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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Council (EPSCO)
Subject:	Balancing work, family and private life: Action to address the challenges faced by parents and caregivers

Delegations will find attached the Presidency note on the above subject, with a view to the informal discussion (breakfast) that will take place before the EPSCO Council on 7 December 2015.

Balancing work, family and private life: Action to address the challenges faced by working parents and caregivers

In August 2015, the Commission published a Roadmap for ‘A new start to address the challenges of work-life balance faced by working families’, replacing the 2008 Commission proposal to revise the 1992 Maternity Leave Directive. The objective is to improve the current EU legal and policy framework and to adapt it to today's labour market in order to increase the participation of women in the labour market, to allow parents and people with dependent relatives to better balance work, family and private life, to facilitate a more equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men, and to strengthen gender equality.

The Challenges

Women in Europe are increasingly well qualified, even outperforming men in terms of educational attainment, yet they continue to be under-represented in the labour market. Parenthood and other caring responsibilities still have strikingly negative impacts on women's employment rate.

Moreover, women, especially mothers, are more likely than men to work part time, often on an involuntary basis. Women are more likely than men to assume care responsibilities for elderly/dependent family members, leading to their temporary or permanent exit from the labour market or to reduced working hours. Women are often trapped in sectors and jobs characterised by low productivity, low skills and low pay, and are over-represented in jobs involving fixed-term contracts. Women's lower pay, higher concentration in part-time work and more frequent career interruptions contribute to a greater risk of poverty and social exclusion as well as to the wide gender pension gap (39%).

Furthermore, when only one parent is employed, families are worse off, their resilience to economic downturns is weakened and children face a higher risk of poverty. Women's underrepresentation in the labour market also represents a sub-optimal allocation of skills and competences acquired through education and thus a waste of resources for the EU economy.

The availability of measures to reconcile work, family and private life influences people's decision to leave the labour market or reduce their working hours after having children and/or when having to care for a dependent relative. Indeed, it is a key factor when people decide whether or when to have children, or how many children to have. Women and men often face a constrained choice because of a lack of formal care arrangements. Men also have fewer opportunities to take family leave.

Despite the fact that childcare has been shown to be a key measure in improving female labour market participation, many parents still experience difficulties in finding available, affordable, quality childcare for a sufficient number of hours per week. Lack of paid leave arrangements for fathers, or insufficient incentives to make use of them, can further reinforce gender differences, encouraging men to work and women to take up care responsibilities. The unavailability of flexible working arrangements (e.g. flexible working hours or remote working) can also lead some parents and care-givers to leave the labour market. These problems are further compounded by tax-benefit systems that reduce a lower-earning partner's incentives to work.

With all these considerations in mind, the Commission aims to modernise and adapt the current legal and policy framework to today's labour market in order to address the challenges of work-life balance for working parents and caregivers. It is considering a mix of legislative and non-legislative actions.

Legislation is considered in the areas of leave (in particular maternity, paternity, parental and carers' leave) and flexible working arrangements for parents and people with caring responsibilities. **Non-legislative proposals** are considered in the areas of childcare and long-term care and tax-benefit disincentives.

A consultation with the EU social partners on the possible improvements to EU legislation on work-life balance was launched on 11 November.

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=14743&langId=en>

A public consultation on possible range of new EU-level measures was launched on 18 November.

http://ec.europa.eu/justice/newsroom/gender-equality/opinion/1511_roadmap_reconciliation_en.htm

Questions for discussion

- The work-life balance measures listed in the Roadmap are childcare, long-term care services, family-related leave arrangements for both women and men, flexible working arrangements for both women and men, and tax-benefit systems that make work pay for both partners. Which of these will have the most positive impact on women's participation in the labour market? Are there any other areas you plan to focus on in your national priorities to achieve the objective?
 - What other specific instruments do you consider necessary and effective for tackling work-life balance challenges in a comprehensive way?
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