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#### COVER NOTE

From:	Secretary-General of the European Commission, signed by Ms Martine DEPREZ, Director
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Delegations will find attached document COM(2022) 442 final.

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EUROPEAN  
COMMISSION

Brussels, 7.9.2022  
COM(2022) 442 final

2022/0263 (NLE)

Proposal for a

## **COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION**

**on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care**

## EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

### 1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL

- **Reasons for and objectives of the proposal**

In her 2021 State of the Union speech, President Von der Leyen announced a European care strategy in order to support men and women in receiving the best care in different life stages and finding the best work-life balance for them. The initiative consists of a Commission Communication on a European care strategy<sup>1</sup> accompanied by two proposals for Council Recommendations, one on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care (ECEC), and the other on long-term care (LTC)<sup>2</sup>.

The availability of ECEC services is a key driver of women's labour-market participation. The correlation between mothers' labour-market participation and enrolment rates in ECEC is particularly strong for mothers whose youngest child is under 3 years old. With this in mind, the Barcelona targets on childcare were set by the European Council<sup>3</sup> in 2002 with the aim of increasing female labour-market participation by enhancing the provision of ECEC. The European Council set two targets, i.e. a participation rate of 90% of children from age 3 up to mandatory school age, and a participation rate of 33% of children under 3 years old<sup>4</sup>. Although the Barcelona targets were on average reached at EU level, some Member States are significantly lagging behind, and differences persist in particular for children from lower income households.

The objective of this Recommendation is to encourage Member States to increase participation in ECEC in order to facilitate women's labour-market participation and enhance the social and cognitive development of children, in particular for children in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, the Commission proposes to revise the Barcelona targets to create new momentum for fostering further upwards convergence among Member States of children's participation in ECEC<sup>5</sup> and thus help increase women's labour-market participation and close the gender employment gap<sup>6</sup>. It also addresses additional dimensions that are relevant to reaching the Barcelona objectives, notably affordability, accessibility and quality of ECEC which are key to respond to parents' and children's needs and thus influence the actual uptake of such services. It also invites Member States to take into account the time-intensity of children's participation in ECEC, which should be sufficient to allow parents to meaningfully engage with paid work, and the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion participating in ECEC.

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<sup>1</sup> COM (2022) 440.

<sup>2</sup> COM (2022) 441.

<sup>3</sup> Barcelona European Council of 15 and 16 March 2002 (2002), SN 100/1/02 REV 1.

<sup>4</sup> Report from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, Report on the Barcelona objectives, (2013), [Barcelona objectives \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/documents/press/docs/2013/03/130313_barcelona_objectives_en.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 'A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025', COM(2020) 152 final.

<sup>6</sup> The gender employment gap means the percentage point difference between male and female employment rates.

Since 2002, female employment has been increasing steadily, reaching 67.7% in 2021 compared to 60.7% in 2010<sup>7</sup> - though it declined in 2020 (66.1%) due to the COVID-19 crisis. This rising trend is accompanied by a pattern of increasing women's educational attainment, with more women completing higher education and obtaining advanced degrees<sup>8</sup>.

Despite these improvements, the gender employment gap is still significant and stands at a wide 10.8 percentage points in 2021<sup>9</sup>. Eurofound estimated the loss resulting from the gender employment gap at EUR 320 billion in 2018. Most of this amount consists of earnings and welfare contributions lost to the economy due to women not taking part in employment<sup>10</sup>. The gender employment gap is closely related to caring responsibilities. Women remain the primary caregivers to children and adults in need of care and bear the main responsibility for household chores. This imbalance limits the possibility for them to participate in and allocate time to paid work.

In 2021, in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for the EU-27, 27.9% of women aged 25–49 outside the labour force indicated that looking after children or adults in need of care was the main reason for not seeking employment, compared to only 8.0% of men<sup>11</sup>. In pre-pandemic 2019, these figures stood at 32.6% and 7.6% respectively<sup>12</sup>. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) indicates that caregiving responsibilities keep 7.7 million women in Europe out of the labour market and constrain many women to work only part-time: 29% of women working part-time cited care duties as the main reason for doing so, compared to only 6% of men<sup>13</sup>.

