

European reconciliation package 2014: Year of reconciling work and family life in Europe ^[1]

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Executive Summary

In the last few years, there has been a growing demand for policies that support the achievement of the targets on gender equality, closing the gender and pension pay gap, women's participation in decision making, the Barcelona targets for early childhood education and care, and a better reconciliation between work and family life. In the context of the EU 2020 Strategy, whilst not framed as a headline target, reconciliation measures have nevertheless been recognised at EU level as important means of achieving major policy objectives.

Europe is the continent with the highest number of older citizens, with women who have a longer life expectancy than men, and an ageing process that will continue for the remainder of this century. However, despite these well-known trends, about 80% of care for people with a disability or for older persons is still provided by informal carers: family, friends, or neighbours, with a great difference from one Member State to the other and with significant differences between women and men. Age groups are also affected differently and, despite a growing number of young carers, the highest share of care is provided by women age 50 or older.

The lack of services and support to those with family needs, long waiting lists for childcare and care for older and disabled persons, including services promoting independent living, coupled with difficulties in reconciling work and care responsibilities has had a strong impact on employment, especially for women. This has, for many women, often resulted in having no other choice than reducing working hours or dropping out completely from paid employment. During the last century, labour market strategies as well as employment policies have been designed based on the traditional family and societal structure of the male breadwinner model. Over time this dynamic has evolved. However, these changes in society and diversity of family forms have not been followed by revisions of the labour market legislation. Reconciliation policies and practices are essential to implement this change and promote the employment of women, which, in the EU in 2013, stands at 62.5% (against 74.2% for men). The gender pay gap remains at 16% and the pension gap has reached 39%.

Women's employment is tightly linked to the distribution of work and family responsibilities between women and men. The unequal share of unpaid work in the family has a direct impact on gender segregation, because women still adjust their working arrangements considering their caring responsibilities especially when they have children or when they need to care for an elderly or disabled relative. Subsequently, women are more likely to take leaves, work part time or withdraw from the labour market. Indeed, because of insufficient or a total lack of childcare facilities and policies, across Europe, 23% of women whose youngest child is under three and 18% of women whose youngest child is between 3 and mandatory school age work part-time or do not work at all.

Leaves are still often ground for discrimination and despite existing legislation on the protection of pregnant workers, women continue to be discriminated on the grounds of childbirth. Furthermore, it is very difficult for women to reintegrate the labour market after a long care period.

To counterbalance this trend, it is important to put in place measures supporting women to access and stay in employment but also encouraging men in taking a higher share of the family and care responsibilities. Childcare arrangements, their availability, affordability, accessibility and quality are a pivotal factor for women's employment and for gender equality, and thus reconciliation of work and family life for working parents.

However, reconciliation policies must not be seen and identified as measures to support young parents only, or benefit only employees in large corporations or in the public sector where employers can put in place special arrangements for their employees with certain types of jobs, mainly managerial and white collar. On the contrary, reconciliation policies are to be considered as a review and improvement of the working environment in order to improve the working conditions and well-being of all employees and workers, as well as a contribution to the productivity and success of the company.

They are not a "one-solution-fits-all" type of policies and tailored instruments must be elaborated and used to fulfil the specific needs of the workers and of the company, according to its size and sector, or developed to favour specifically the self-employed and entrepreneurs. They should provide a coherent framework, aiming to reform the labour market but also to create a "Reconciliation economy" on the model of the "green economy", developing and promoting a social impact indicator, rewarding those companies with low social impact, for

the benefit of the entire community.

Region: Europe ^[4]

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