



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Gender equality aspects of work and care in the context of COVID-19

Webinar, 18 June 2020

Summary Report



Ein Unternehmen der ÖSB Gruppe.

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Introduction

Organised in the framework of the [EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality](#), the webinar presented good practices on gender equality in work and care in the context of COVID-19. Participants had the opportunity to discuss and learn about good practice approaches from Belgium, Malta, France and Italy.

The webinar took place on 18 June 2020 and was attended by officials from 21 Member States, European NGO networks, several European Commission services, the cabinet of Vice President Jourova and of Commissioner Dalli, as well as the European Institute for Gender Equality. It was the second in the series of webinars on gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19, addressing the second pillar ‘Thriving in a gender-equal economy’ of the recently launched [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#).

The webinar featured good practices on the two related themes of work and care in the context of the pandemic. They were selected from responses to a questionnaire from the Commission inviting Member States to share information on how they had approached gender equality during the pandemic and how they were planning to do so in the recovery phase.

1. Setting the scene

1.1 The European Commission’s approach to the need for gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19

Irena Moozova, Director for Equality and Union Citizenship, European Commission opened the webinar. She stressed the importance of gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19 and during the recovery phase and of ensuring the upholding of fundamental EU values of equality and non-discrimination. The pandemic has underlined the disproportionate number of women in frontline jobs providing health, community and other essential services, such as nurses and carers for elderly people, shop assistants and teachers. In addition, many women are working remotely from home where they often have to face the burden of reconciling their work with increased care responsibilities resulting from the closure of schools, childcare and support services for elderly people. The gendered impact of the pandemic on women’s work and care roles is shown in preliminary findings from time use surveys. These show that the pandemic has not led to an equal sharing of care responsibilities, instead reinforcing stereotypical gender roles.

Closing gender gaps and achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy are key objectives of the EU’s [Gender Equality Strategy](#). These reflect the Commission’s priority to ensure adequate investments in early childhood education and care services, including from available EU funding. Furthermore, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of a smooth transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive. Future developments include introducing a gender-lens to the

future development of social and care systems. To empower women to thrive in the economy, targeted measures promoting the participation of women in innovation will be developed under the Horizon Europe European Innovation Council. The Commission has also proposed a €3 billion Emergency Support Instrument for the healthcare sector where women are overrepresented. Funding under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, including its successor, is supporting projects that tackle occupational segregation and the equal sharing of care responsibilities. In addition, in early April, Commissioners Dalli, Kyriakides and Schmit, sent a joint letter to the relevant Ministers in all Member States to urge them to ensure that the emergency response measures also take into account the needs of groups in situations of vulnerability, including women on the frontline of the COVID-19 response. European institutions, Member States, civil society organisations and other stakeholders have an opportunity to work together in devising gender-sensitive responses to the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that women will not continue to carry the social and economic burden of this pandemic.

2. Valuing care work and encouraging its equal sharing

2.1 Introduction by COFACE

COFACE Families Europe set the context of the first theme of the webinar by highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed new tensions and difficulties in achieving work-life balance for people working in essential services and those who are teleworking. Overcoming these problems requires the swift transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive, along with adequate payment for family leave to ensure a decent income for all types of families. Alongside this is the need for universal help for families through resources, flexible work arrangements and services, embedded in employment rights. In particular, this is an opportunity to go beyond the Directive and further develop good quality, affordable and accessible early childhood education and care services. All stakeholders, including employers, unions and family organisations, can rethink ways to end the 'motherhood gap' and to incentivise men to take leave. Government measures are also needed to boost investment in social and healthcare services and build on initiatives introduced during the pandemic by some governments (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Luxembourg) that reflect a mix of approaches, such as extraordinary leave, care vouchers and flexible work solutions.

