced by carers and employees with disabilities, employers should improve workplace inclusivity through training, accommodations, and tailored benefits. This includes ensuring accessible workspaces, providing health benefits, and fostering a culture of understanding and support.

Sandra underscored the importance of employers adopting more inclusive hiring practices and offering enhanced support systems to accommodate carers and people with disabilities. There is a consensus on the need for continued advocacy and practical interventions to foster a more equitable and flexible workplace.

She concluded her presentation by emphasising the importance of engagement with employers to promote the implementation of recommended strategies, explore initiatives for training employers on the benefits of workplace inclusivity and continue to monitor and address challenges related to the gender pay gap and the employment of carers and individuals with disabilities.

Key discussion points

A participant from Ireland asked about the concept of family carers and if this includes kinship carers – these are typically grandparents or other families who step into a parenting role e.g. if a parent is in prison or has other challenges preventing them from fulfilling their parenting role. These family carers are invisible and need to take on extra responsibilities due to a lack of support services. Recognition of kinship carers and offering them peer support is highly beneficial and should be included in broader care programmes.

There was also a discussion on terminology. A participant from Austria highlighted the overlap between unpaid care work and formal employment in the care sector, emphasising the difference in the terms "unpaid work" and "care work". A participant from Lithuania referred to the definition of "carer" in Lithuania, where the term is often conflated with nursing or childcare.

One participant highlighted Lithuania's "Silver Line" initiative, which connects older individuals with "phone friends" to improve mental health. Sarah added that AGE Platform Europe collects good practices, and invited participants to share their good practices, such as the Silver Line initiative.

A participant from Hungary raised two questions. First, she noted the high percentage of carers in single-parent families, often due to separation. She asked how they manage to engage these parents, who are typically overwhelmed and struggling to cope. Her second question focused on older women in their 70s and 80s who care for their adult children despite being too old or ill to continue. She expressed concern that these older carers are often overlooked and asked for ideas or resources to support them. Sarah acknowledged the challenges faced by single parents are acknowledged, emphasising the importance of dedicated peer support groups for single parents.

On the broader issue of older carers, the importance of intergenerational support was stressed, highlighting that older people, when they lose jobs, are less able to help younger family members. Regarding older women, it was pointed out that they are often forced to retire early, which contributes to pension inequality. Both older men and women face health issues that complicate caregiving, and the current EU policies, including work-life balance measures, do not provide enough support for this group. A participant from France added that a significant number of carers are self-employed, so that benefits like carers leave generally do not apply to them.

A participant from Bulgaria highlighted the role of grandparents in her country, where they support single parents with children who have disabilities. She stressed the importance of support for older carers, noting the significant contribution they make. There was also concern about what happens to care receivers when a carer dies, especially in single parent families.

In relation to care-friendly workplaces, there were questions raised about support for single parents. A participant from North Macedonia highlighted that single parents can work part-time, with government compensation for the remainder of their hours.

A Lithuanian participant referred to gender dynamics in salary negotiations, pointing out that while men may be bolder in negotiating wages, women often prioritise work-time flexibility. She emphasised that life circumstances influence negotiations with employers, and in Lithuania, many employers only meet the minimum legal requirements, considering it a significant contribution. In her response, Sandra stressed the fact that employers are often hesitant to offer more than the legal minimum in terms of flexibility and other benefits.

Study session 4: Building family-supportive workplaces

This session took a look at workplace dynamics and their impact on the work-life balance of families such as the pros and cons of telework, company policies to support family-related leaves, and the impact of workplace discriminations.

Tina Weber, Research Manager, Eurofound

Tina's presentation focused on the right to disconnect (R2D) and how it relates to creating family-supportive workplaces. Drawing on findings from Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey (with over 75,000 respondents) and the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS), Tina outlined the key factors contributing to the rising importance of the R2D debate, particularly in the context of telework and hybrid work.

The increasing prevalence of telework and hybrid work, along with the use of digital tools, has led to longer working hours and adverse physical and psychological health impacts, particularly for remote workers. This shift in work patterns has brought the debate around R2D to the forefront in recent years.