The gender care gap, namely the difference in time devoted to unpaid care work by women and men, is linked to and further reinforces gender stereotypes in both women's and men's occupations and roles. Women are still widely expected to provide unpaid care to a greater extent than men, even within dual-earner families. Before the COVID-19 crisis, employed women in the EU with children under the age of 7, living in a couple, spent on average 39 hours per week on unpaid work as compared to 19 hours per week<sup>14</sup> for employed men in the same situation. The gender care gap was higher for women in precarious employment.

With the closures of and restrictions in care services during the pandemic, women were even more called upon to provide care work. The COVID-19 crisis has aggravated gender

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<sup>7</sup> Eurostat, 'Employment and activity by sex and age – annual data', available at: [Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data \[LFSI\\_EMP\\_A\]](#).

<sup>8</sup> Report of the European Commission, 'Report on gender equality in the EU', (2021), [annual\\_report\\_ge\\_2021\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> Eurofound, 'Women and labour market equality: Has COVID-19 rolled back recent gains?', (2020) Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat database table LFSA\_IGAR, "Care of adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons", percentage of population outside the labour force and wanting to work, age group 15-64.

<sup>12</sup> EIGE, Research note on gender equality and the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, (2021), p. 15, [Gender equality and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic | European Institute for Gender Equality \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> EIGE, 'Gender inequalities in care and consequences for the labour market', (2020), [Gender inequalities in care and consequences for the labour market | European Institute for Gender Equality \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>14</sup> Eurofound, 'Sixth European working conditions survey: overview report', (2019), Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report | Eurofound (europa.eu).

inequalities in unpaid care<sup>15</sup>, reinforced traditional gender roles and derailed the modest progress in gender equality achieved so far<sup>16</sup>. According to a Eurofound e-survey on living, working and COVID-19<sup>17</sup>, women with children up to 12 years of age spent an average of 62 hours per week on childcare, compared to 36 hours for men in the same situation, and 23 hours on housework, compared to 15 hours for men during the pandemic. Nearly one third of these women (29%) reported that they found it hard to concentrate on their job because of care responsibilities, compared to 11% of men.

The European Pillar of Social Rights states that equal treatment and opportunities between women and men must be ensured and fostered in all areas, including as regards participation in the labour market, terms and conditions of employment and career progression. It also recognises children's right to affordable ECEC of good quality; children's rights to protection from poverty; and the right for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.

The European Pillar of Social Rights action plan set a headline target of increasing the overall employment rate to at least 78% of the population (age 20–64) by 2030, and this was welcomed by EU leaders at the Porto Summit in May 2021 and the European Council in June 2021. To achieve that overall goal, Europe must strive to at least halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019 and increase the provision of ECEC, thus contributing to better reconciliation between professional and private life and supporting stronger female labour-market participation.

The 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive<sup>18</sup> created minimum standards for family leave, introducing (i) the right to paid paternity leave and carers' leave and strengthening non-transferable and paid parental leave, and (ii) the right to request flexible working-time arrangements for workers with care responsibilities, to encourage equal sharing of care between women and men. Provision of high-quality, accessible, and affordable ECEC complements working-time arrangements in allowing work-life balance and is crucial to enable parents, especially mothers, to participate in the labour market.

Public sector support for the ECEC sector is a social investment which brings multiple returns for individuals, society and the economy as a whole. It promotes women's labour market participation, spurs women's uptake of full-time jobs, improves children's development, strengthens social inclusion and fairness and helps break the inter-generational cycle of poverty. In the context of labour shortages and persistent employment gaps, increasing the labour market participation of women, including by enhancing access to ECEC, represents a major opportunity for an inclusive and sustainable growth<sup>19</sup>. Investment in ECEC has also

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<sup>15</sup> European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Division of Childcare and Housework among Men and Women during COVID-19 lockdowns, (2022), JRC128157, <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128157>

<sup>16</sup> EIGE Research note on gender equality and the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, (2021), p. 36 [Gender equality and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic | European Institute for Gender Equality \(europa.eu\)](https://www.eige.europa.eu/gender-equality/publications/gender-equality-and-the-socio-economic-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic).

