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**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee**

**Ensuring a needs-based work-life balance for all: How adequate flexible working conditions can support intergenerational solidarity and the empowerment of women**

**(exploratory opinion at the request of the Hungarian Presidency)**

(C/2025/116)

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## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. 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 <sup>(1)</sup>, its implementation in the Member States and its impact on the economy and society.

1.2. 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.

<sup>(1)</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79).

1.3. 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.

1.4. 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.

1.5. 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.

1.6. 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.

1.7. 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.

## **2. General comments**

2.1. 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. 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.

2.2. 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 <sup>(2)</sup> among Europeans about ageing <sup>(3)</sup>, the declining number of people of working age and the resulting labour shortages <sup>(4)</sup>, work-life balance conflicts <sup>(5)</sup>, persistent gender inequalities <sup>(6)</sup> and the rising care gap <sup>(7)</sup>, all of which have a significant impact on families in the EU.

2.3. 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 <sup>(8)</sup>, 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 <sup>(9)</sup>. 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.

2.4. 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 <sup>(10)</sup>, 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.

<sup>(2)</sup> Eurobarometer 2023.

<sup>(3)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Towards a new care model for older people: learning from COVID-19' (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 194, 12.5.2022, p. 19), Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on a European Strategy for Older Persons (exploratory opinion at the request of the Spanish Presidency) (OJ C 349, 29.9.2023, p. 28).

<sup>(4)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Demographic challenges in the EU in light of economic and development inequalities (exploratory opinion at the request of the Croatian Presidency) (OJ C 232, 14.7.2020, p. 1) and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – The impact of demography on Social Europe (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2024/6867, 28.11.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/6867/oj>).

<sup>(5)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Challenges of teleworking: organisation of working time, work-life balance and the right to disconnect' (Exploratory opinion at the request of the Portuguese Presidency) (OJ C 220, 9.6.2021, p. 1) and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions an initiative to support work-life balance for working parents and carers' [COM(2017) 252 final] — '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' [COM(2017) 253 final – 2017/0085 (COD)] (OJ C 129, 11.4.2018, p. 44).

<sup>(6)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and the Council on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment and equal opportunities between women and men in matters of employment and occupation (COM(2022) 688 final — 2022/0400 (COD)) and on the Proposal for a Council Directive on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment between persons irrespective of their racial or ethnic origin, equal treatment in the field of employment and occupation between persons irrespective of their religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, equal treatment between women and men in matters of social security and in the access to and supply of goods and services, and deleting Article 13 of Directive 2000/43/EC and Article 12 of Directive 2004/113/EC (COM(2022) 689 final — 2022/0401 (APP)) (OJ C 184, 25.5.2023, p. 71) and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on gender equality (Exploratory opinion at the request of the Czech Presidency) (OJ C 443, 22.11.2022, p. 63).

<sup>(7)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European care strategy' (COM(2022) 440 final) (OJ C 140, 21.4.2023, p. 39) and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Caregivers (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2024/6018, 23.10.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/6018/oj>).

<sup>(8)</sup> Healthy life years statistics, July 2024, Eurostat.

<sup>(9)</sup> Demography and Competitiveness in the European Union, KINCS 2024.

<sup>(10)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European care strategy' (COM(2022) 440 final) (OJ C 140, 21.4.2023, p. 39).

2.5. 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 <sup>(11)</sup>. These figures highlight the economic consequences of the uneven distribution of care responsibilities, which not only hinder women's career progression but also affect their pension contributions and long-term financial security.

2.6. **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 <sup>(12)</sup>. There are various and intersecting reasons for the gender pay gap, such as labour market segregation, part-time vs full-time work, unpaid care responsibilities and tax-related disincentives to women's employment. The gender pay gap is also closely related to the gender pension gap, which stands at 40 %, pointing to the need for more proactive measures to ensure equality between women and men in all areas, including addressing the 'feminisation of poverty' <sup>(13)</sup>.