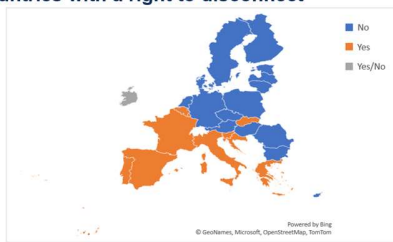
While telework generally has a positive impact on work-life balance, the benefits are more pronounced for men than for women. Women, especially full-time teleworkers, tend to juggle more caregiving tasks alongside their work, affecting their overall work-life balance. Workers based at employers' premises more frequently reported that their working hours did not align well with family or social commitments, underscoring the potential benefits of telework if managed properly.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only four EU countries (France, Italy, Belgium, and Spain) had some form of R2D legislation. By 2023, ten Member States had adopted laws, with Ireland implementing a Code of Practice that can influence court decisions.

Tina highlighted the positive outcomes for workers in companies that have implemented R2D policies:

- **Reduced Pressure to Work Outside of Hours:** Workers are less likely to work additional hours due to being contacted outside of work hours.
- **Greater Autonomy:** Employees enjoy more control over their working hours, which contributes to better job satisfaction.
- **Improved Work-Life Balance:** Those with access to R2D policies report a healthier balance between their professional and personal lives.
- **Health Benefits:** There is a lower incidence of common health issues, particularly stress and burnout, among workers who have the right to disconnect.
- **Overall Job Satisfaction:** Workers report higher levels of satisfaction with their working conditions when R2D policies are in place, though this is not necessarily linked to working fewer hours overall.

Countries with a right to disconnect



Eurofound

Despite the clear benefits of R2D policies, Tina stressed that having a policy in place is not enough on its own. To be effective, R2D must be accompanied by:

- **Awareness-raising:** both employees and employers need to be fully aware of the policy and how it functions.
- **Effective implementation:** clear procedures must be in place to ensure the policy is adhered to.
- **Joint monitoring and review:** regular assessments by management and employee representatives are essential to ensure that the policy continues to meet the needs of workers and is being applied effectively.

She concluded by emphasising the growing importance of R2D, particularly in the context of the shift towards telework and hybrid work environments.

While progress has been made with legislative advances across the EU, there is still work to be done to ensure these policies are effectively implemented and monitored. R2D, when properly enforced, has the potential to significantly improve work-life balance and support the creation of family-friendly workplaces.

Marta Pompili, Policy Officer responsible for Gender Equality, EQUINET

Marta's presentation focused on the role of equality bodies in tackling labour market discriminations of parents and carers.

Equality Bodies are national, public institutions set up across Europe to promote equality and tackle discrimination on one, some, or all the grounds of discrimination covered by European Union (EU) law – gender, race and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and disability. They play a fundamental role in the non-discrimination architecture of the EU and thus, have a fundamental role to play in the protection of working parents and carers from discrimination in the workplace. This role is also reinforced in the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158). Equality Bodies, alongside family organizations and all striving for equitable work-life balance and non-discriminatory family policies, play a key role in the promotion of (gender) equality in the workplace and in the safeguard of one's right to a mentally healthy working environment.

Equinet, the European Network of Equality Bodies is a membership organisation bringing together 47 Equality Bodies from across Europe (27 EU MS plus non-EU countries) that promotes equality in Europe by supporting and enabling the work of National Equality Bodies.

Marta referred to the research study by the German Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (FADA) that shows:

- 1) During pregnancy, 56% of parents experience discrimination at least once. In this phase, significantly more mothers (72%) than fathers (44%) are affected.
- 2) In the context of parental leave, 52% of parents have experienced discrimination, with stronger effects for men when the leave is announced and for women during the period of leave.
- 3) 48% of caregivers experience prejudice and discrimination at least once.

Overall, discrimination against parents and caregivers in the workplace is widespread. It is however clear that women are still predominantly affected.

Furthermore, Marta mentioned Parents@Work, an EU-funded 2-year project (2019-2021) carried out by four National Equality Bodies (Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Portugal) with the aim of improving the protection of and combating discrimination against pregnant workers, mothers, and fathers in the workplace, by collecting good practices regarding work-life balance and the protection of parents and carers.

One of the outcomes of the project was providing Equality Bodies with a user-friendly guide containing over 40 good practices collected in three different countries (Belgium, Portugal, and Estonia) that identify areas of challenge of the work-life balance legislation in need to be addressed in efficient ways.