<sup>17</sup> Eurofound Report on living, working and COVID-19; (2020), Living, working and COVID-19 | Eurofound (europa.eu).

<sup>18</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.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission, European Economy Brief, 'The Macro-Economic Benefits of Gender Equality', March 2022; see also Proposal for a Joint Employment Report from the Commission and the Council, 24.11.2021, COM(2021) 743 final.

significant job creation potential. Recent research from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) shows that investing 1.1% of GDP in ECEC and 1.8% of GDP in long-term care each year would create an additional 26.7 million jobs in Europe by 2035<sup>20</sup>.

Such investment can generate additional tax and social security revenues. Overall, tax and social security revenue from increased earnings and employment would rise, reducing the total funding requirement of care policy measures from 3% of GDP (before taxes) to a net 2% of GDP (after taxes)<sup>21</sup>. The ILO estimates that the rate at which Member States can recoup investments in the care sector is on average around 55%, depending notably on the amount of investment needed, the labour demand in the Member State concerned and the level of taxation. Member States can improve the fiscal sustainability of investments in ECEC by evaluating the impact on public finances and ensuring cost-effectiveness, including through an efficient design of funding mechanisms that are coherent with the overall sustainability of public finances.

In addition to investing in ECEC, many Member States have introduced a legal entitlement to a place in ECEC, while others have made ECEC attendance compulsory, especially in the last year before primary school. By making it a legal entitlement, public authorities have to guarantee a place for each child whose parents demand it (in the age range covered by legal entitlement); whereas in countries where ECEC is compulsory, public authorities have to ensure a sufficient number of pre-primary places for *all* children in the age range covered by the legal obligation. In most Member States, such legal entitlement already exists, but the starting age for the entitlement varies significantly. In Europe, there are significant differences in the age at which children have a guaranteed place in ECEC. Only seven EU Member States<sup>22</sup> have introduced a legal entitlement to a place in ECEC for children from an early age (6-18 months). This follows often immediately after the end of childcare leave since, ideally, there should not be a gap between the end of adequately paid family leave and a legal entitlement to a place in ECEC. For children age 3 or older, a legal entitlement exists in 13 Member States<sup>23</sup> and some Member States committed to introducing it in the context of their national recovery and resilience plans<sup>24</sup>.

Evidence shows that the provision of quality ECEC plays a crucial role in improving children's cognitive, social and educational development from an early age<sup>25</sup>. Such improvements often translate into better learning achievements and employment prospects later on in life<sup>26</sup>. Participating in high quality ECEC is beneficial for all children and especially for those in a disadvantaged situation. It is an essential tool to fight inequalities,

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<sup>20</sup> ILO 'Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work', 7 March 2022.

<sup>21</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), 2022: ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator, Geneva, *forthcoming*.

<sup>22</sup> Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to the ones above Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Luxembourg, Poland, Spain; European Commission, Eurydice Policy Brief Early Childhood Education and Care, 2019, p. 6; detailed overview of Member States' systems in European Commission, Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training systems in Europe, Eurydice background report, 2021, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> For example Slovakia, Commission Staff Working Document Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Slovakia, SWD(2021) 161 final of 21.6.2021.

<sup>25</sup> Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, Education and Training 2020 Strategic Framework (2020), OJ 2009/C 119/02.

<sup>26</sup> European Commission, Annual Report on Employment and Social Developments in Europe: Young Europeans: employments and social challenges ahead, chapter 5, June 2022.



tackle possible social disadvantages of children<sup>27</sup> and promote equal opportunities. These aspects are specifically mentioned in the 2019 Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care<sup>28</sup> and in the European Child Guarantee<sup>29</sup>. Benefits go beyond the children involved. At the individual level, participation in ECEC is associated with greater educational attainment, higher earnings, improved social integration and better health. There are also many benefits on a societal level, ranging from reduced spending on welfare and lower crime rates, to higher tax revenues and improved social cohesion<sup>30</sup>.