2.7. **Flexible working arrangements**, if available <sup>(14)</sup>, 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. Additionally, part-time roles can lead to fewer opportunities for professional development and advancement. Reforming taxation laws to ensure fairer treatment for lower-income earners is essential, e.g. through the separate taxation of spouses. 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.

### 3. Specific comments

#### 3.1. Work-life balance

3.1.1. The WLB Directive recognises that the need for employees to reconcile work and private life may arise at any stage of their working life: not only when they have a young child, but also when a relative of theirs needs long-term care.

3.1.2. Two years after the deadline to transpose the **WLB Directive**, although all Member States have made progress, significant differences remain, according to the ongoing review on implementation:

- (i) On the one hand, it is positive that paternity leave is an individual and non-transferable right of the father in all EU Member States and is well paid <sup>(15)</sup>.
- (ii) There are only 10 Member States where the two non-transferable months of parental leave are compensated at an adequate level.
- (iii) In 22 Member States, the entitlement to carers' leave is granted per worker, while in the other five Member States the right could be shared between different workers, e.g. two parents to take care of a child or two spouses/partners to look after an older relative (BG, IE, EE, SE, SI). Since it is mostly women who perform care duties, family entitlement does not contribute to a more equal sharing of caring responsibilities between men and women. In this sense, it is more appropriate for each worker to have an individual and non-transferable right.

<sup>(11)</sup> A. Ophir and J. Polos, 'Care Life Expectancy: Gender and Unpaid Work in the Context of Population Aging', Population Research and Policy Review 41, No. 1 (2022).

<sup>(12)</sup> EIGE, 'Gender inequalities in unpaid care work and on the labour market in the EU'.

<sup>(13)</sup> EIGE. (2021). Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union: Literature Review: How does the Improvement of Gender Equality Contribute to Economic Growth?. <https://eige.europa.eu>.

<sup>(14)</sup> Eurofound.

<sup>(15)</sup> The transposition of the WLB Directive in EU Member States (II) COMM 2022.

- (iv) The provision on FWAs did not create the right to use them, but only introduced the right for workers who are parents or carers to request them. The employer must consider and respond to such a request, taking into account the needs of both the employer and the worker.

3.1.3. Difficulties in reconciling work and private life adversely affect employment. In the 2016 European Quality of Life Survey, more than a third of respondents, in some countries 50 %, said they found it difficult to reconcile paid work with caring responsibilities <sup>(16)</sup>. In addition, there is a growing tendency for young people to postpone their decision to start a family or to have fewer children than planned. The gap between the actual and **desired size of the family** is explained, among other things, by the difficulty of reconciling work and care responsibilities <sup>(17)</sup>.

3.1.4. The EESC calls for the demographic trends leading to **changing care needs** to be taken into account in the pursuit of a needs-based work-life balance, as part of the review of the WLB Directive. While progress has been made in increasing coverage in early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems, due to existing targets and decreasing birth rates, the situation is different in long-term care (LTC). The absence of related targets, a scarcity of skilled workers, and population ageing have led to a growing number of unmet needs in the LTC sector.

3.1.5. A gender perspective in work-life balance policies is essential as women encounter more significant disadvantages due to societal expectations and traditional gender roles, which assign to them a greater share of domestic duties and care-giving responsibilities. Tailored policies promoting gender equality in the workplace can better meet the specific needs of all workers <sup>(18)</sup>.

## 3.2. Care

3.2.1. Women with young children wishing to go back to work face many challenges. It is crucial for parents, especially mothers, to be able to decide how to use parental leave, when to return to work (even gradually) and what kind of **childcare** to use. ECEC services can facilitate the participation of women and men with young children in the labour market, provided that the opening hours align with the needs of working parents.

3.2.2. Regarding ECEC, the Barcelona targets were set in 2002 and the European Commission proposed revising them in 2022. Although ECEC participation rates have increased in most countries since the targets were set, the use of ECEC, particularly in the 0-3 age group, varies considerably between and within countries, reflecting different needs resulting from cultural and social backgrounds and family support systems, as well as the availability and accessibility of ECEC services. The start of guaranteed ECEC differs greatly according to the age of the child: only seven Member States (DK, DE, EE, LV, SI, FI and SV) guarantee a placement for all children immediately after a period of well-paid parental leave <sup>(19)</sup>.

