

# Work Family Balance

Shifting demographics and rising care demands

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The European Presidency has recently requested an explanatory opinion on ‘Ensuring a needs-based work-life balance for all: How adequate flexible working conditions can support intergenerational solidarity and the empowerment of women’.

The opinion stresses the urgent need to adapt strategies for work-life balance taking into consideration the shifting demographics, new forms of work, flexible working arrangements and rising care demands, in view of the 2027 revision of the Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers.

Alongside the rights-based approach, a ‘needs-based approach’ to work-life balance means a flexible, adaptive framework that prioritises and addresses the varying personal and professional requirements of workers.

Such an approach emphasises the importance of understanding and accommodating the specific needs of individuals to enhance their well-being and productivity. It involves assessing and taking into account the diverse circumstances of workers and their families, such as family responsibilities, personal health, and professional development goals.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is the voice of organised civil society in Europe. It represents employers, workers and civil society organisations. The expertise of its 329 members helps optimise the quality of EU policies and legislation.

The Rapporteur Kinga Joó has been a longstanding expert and contributor of family-friendly policy recommendations at the United Nations and European Union. She is the International Advisor to the President of the National Association of Large Families (NOE), President of the Social Responsibility Board, National Cooperation Fund (NEA).

Extract of the EESC Opinion on ‘Ensuring a needs-based work-life balance for all’.  
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/ensuring-needs-based-work-life-balance-all-how-adequate-flexible-working-conditions-can-support-intergenerational>

By recognising these unique needs and taking into account the needs of companies as well, it is possible to create a more supportive work environment that fosters worker satisfaction, improves worker retention and enables overall work-life harmony, thus making the economy more competitive.

The EESC has repeatedly raised the issue of the need for working conditions that are better adapted to demographic trends, drawing attention to the growing concerns among Europeans about ageing, the declining number of people of working age and the resulting labour shortages, work-life balance conflicts, persistent gender inequalities and the rising care gap, all of which have a significant impact on families in the EU.

Current demographic trends in Europe will have major social and economic implications. As the overall increase in age is not accompanied by a rising number of healthy life years in all regions, the number of older people with chronic and often multiple diseases will grow. In addition, the number of births is steadily decreasing: while almost 4.5 million children were born in the EU in 2011, the number fell below 4 million in 2022. These demographic changes are leading to changing needs in the field of care: the focus is increasingly on shifting to care for older people, putting considerable pressure not only on our care systems, but also on workers and their families, who are increasingly struggling to balance work with mounting care-giving responsibilities.

Significant variations exist among EU Member States, reflecting differences in national systems and conditions, the financing and cost-sharing of social systems, and employment measures – areas that largely fall within national competences. Moreover, cultural differences regarding care-giving and gender roles within families and in working life also have an influence. It is crucial to establish care infrastructures and social services that offer real options and meet the diverse and increasing needs of individuals and families. This requires mobilising the whole range of care service providers, including public, private and social economy actors, performing in the framework of common rules and standards. While respecting national competences and cultural differences, there is a need for EU-wide policies and initiatives that support the availability and affordability of quality care where needed, which also requires a skilled and adequately paid workforce with decent working conditions in the care sector, and aim for upward convergence both among and within Member States.

It is estimated that EU citizens over the age of 15 engage in unpaid care activities, including caring for children and older relatives, for more than half of their lifetime. However, there are significant gender inequalities: as per estimates, women spend six more years (39 years) doing so than men (33 years). In addition, in most Member States, the unpaid care work carried out by women is associated with 5 to 10 more years of demanding care responsibilities than for men. These figures highlight the economic consequences of the uneven distribution of care responsibilities, which affect their pension contributions and long-term financial security.

Gender equality is far from being achieved in the EU despite considerable progress. The persistent gender pay gap of 12.7% and women's unequal role and participation in the labour market, where 31% of women work part-time compared to 8.2% of men, highlight persisting disparities.

Flexible working arrangements, if available, can significantly enhance the work-life balance of women in particular, enable them to be active in the labour market and allow them to better manage family and work. While flexible and part-time work is an option for many who cannot work according to standard working patterns, over time, it often comes with downsides such as lower wages, fewer benefits and reduced pension accumulations. Reforming taxation laws to ensure fairer treatment for lower-income earners is essential. Such reforms can significantly enhance work-life balance by reducing financial stress for lower earners, allowing them to invest more time and resources into personal and family well-being.

### **Work-life balance**

The Work-Life Balance (WLB) Directive acknowledges that employees may need to balance work and personal life at various stages, such as when raising young children or providing long-term care for relatives. While all EU Member States have made progress in implementing the directive, disparities remain. Notably, paternity leave is now an individual, non-transferable, and well-paid right across the EU, but caregiving duties still fall disproportionately on women. Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) allow workers to request adjustments, though employers are not obligated to grant them.

Struggles to balance work and private life significantly impact employment and family size, with many delaying or reducing the number of children they have due to these difficulties. The

EESC highlights the need to adapt work-life balance policies to address evolving care demands. While early childhood education and care (ECEC) coverage has improved, long-term care (LTC) faces challenges, including aging populations, a lack of skilled workers, and unmet care needs, underscoring the necessity for targeted solutions.

## Care

Women with young children face significant challenges when returning to work. Parental leave flexibility, gradual re-entry, and accessible childcare are vital for parents, especially mothers. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services can support labor market participation if their hours align with working parents' needs. While ECEC participation has improved since the Barcelona targets of 2002, variations persist, particularly for children under three. Only seven Member States guarantee ECEC placement after well-paid parental leave.