Finally, this proposed Recommendation addresses the working conditions in the ECEC sector. Workers in the sector, many of whom are women, often face difficult working conditions and limited career prospects. Improving working conditions requires stronger social dialogue, adequate pay and upskilling and re-skilling opportunities. The promotion of fair working conditions for staff in ECEC should contribute to attracting and retaining workers – both men and women - in the sector, and may equally contribute to tackling gender segregation in the sector and remedy the staff shortages experienced in many countries<sup>31</sup>. It is also an important aspect in ensuring quality of care. The EU is supporting Member States' investment and reforms in ECEC through its different funding instruments, in particular the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund plus and the Recovery and Resilience Facility. This support is particularly important to tackle territorial inequalities across and within Member States. The EU is also providing direct technical support for reforms under the Technical Support Instrument. The Commission monitors implementation of ECEC policies and assesses progress towards the Barcelona targets in the European Semester and will continue to do so.

- **Consistency with existing policy provisions in the policy area**

The revision of the Barcelona targets for early childhood education and care is announced in the 2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy<sup>32</sup>. It is one of the initiatives presented in the Strategy aimed at promoting women's economic empowerment and the equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men. The revision is also announced in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child<sup>33</sup>, as well as in the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan<sup>34</sup> as

<sup>27</sup> European Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013 on Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (2013/112/EU), 2.3.2013, p. 5-16.

<sup>28</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 4-14.

<sup>29</sup> Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, OJ L 223, 22.6.2021, p. 14-23.

<sup>30</sup> European Commission, 'Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them', Publications Office, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> International Labour Organisation, 'Meeting of Experts on Policy Guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel', available at: [https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/WCMS\\_236528/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/WCMS_236528/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>32</sup> Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 'A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025', COM(2020) 152 final.

<sup>33</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU strategy on the rights of the child, COM(2021) 142 final, 24.3.2021, p. 1-23.

<sup>34</sup> European Commission, 'Building a Union of Equality: the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan', adopted on 4 March 2021, COM(2021) 102 final

part of the efforts to reach, by 2030, the headline target of an overall employment rate of 78% and the complementary goal to at least halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019.

In its Communication ‘An initiative to support work-life balance for working parents and carers’<sup>35</sup>, the Commission stressed, among other things, the importance of support measures for Member States to improve access to affordable quality ECEC as a way to achieve better work-life balance for workers with care responsibilities.

The Work-Life Balance Directive aims at encouraging better sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men by strengthening legal entitlements to family leave and granting the right to request flexible working-time arrangements. This includes notably 2 months of non-transferable and adequately paid parental leave for each parent. By granting non-transferable rights to family leave, the Work-Life Balance Directive aims to encourage fathers to avail themselves of their rights, thereby facilitating the return of mothers to the labour market.

The 2019 Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (‘ECEC Recommendation’) aims to support Member States in their efforts to improve access to and quality of their ECEC systems. The ECEC Recommendation includes a quality framework to guide Member States in improving access to and quality of ECEC. It provides a common understanding of the meaning of quality in ECEC. This proposal builds upon the ECEC Recommendation and the quality framework by emphasising the elements that are particularly relevant for facilitating female labour-market participation and fostering parents’ trust in ECEC, such as staff/child ratio, staff qualifications and continuous professional training, and governance of the ECEC system.