3.2.3. The number of people in need of **long-term care (LTC)** in the EU is currently 30,8 million and is projected to rise by more than 7 million to 38,1 million by 2050 <sup>(20)</sup>. While one-third of those with children under the age of 12 experience regular difficulties combining paid work with care responsibilities, this figure rises to 40 % for those providing LTC <sup>(21)</sup>. The EESC notes that in the field of long-term care, there are no quantified targets and therefore no traceable indicators, unlike the Barcelona targets for ECEC, and therefore calls for a Care Toolbox to be created.

<sup>(16)</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8137&furtherPubs=yes>.

<sup>(17)</sup> COM(2023) 577 final.

<sup>(18)</sup> EIGE. (2022). Work-life balance and gender equality, <https://eige.europa.eu>.

<sup>(19)</sup> Access to ECEC in Europe Eurydice 2023.

<sup>(20)</sup> European Care Strategy, COM(2022) 440 final.

<sup>(21)</sup> A Better Work-Life Balance: Bridging the gender care gap, EIGE 2023.

3.2.4. 70 % of informal carers are over 45 years of age: 48 % are aged 45-64, 33 % are 44 years of age or younger, and 22 % are 65 years of age or older. In other words, four-fifths of informal care-givers carry out care tasks in addition to, or by giving up, their responsibilities at work. In addition, women also provide care more frequently and longer than men <sup>(22)</sup>. Live-in care workers, many of whom are other EU or third-country nationals <sup>(23)</sup>, are at risk of being exploited <sup>(24)</sup>. The EESC highlights that social partners and several civil society organisations called for the status of informal carers to be defined <sup>(25)</sup>.

### 3.3. Gender equality

3.3.1. In 2023, the **employment rate for women** aged 20-64 in the EU was about 70,2 %, compared to 80,4 % for men, resulting in a gender employment gap of 10,2 percentage points <sup>(26)</sup>.

3.3.2. The EESC emphasises that gender equality and equal rights are not only fundamental European values but also economically beneficial. Research shows that **closing the gender gap in labour markets** could increase GDP by almost 8 % <sup>(27)</sup>. Policies promoting gender equality in work-life balance attract and retain top talent, reduce absenteeism, and increase productivity, thereby addressing demographic challenges and contributing to the economic stability of Member States <sup>(28)</sup>.

3.3.3. Countries with higher gender equality in the workforce perform better in global **competitiveness** rankings. The Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum (WEF) underscores gender equality as a key factor in competitive economies, showing that reducing gender inequality can significantly boost economic growth and readiness for the future <sup>(29)</sup>.

### 3.4. Flexible working arrangements

3.4.1. FWAs enable working parents and carers, especially women, to participate more intensively in the workforce, driving economic growth and reducing gender disparities <sup>(30)</sup>. **Proper boundaries** must also be set between work and personal life to avoid exploitation and burnout <sup>(31)</sup>. This is a challenge for female workers and self-employed people alike, as well as for women in leading positions in any organisation.

3.4.2. **Teleworking** has increased flexibility in working conditions and provided more room to accommodate family needs with work. However, experience – particularly during the pandemic – shows that the distinction between working time and personal life can be easily disrespected, potentially contributing to burnouts, and mental and other serious health issues. The European Commission has launched a first-stage consultation of European social partners on possible action to ensure fair telework and the ‘right to disconnect’.

3.4.3. **New technologies**, such as AI and flexible work arrangements, may allow time to be managed more efficiently and reduce stress by automating tasks and providing smart scheduling. However, challenges remain, including ensuring flexible working conditions to retain talented female employees. Lack of flexibility is a major reason why women in Europe change jobs <sup>(32)</sup>.

<sup>(22)</sup> European Care Strategy, COM(2022) 440 final.

<sup>(23)</sup> EIGE: Gender Statistics Database.

<sup>(24)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘The rights of live-in care workers’ (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 487, 28.12.2016, p. 7).