Long-term care (LTC) needs are growing, with 30.8 million EU citizens requiring LTC in 2022, projected to rise to 38.1 million by 2050. Combining paid work with caregiving is difficult for one-third of parents with children under 12 and 40% of LTC providers. Informal carers, 70% of whom are over 45, often juggle care with work or leave employment entirely. Women bear a disproportionate caregiving burden, and live-in care workers, often migrants, face exploitation risks. The EESC calls for defined statuses for informal carers and a "Care Toolbox" to address these gaps.

## Gender equality

In 2023, the EU gender employment gap stood at 10.2%, with 70.2% of women and 80.4% of men aged 20-64 employed. The EESC highlights that gender equality is a core European value and an economic advantage, with closing the gender gap potentially boosting GDP by 8%. Gender-equal policies improve talent retention, productivity, and economic stability while addressing demographic challenges.

Countries with greater workforce gender equality excel in global competitiveness, as the WEF's Global Competitiveness Report links reducing inequality to stronger economic growth and future readiness.

## Flexible working arrangements

FWAs enable parents and carers, especially women, to engage more actively in the workforce, boosting economic growth and reducing gender disparities. Clear boundaries between work and

personal life are essential to prevent exploitation and burnout, a challenge for women in all roles, including leadership. Teleworking has increased flexibility but risks blurring work-life boundaries, leading to burnout and health issues.

The European Commission is consulting on measures to ensure fair telework and the right to disconnect. Technologies like AI and smart scheduling can improve time management and reduce stress, but a lack of flexibility remains a key reason women change jobs. Women reducing hours or working part-time for caregiving risk outdated skills, limited career advancement, and old-age poverty. Many also work in roles at higher risk of automation, with restricted access to training compounding long-term challenges. Social partners and civil society organizations play critical roles in implementing work-life balance policies, fostering inclusive labor practices, and advocating for family-friendly measures to support workers and enterprises.

## Intergenerational solidarity

The traditional stages of education, work, and retirement are becoming more flexible. Active participation in both family and work life can enhance health and well-being for older adults. At age 50, men and women have different work patterns: women spend more years in unpaid care work, while men focus on paid employment. Older adults, particularly women, often provide unpaid care, supporting working-age family members in balancing work and family life.

Flexible work arrangements, training, gradual retirement schemes, and ergonomic adjustments help older workers stay in the labor market longer if desired. Preventive measures like healthy lifestyles, quality healthcare, and suitable workplaces further support their ability to work and reduce care needs.

## Family friendly workplaces

The European Commission's 2018 policy memo provided a comprehensive overview of policies and initiatives in EU Member States to support family-friendly workplaces, including a list of good practices. A memo still to be relaunched.

Several European companies are leading the way in offering excellent childcare arrangements and work-life balance policies. For example, SAP and Volvo Group have been recognised for their comprehensive family support policies, including flexible working hours, generous parental leave, and on-site childcare facilities. These companies understand that supporting workers in balancing

family responsibilities not only enhances productivity and retention but also boosts overall company performance.

The Balanzs Programme was the first CSO-led programme in Hungary to support companies and workplaces in becoming more family-friendly. They have created a supportive professional community where pioneering initiatives and best practices are collected and disseminated to help companies develop a humane corporate culture. Between 2013 and 2023, 1 349 companies were audited and rewarded, benefiting around 240 000 employees and their families.

Company-level social dialogue is an essential tool in promoting gender equality and fair working conditions. In particular, it makes it possible to consider the specific circumstances and needs of the workers and business in question. The EESC finds it important to enhance work-life balance in a way that provides families with appropriate choices while also taking into consideration the needs of businesses, in particular SMEs. However, it must be recognised that most European companies are micro-companies which do not have the same resources for extensive work-life balance policies as their larger counterparts and therefore need to be supported.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The shifting demographics, emergence of new work forms, expansion of flexible working arrangements, and increasing care demands are creating an urgent necessity to adapt strategies to achieve a needs-based work-life balance. This is instrumental to the 2027 review of the Work-Life Balance (WLB) Directive, its implementation in the Member States and its impact on the economy and society.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) stresses that social dialogue is the primary tool for introducing appropriate methods, and civil society organisations can support this process.

Needs-based measures include services that are affordable, available, accessible and of high quality but that should also aim to be beneficial for

all stakeholders, including workers and their families, companies and public authorities. Adequate solutions must be based on relevant data, and the EESC therefore calls on the European Commission to prioritise continuous data collection.

The EESC notes that demographic trends, in particular the ageing population, require more resources to be allocated to the whole range of care service providers in order to future-proof our labour market. The EESC recommends that the Council of the EU ask the Commission to develop a Care Toolbox with indicators and targets for long-term care.

Although there appears to be some improvement in the rate of participation in care work among men, women continue to perform the bulk of unpaid care work. Too often unpaid care work contributes to the ‘feminisation of poverty’, as women leave their jobs or reduce their working hours to care for a relative or children. Families and workers need financial security, and supporting women and men in carrying out this essential care work should not be seen as an expense, but as an investment, which benefits not only all of society but also the economy.

In the post-pandemic period, it is important to examine, evaluate and update, where necessary, the employment-related measures taken as a result of the pandemic and integrate them into the review process of the WLB Directive. As the proposed studies for the review report do not cover flexible working arrangements (FWAs), the EESC calls for a separate study on these.

The EESC suggests that the Commission examine the state of work-life balance policies in EU companies and the related benefits, obstacles and impacts on competitiveness, as well as good practices, including in SMEs. Practices that harness the potential of intergenerational cooperation in the workplace should be highlighted. Updating the 2018 policy memo on family-friendly workplaces could provide a valuable framework for this effort.