The 2020 Communication entitled ‘Achieving a European Education Area by 2025’<sup>36</sup> designates inclusion and gender equality as one of the six dimensions to be consolidated. Based on that Communication, on 19 February 2021 the Council adopted a Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)<sup>37</sup> which includes an EU-level target that at least 96% of children between 3 years and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in ECEC. The Resolution also highlights the importance of improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training. To ensure consistency, this proposal uses the EEA target as a revised Barcelona target for the age group from 3 years to compulsory primary education age.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child<sup>38</sup>, adopted by the Commission in March 2021, pools all existing and future initiatives and actions on children’s rights – including the revision of the Barcelona targets – under one coherent policy framework. The strategy aims to build the best possible life for children in the European Union and across the globe by

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<sup>35</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, ‘An initiative to support work-life balance for working parents and carers’, COM(2017) 252 final, 26.4.2017, p. 1-16.

<sup>36</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, ‘Achieving the European Education Area by 2025’, COM(2020) 625 final, 30.9.2020, p. 1-29.

<sup>37</sup> Council Resolution, ‘A strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)’, OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1-21.

<sup>38</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU strategy on the rights of the child, COM(2021) 142 final, 24.3.2021, p. 1-23.



strengthening children's participation in society, and fulfilling their rights in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The strategy focuses, among other things, on socio-economic inclusion, health and education of children and addresses ECEC as part of building inclusive, quality education for all children. In its Conclusions of 9 June 2022 on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the Council of the European Union emphasised that all children have a right to non-discriminatory access to key services, such as early education and care, health, nutrition and housing which are important for their development and wellbeing<sup>39</sup>.

The Council Recommendation on establishing a European Child Guarantee, adopted on 14 June 2021, aims at preventing and combating social exclusion and supporting Member State efforts to guarantee access to high-quality key services for children in need, including free and effective access to ECEC. Approximately 27% of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion aged 0-2 participated in ECEC in the EU in 2019. Although this represents an increase of about 11 percentage points on 2010, it is substantially lower than the participation rate of the overall population of children (35%)<sup>40</sup>.

- **Consistency with other Union policies**

The proposal is complementary to and consistent with a number of other EU initiatives.

It is fully consistent with the EU's 2021-2027 Multi-Annual Financial Framework which provides EU funding opportunities under instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund plus, including its Employment and Social Innovation strand, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the Just Transition Fund, the Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programmes, all of which play a major role in supporting Member State investment in accessible, affordable and quality ECEC infrastructure and services. The Technical Support Instrument can also support reforms and investment. The proposal is also fully consistent with the Regulation establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility with regard to eligible reforms and investments to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and to make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions in the context of the Facility's objective.

The proposal is also consistent with the Commission's strategies and action plans to achieve a Union of equality. The EU 2020-2025 anti-racism action plan<sup>41</sup> aims at combating racism through policy and funding programmes in the areas of employment, housing and access to healthcare and education. Among other things, it aims to ensure equal access to education for children of minority racial or ethnic origin. Also, it promotes the training of teachers to work with all children. The action plan provided for a Commission report, published in 2021, on the application of the EU Racial Equality Directive, which prohibits discrimination based on

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<sup>39</sup> Council of the European Union, Conclusions on the EU Strategy on the rights of the child, 10024/22, 9 June 2022, see: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10024-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> European Commission, Annual Report on Employment and Social Developments in Europe: Young Europeans: employments and social challenges ahead, chapter 5, ISSN 2315-2540, June 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, 'A Union of Equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2050', COM(2020) 565 final, 18.9.2020, p. 1-26.

racial or ethnic origin, including discrimination against Roma children, in different areas such as education and social protection<sup>42</sup>.

The EU Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion and participation<sup>43</sup>, together with the Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation, adopted on 12 March 2021<sup>44</sup>, calls on Member States to fight multiple and structural discrimination against Roma, in particular against Roma children, and to take stronger measures to support Roma children and their families in the interrelated fields of employment, social services, quality, inclusive mainstream education and early childhood education and care, health, housing and access to essential services, nutrition and access to leisure activities. The framework sets the objective of reducing the gap in participation in ECEC of Roma children by at least half by 2030.

The Commission's action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027<sup>45</sup> focuses on the enabling factors essential for the successful integration and inclusion of migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background, including children, on different levels such as education and training, employment and skills, and health and housing.