2.2 Good practices from Member States

In **Belgium**, a special COVID-19 parental leave scheme has been introduced to enable working parents to combine work and care during the pandemic. The closure of schools and childcare facilities, and health and other support structures in the community, made the situation very difficult for many women who were continuing to work in essential services or teleworking. The existing parental leave law allows for four months of non-transferrable parental leave for children up to the age of 12

years or a dependent child or adult, which can be taken flexibly (4 months full-time, 8 months part-time, 20 months at 20% and 40 months at 10%). An allowance is given for full-time parental leave of €760 and there is protection against dismissal. The introduction of the special parental leave is also non-transferable for the same care groups. However, the allowance operating from May-September 2020 provides for parental leave on a half-time or 20% basis at a higher amount of €500 for half-time leave. One of the reasons for introducing parental leave half-time or 20% is to encourage fathers to take up parental leave on this basis. A higher rate was also introduced in the allowance for single parents and parents who care for a dependent child or adult without an age limit who were working during the pandemic. Although it is too early to assess the overall impact on the gender dimension of the special parental leave, feedback to date is that it has had a positive effect. Additional incentives could be envisaged to enable part-time leave to be taken by both parents.

Malta introduced an innovative scheme to support employers investing in teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative aims to promote gender equality by enabling a better work-life balance, while reducing commuting time, emissions and energy consumption. Employers and self-employed people are given financial support to invest in technology that enables teleworking, with partial reimbursement of the cost of teleworking solutions incurred. It covered costs incurred between 15 February and 8 May 2020. Financial support is given to cover 45% of the eligible costs, up to a limit of €500, for each teleworking agreement and a maximum of €4,000 per undertaking. Overall, 946 applications were received, comprising an average of five teleworking agreements per applicant. The total cost of the initiative was €3.5 million. An example was presented from Gozo, a smaller island with a population of about 40,000. Their teleworking scheme to promote work-life balance has two elements: financial assistance through partial reimbursement of 75% (up to €850) on the cost of technological equipment for each employee and salary reimbursement of up to €10,000 over a three-year period for businesses operating teleworking. Overall, the scheme has been successful and it has shown that teleworking can increase productivity and work-life balance, as well as being an important tool to increase women's participation in the labour market. There are challenges related to changing culture and addressing women's additional unpaid care work in the home.

Additional good practices were presented during the **discussion**. One of these from **Lithuania** related to new social security provisions introduced for working parents and carers under an amendment to the Law on Sickness and Maternity Insurance. This specifies that, following the suspension of day care centres, carers of elderly or disabled people, who are mainly women, can receive a payment of 65.94% of sickness benefit equal to the amount of their declared income (which forms the basis for the calculation of sickness social insurance and maternity social insurance benefits). In addition, the law covers parents caring for a young child or a child with a disability at home due to the suspension of the educational process. The child's parents, adoptive parents, guardians or working grandparents may be granted an incapacity certificate and paid sickness benefit.

3. Valuing women's contributions in the labour market

3.1 Introduction by the European Women's Lobby

The European Women's Lobby set the context of the second theme of the webinar – valuing women's work – stating that women's economic independence is the cornerstone of equality between women and men. Women's life experiences, economic independence and resources are also shaped by a range of intersecting factors, such as age, ethnic origin, migration, disability and social class. In addition, accumulated inequalities over time and the undervaluing of women's care work mean that the gender pay and pension gaps persist across Europe. In addition, women have a disproportionate burden of care work, carrying out on average 13 hours more unpaid care and housework per week than men. However, women have made an invaluable contribution to the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit working in sectors where they are undervalued and underpaid. Currently, women are 76% of all care workers in the EU, 93% of childcare workers, 95% of domestic cleaners and helpers and 86% of healthcare workers. The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to redesign our societies so that they value women's essential contribution to work and care. In this regard, the European Women's Lobby has proposed 'A Care Deal for Europe' that has its foundation on a dual-earner-dual-carer model. The objective is to meet future care needs across the lifecycle, create the conditions for the care sector to offer quality jobs, tackle gender segregation in the labour market and close the gender pay and pension gaps. There are opportunities for investment under the **Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027** and the '**Next Generation EU**' instrument. However, a potential reduction in funding under the Equality, Rights and Values programme is a cause for concern.