Good practices from Equality Bodies include i) working alongside trade unions and labour inspectorates to develop training activities and exchange knowledge and investigation powers; ii) developing communication and awareness-raising initiatives, and providing information to rights-holders and employers alongside family organizations, and civil society more broadly; iii) engaging with employers to facilitate the implementation of work-life balance measures by encouraging the adoption of equality plans or the mutual learning among employers.

She concluded with her presentation with the following recommendations:

- Full transposition of the EU directive on work-life balance in all Member States and beyond the minimum standards set in the Directive.
- Ensure that work-life balance measures can be taken up by all, and in adequate forms.
- Prioritise the well-being and mental health of workers
- Always adopt an intersectional approach
- Invest in care services such as ECEC, long-term care
- Raise awareness: information is key
- Deconstruct gender roles and implement gender-transformative policies

Inga Ruginienė, President, The Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation

Inga presented the work of the Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation and emphasised the importance of work-life balance for employees. Her presentation centred around the challenges employees face in balancing professional and family responsibilities, and how trade unions can advocate for better working conditions. She highlighted that employees should not have to choose between their work and family life.

Moreover, Inga underscored that work-life balance is essential for increasing job satisfaction and productivity. Ensuring a balance between professional duties and family responsibilities leads to a happier and more engaged workforce.

Employees from various backgrounds and sectors approach trade unions with different challenges, highlighting the need for flexible solutions that cater to their specific situations. Trade unions play a key role in addressing these diverse issues, whether related to working hours, leave policies, or work conditions.

The Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation is actively working towards regulating relationships between employees and employers to ensure fair treatment. Inga emphasised the importance of strong legislation, including the Law on Trade Unions, which empowers unions to effectively represent workers' interests.

Inga shared findings from a study conducted by Eurofound, which demonstrated that countries with strong trade unions tend to have:

- **Shorter Working Hours:** In nations with strong trade union presence, employees work fewer hours on average compared to countries with weaker unions.
- **Greater Flexibility at Workplaces:** Increased workplace flexibility provides more opportunities for employees to express their needs and better manage work-life balance. This flexibility is a key factor in creating supportive and inclusive working environments for employees with diverse family responsibilities.

In conclusion, she highlighted the critical role trade unions play in advocating for work-life balance, fair working conditions, and a family-friendly workplace. Strong trade unions, backed by effective legislation, help create a working environment where employees feel empowered to voice their concerns and access flexible working arrangements.

Key discussion points

A participant from Lithuania raised the question of whether family organisations could be considered as the 4th “social partner” in the context of social policy reforms. She highlighted the importance of these organisations and asked Inga's position on this idea. Inga responded positively to the concept of including diverse NGOs in social dialogue, representing families and individuals who are not affiliated with trade unions. She acknowledged the similarities between trade unions and NGOs, especially in terms of achieving results with limited resources. However, she noted that while NGOs are welcome to participate in discussions, they may not be able to sign formal social agreements as trade unions do in many EU countries. Inga concluded by supporting the idea of greater diversity in social partnerships, which she believes will lead to positive outcomes.

A participant from the UK raised a question regarding the generational impact of the right to disconnect. She noted that her generation, which has grown up accustomed to teleworking, might approach family-work reconciliation differently from older generations who had to adapt to remote work. Tina Weber addressed this, stating that their research explored the reasons why different age groups respond to work messages after hours. She found that younger workers often do so out of fear, particularly at the start of their careers. Tina emphasised the need for a separate, reinforced provision for R2D, as current measures have not effectively addressed this concern.

A participant from Austria referred to the idea of a “family leave for all generations,” advocating for family members beyond parents, such as grandparents, to be eligible for leave. She also promoted the concept of “family mainstreaming,” aiming to ensure family considerations are included in all relevant policies and discussions. Kinga Joo, the Chair of this session, added that some EU countries, such as Hungary, already extend family leave to grandparents, showing varying approaches to family leave across the region.

A point was also made about access to breastfeeding leave. Marta pointed out that breastfeeding rights are not adequately covered in current work-life balance discussions. She suggested that having childcare services in the same building as the workplace could support breastfeeding mothers, though it might have the unintended consequence of keeping mothers at work for longer hours.



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