Finally, the 2021-2030 strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities<sup>46</sup> aims to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in the EU and beyond and to promote their full and equal participation in all areas of life. The strategy addresses participation in all educational levels and forms, including ECEC, on an equal basis with others, and the promotion of independent living and community-based services. This is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to which the EU and all Member States are parties, and which requires parties to take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children. In line with the Strategy, this Recommendation fully takes into account the needs of children and parents with disabilities, in particular in the provisions on accessibility.

The proposal also responds to the Conference on the Future of Europe recommendation on demographic transition (proposal No. 15) and on anti-discrimination, equality and quality of life (proposal No. 29). Proposal 15 calls for “ensuring quality, affordable and accessible childcare across the EU, so that mothers and fathers can confidently reconcile their work and family life” and “guaranteeing the access of children in need to services such as education and

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<sup>42</sup> Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the application of Council Directive 2000/43/EC implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin ('the Racial Equality Directive') and the Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation ('the Employment Equality Directive'), COM(2021) 139 final, 19.3.2021, p. 1-26.

<sup>43</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, 'A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation', COM(2020) 620 final, 7.10.2020, p. 1-17.

<sup>44</sup> Council Recommendation of 12 March 2021 on Roma equality, inclusion and participation, OJ 2021C 93/01, 19.3.2021, p. 1-14.

<sup>45</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 'Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027', COM(2020) 758 final, 24.11.2020, p. 1-25.

<sup>46</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 'Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030', COM(2021) 101 final, 3.3.2021, p. 1-29.

care.” Proposal 29 calls to ensure the “creation and facilitation of affordable kindergartens [...] and free childcare for those in need<sup>47</sup>.”

Finally, this Recommendation contributes to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 as part of the United Nation’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030, which highlight the importance of gender equality (SDG 5.4 and SDG 8.5) and the relevance of ECEC (SDG 4.2), thus underscoring the need for action in these areas.

## **2. LEGAL BASIS, SUBSIDIARITY AND PROPORTIONALITY**

### **• Legal basis**

The proposal is based on Article 292 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), under which the Council adopts recommendations on a proposal from the Commission, in conjunction with Article 153 (1), point (i) TFEU.

Under Article 153(1) (i) TFEU, the EU supports and complements the activities of the Member States in the field of equality between women and men with regard to labour market opportunities with a view to achieving the objectives of Article 151 TFEU. Under Article 151 TFEU, the objectives of the EU and the Member States include the promotion of improved living and working conditions, proper social protection, and the development of human resources, with a view to lasting high employment and combating of exclusion. Ensuring equal opportunities for all children living in the EU contributes to reaching those objectives.

The proposal will contribute to the objectives of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), notably to combating social exclusion and discrimination, promoting equality between women and men and protecting the rights of the child (Article 3 TEU).

The proposal will also contribute to implementing the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, in particular its Article 14, which recognises everyone’s right to education; Article 23, which recognises equality between women and men; Article 24, which recognises that children have the right to the protection and care necessary for their well-being; and Article 33, which stipulates that the family must enjoy legal, economic and social protection.

This proposal does not exceed EU’s regulatory power or impose binding commitments on Member States. Member States will decide, according to their national circumstances, how they can make the best use of the Council Recommendation.

### **• Subsidiarity (for non-exclusive competence)**

While policies addressing ECEC and women’s labour-market participation are the responsibility of the Member States, the EU has the competence to support and complement Member State actions.

The proposal ensures that action at EU level has added value. It fulfils a political commitment to make progress on equal opportunities for women and men and in particular on women’s

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<sup>47</sup> European Commission, Conference on the Future of Europe, Report on the final outcome, May 2022.

labour-market participation, and to promote the rights, equal opportunities and wellbeing of all children.

- **Proportionality**

The proposal complements Member States' efforts in the area of addressing inequality of women and men, and women's labour-market participation as well as to promote the rights, equal opportunities and wellbeing of all children. It respects Member States' practices and the diversity of national systems. It recognises that different national, regional or local situations could lead to differences in how the Recommendation is implemented. This will allow Member States to make use of the Recommendation according to their specific context.