<sup>(25)</sup> Proposal for a Council Recommendation on access to affordable quality long-term care, COM(2022) 441 final.

<sup>(26)</sup> Eurostat. (2023). Employment statistics. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment\\_-\\_annual\\_statistics#Employment\\_in\\_2023\\_compared\\_with\\_the\\_EU\\_target](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment_-_annual_statistics#Employment_in_2023_compared_with_the_EU_target).

<sup>(27)</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2023/09/27/countries-that-close-gender-gaps-see-substantial-growth-returns>.

<sup>(28)</sup> OECD. (2020). The Business Case for Gender Equality and Diversity in the Workplace, <https://www.oecd.org>.

<sup>(29)</sup> World Economic Forum. (2022). The Global Competitiveness Report 2022, <https://www.weforum.org>.

<sup>(30)</sup> ILO. (2020). The Role of Flexible Working Arrangements in Gender Equality, <https://www.ilo.org>.

<sup>(31)</sup> Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers and Chung, H., *Flexible working arrangements and gender equality in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/13215>.

<sup>(32)</sup> European Commission. (2021). Digitalisation and Women’s Workforce Participation in the EU, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu>.

3.4.4. Women in Europe who reduce their working hours or switch to part-time work due to caring responsibilities are more likely to face the risk of their skills becoming outdated and may face difficulties in changing from part-time work back to full-time and risk old-age poverty. This reduction in working hours and the fact that they are more likely to work in jobs at risk of being automated can lead to fewer opportunities for professional development and career advancement, exacerbating **skill gaps**. Limited access to training and professional development programmes further compounds these challenges, impacting long-term career prospects and financial security at each stage of life <sup>(33)</sup>.

3.4.5. **Social partners** play a vital role in implementing the WLB Directive and associated policies through negotiations and collective agreements. Their efforts shape inclusive labour practices and ensure that workers' and enterprises' needs are considered. **Certain civil society organisations** advocate for and ensure good work-life balance policies across Europe by engaging in policy dialogue, monitoring implementation, and providing insights and feedback to policymakers, including highlighting the importance of family-friendly policies.

### 3.5. *Intergenerational solidarity*

3.5.1. Based on a **life-cycle approach**, the traditional stages of education, training, work and retirement are becoming less rigid and more flexible <sup>(34)</sup>. Taking an active role both in family life and at work can increase the time spent in good health and well-being for older people.

3.5.2. Looking at **paid and unpaid working life expectancy** at the age of 50, including caring for grandchildren and helping older people with daily activities, the components of work for men and women are very different. The largest component for women is the years spent exclusively in unpaid work, while for men it is the years spent exclusively in paid work <sup>(35)</sup>. Through unpaid care work, many older people, mainly women, help their working age family members to reconcile work and family life <sup>(36)</sup>.

3.5.3. Flexible working arrangements, training, special forms of employment, including gradual retirement schemes, and, where appropriate, ergonomic or accessibility aspects allow **older workers** to remain active in the labour market for longer if they so wish. Preventive approaches, including a healthy lifestyle, adequate healthcare systems and a quality and suitable workplace environment also help maintain people's ability to work, on top of decreasing their need for care.

### 3.6. *Family friendly workplaces*

3.6.1. 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** <sup>(37)</sup>. Unfortunately, this overview has not been repeated or updated.

3.6.2. 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.

<sup>(33)</sup> EIGE. (2022). The Impact of Part-Time Work on Women's Career Development in the EU, <https://eige.europa.eu>.

<sup>(34)</sup> Green Paper on Ageing, COMM 2021.

<sup>(35)</sup> A. Ophir, The Paid and Unpaid Working Life Expectancy at 50 in Europe, The Journals of Gerontology Volume 77, 2022.

<sup>(36)</sup> <https://www.koppmariantezet.hu/en/allarticles/718-older-people-are-valued-family-members>.

<sup>(37)</sup> Family-friendly workplaces, COMM 2018.

3.6.3. 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.

3.6.4. 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.

Brussels, 23 October 2024.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Oliver RÖPKE

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