3.1 Good practices from Member States

In **France**, measures to empower women in employment recognise women's contribution to providing essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic in their roles as nurses, care givers, kindergarten and elementary teachers, cashiers, dressmakers, and cleaners, amongst others. In addition, during the pandemic many women carrying out telework experienced an increased burden of domestic work and childcare. A two-pillar Action Plan was introduced in response to COVID-19. The first pillar 'Helping women reconcile their private and professional lives' introduced one month of parental leave (compared to the 11 days allowed by the current law), parental leave when children are sick and a young grand-parent leave. A second pillar 'Promoting women's entrepreneurship' aims to double the number of women entrepreneurs by the end of current president's mandate. A communication campaign with its partner France Active has brought together women entrepreneurs that benefited from public financial aid, along with a €100,000 national prize to women heads of young companies. These measures build on the existing

commitment to gender equality in the government's plan for professional gender equality 2020-2022 launched in March 2020. The plan includes an addition of €5 million dedicated to gender equality aimed at promoting it in the long term, including indicators for companies to report on progress on gender equality and awareness raising campaigns. A programme has been introduced to exchange good practices on gender equality, which details 15 good practices for recovery. Guidelines have been issued to employers and companies covering reconciliation of private and professional life, combating gender-based violence, protecting women from sexual harassment and achieving professional equality between women and men. A study has been recently launched to test equality in the recruitment process.

In **Italy**, measures have been introduced to promote gender equality by enhancing female entrepreneurship. In 2013, a fund was created to give financial support to women starting companies, which was extended to self-employed women in 2014. Despite increases in women's start-ups in sectors such as trade, agriculture, care and tourism, in 2018 women headed companies represented just 21.93% of the companies recorded in the register of the Chamber of Commerce. Around 16,000 women-headed companies have benefited from the fund and €1.5 million has been allocated to small- and medium-sized enterprises that are predominately female, and to self-employed women. In addition, in 2020, in response to COVID-19, an additional budget of €5 million was allocated to the fund to tackle gender-related business challenges during the pandemic.

The Task Force 'Women for a New Renaissance' was established by the Minister for Equal Opportunities and Family on 15 April 2020 for post-COVID economic, cultural and social recovery. The Task Force is made up of 12 women managers, economists, researchers, entrepreneurs and leaders from different sectors of the economy and society. Drawing on data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different sectors, the Task Force made specific recommendations in a range of areas. In relation to women's entrepreneurship, recommendations aim to promote an increase in the numbers of women in all areas of work, including non-traditional areas such as STEM, cloud computing and artificial intelligence. Other recommendations include promoting female leadership in the post-COVID phase by assessing the gender impact of corporate restructuring, access to financial independence through a fund to support women's business development and access to micro-credit, tackling gender stereotypes and finding solutions to work-life balance in companies post-COVID-19.

During the **discussion** an additional good practice example from **Spain** was mentioned, relating to new legislation introduced to protect women affected by job losses in female-dominated sectors, particularly where women are in precarious work. An extraordinary subsidy was introduced in the Special System of Household Employees of the General Social Security Regime for domestic workers whose employment was totally or partially ended during the pandemic and who do not have regular unemployment benefit. The subsidy amounts to 70% of their salary. In addition, on 19 May 2020 a minimum income was introduced under the premise 'leave no one behind' which is expected to be taken up by 2.3 million persons,

especially those facing social exclusion, providing special protection for single-parent households and victims of domestic violence and trafficking.

Further issues were raised during the discussion about the long-term impact of the crisis on women's roles in the labour market and particularly the consequences of this on the pension and pay gaps. It is of crucial importance to ensure gender-sensitive social systems.

4. Conclusions

The presentations and discussions highlighted suggestions to address current and post-COVID-19 responses to ensure a gender-sensitive approach to work and care.

In relation to women's care roles, promoting work-life balance, flexibility of work and adequate payment of parental leave benefits, coupled with good quality care services is essential. In addition, there is a need for longer-term cultural and social change towards the dual-earner-dual-carer model.

In the area of women's work, strategies on the inclusion of women in precarious and insecure work, new ways of working, women's entrepreneurship, women's leadership in companies, promoting work-life balance, changing mind-sets and gender stereotypes, are amongst the priority areas to be addressed. It is important that employers can build trust in teleworking, and for the private sector to encourage teleworking for both women and men in order to promote women's participation in employment and work-life balance.

In her closing remarks, Ingrid Bellander-Todino, Head of the Gender Equality Unit, DG Justice, European Commission, emphasised the need for short and long-term gender-sensitive responses to work and care challenges during and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis has revealed new ways of working, including possibilities to combine work and care through parental leave arrangements, flexible arrangements and teleworking. The good practices presented at the webinar offer inspiration for long-term change in the world of work, including on valuing women's work and the importance of female entrepreneurship.