Proportionality considerations also played a key role in guiding the choice of the instrument.

- **Choice of the instrument**

The instrument is a proposal for a Council Recommendation, which abides by the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. It builds on the existing body of European Union law and policy, and is in line with the type of instruments available for European Union action in the area of social policy. As a legal instrument, the proposal signals the Member States' commitment to the objectives and measures laid down in this Recommendation and provides a strong basis for cooperation at European level in this area, while fully respecting the competence of the Member States.

### **3. RESULTS OF EX-POST EVALUATIONS, STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS**

- **Stakeholder consultations**

The Commission consulted extensively with a wide range of stakeholders on this initiative. All these activities were summarised in the Synopsis Report, published together with this proposal for a recommendation<sup>48</sup>. The consultation activities provided more insights, with no substantial divergences from the broad aim and framing of the initiative. They were taken into account in the preparatory work and enriched the proposal with additional perspectives. The consultation process built on several recent public consultations, namely those for the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan<sup>49</sup>, the Green Paper on Ageing<sup>50</sup>, and the Gender Equality Strategy<sup>51</sup>. Those consultations stressed the importance of high-quality, accessible

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<sup>48</sup> Commission staff working document: summary of consultation activities, SWD(2022) 440 .

<sup>49</sup> The Commission received 1 041 unique written contributions. 67.5% of submissions came from individuals. Many citizens took the opportunity to describe their personal situation, notably persons with disabilities and women with care responsibilities: [SWD\(2021\) 46 EN, autre document travail service part1 v8 \(2\).pdf](#)

<sup>50</sup> The public consultation gathered a total of 473 replies. 133 submissions came from individuals. Long-term care was discussed in the context of older people's autonomy and ensuring their at-home care, which opens new employment opportunities and skills needs. Moreover, the need to recognise pension rights of informal carers was highlighted. See: Green Paper on Ageing: Factual summary report of the public consultation: [090166e5de9b0583.pdf](#)

<sup>51</sup> The consultation was available online from 8 March until 31 May 2019. It received 1 335 replies, 73% of which came from EU citizens (970 replies). Respondents were asked in particular about which specific goals they would prioritise for EU action to increase women's participation in the labour

and affordable ECEC – in particular in under-served groups – to encourage equal sharing of caring activities between parents.

**A Call for Evidence** was published on the [Have your Say portal](#) from 1 to 29 March 2022. A total of 123 contributions were received; most (52%) were from NGOs, the others were from public authorities, business associations, EU citizens, trade unions and research institutions. Comments focused on access, availability, affordability and quality of care services, care workers, socio-economic and territorial inequalities, and the gender dimension.

A number of stakeholders had already called for a strategic and comprehensive approach to ECEC.

The **European Parliament** has repeatedly called for a holistic approach to care, supporting the revision of the Barcelona targets with a special emphasis on the need to target children with disabilities<sup>52</sup>. In its recent report on the European care strategy adopted in the Plenary Session of 5 July 2022, the European Parliament welcomed the upcoming review of the Barcelona targets and highlighted the importance of ECEC for facilitating female labour-market participation and for closing the gender gaps in care, pay and pension<sup>53</sup>.

The Committees of the European Parliament on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) and Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) organised a **Joint hearing** in preparation of an own-initiative report 'Towards a Common European action on care' on 24 March 2022. Members of European Parliament welcomed the European care strategy and stressed in particular the potential of the care sector, currently underfunded and understaffed, in terms of job creation. Better working conditions can contribute to gender equality, while education and training play a key role in ensuring qualified staff and professionalisation. The need to monitor progress and to take into account Member States competence in this policy area were also highlighted.

Similarly, the **EESC** has repeatedly called for a revision of the Barcelona targets and a holistic approach in several opinions<sup>54</sup>, in which they stressed the need for more investment in high-quality, affordable and available care services and facilities for every family. It also called for investment to be channelled towards social infrastructure, in particular ECEC and after-school care, and to make the Barcelona targets on childcare more ambitious along with covering care of other dependants.

The **European Council** stressed the importance of considering the gender pay gap and gender care gap together<sup>55</sup>, as they are both largely dependent and a mutually reinforcing phenomena. The Council also called for long-term public investment in high-quality, affordable and

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market. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12114-Gender-equality-strategy-2020-2024/public-consultation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12114-Gender-equality-strategy-2020-2024/public-consultation_en)

<sup>52</sup> E.g. the European Parliament Resolution of 15 December 2021 on equality between women and men in the European Union in 2018-2020 (2021/2020(INI)).

<sup>53</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 5 July 2022 towards a common European action on care (2021/2253(INI)).

<sup>54</sup> E.g. Opinion of the EESC, 'Gender Equality in the labour markets', (SOC/586-EESC-2018); Opinion of the EESC, 'The challenges of work-life balance faced by working parents and caregivers', (SOC/529-EESC-2018); Opinion of the EESC, 'Gender equality issues' (SOC/610-EESC-2018); Opinion of the EESC, 'Opinion on the Social Pillar Action Plan', (SOC/679-EESC-2021).

<sup>55</sup> Council Conclusions on Tackling the Gender Pay Gap, 'Valuation and Distribution of Paid Work and Unpaid Care Work', 13584/20, 2.12.2020.



accessible care facilities and infrastructure, the development of caring skills, and care services. The Council called upon the Commission to present a revision of the Barcelona targets to enhance upward convergence in the provision of quality early childhood education and care among Member States<sup>56</sup> and emphasised the right of all children to non-discriminatory access to key services, such as early education and care<sup>57</sup>.

At the meeting of the **High-level group on gender mainstreaming** in January 2022, Member States gave broadly positive feedback on the proposal for a care strategy. In particular, they agreed on the need to address accessibility, quality and affordability of services; improve working conditions in the care sector; reflect on, among other matters, the educational aspect of ECEC; and tackle gender stereotyping in relation to care.

**During the exploratory debates** with Member States' representatives in the **Social Protection Committee (17 March 2022) and Employment Committee (1 April 2022)**, Member States shared a number of examples and good national practices and expressed a preliminary broad agreement with the overall aim of the initiative, the analysis of the challenges and the proposed policy objectives. Several Member States pointed out that the initiative should be developed in full respect of national competences, also taking into account the different national circumstances and set-up of the care systems, and avoiding administrative burden. The importance of EU funding, support for mutual learning and improving the evidence base was also highlighted.

On 13 September 2021, the **Advisory Committee** on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men adopted an Opinion on 'The care gap in the EU: a holistic and gender-transformative approach'<sup>58</sup>. The Opinion supported improving the availability and affordability of quality care and ECEC services for children, revising the Barcelona targets upwards, and setting a policy framework for sustainable LTC through EU funding, including through the National Recovery and Resilience Plans as part of the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

A number of **targeted stakeholder consultations, exploratory debates and hearings** were held to cover the various elements of the initiative in more depth.

The Commission organised a **strategic dialogue** with more than 50 civil society organisations on 11 March 2022. Civil society organisations welcomed the revision of the Barcelona targets and agreed with the challenges identified by the Commission. They highlighted the need for assessing barriers to participation: to look at further breakdowns of participation rates (e.g. children from migrant background, children with disabilities, etc.); including children and their healthy development in the centre of the policy; fostering investment in early childhood intervention services systems for children with disabilities as a measure to promote their participation in ECEC and thus their mothers' participation in paid work.

Finally, a **dedicated hearing with EU-level social partners** was organised on 7 April 2022. Social partners had already delivered in December 2020 a 'joint statement on childcare provisions in the EU' that stressed how available, accessible, affordable and quality childcare

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<sup>56</sup> [Council Conclusions on the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality, 8884/21, 14.6.2021, p. 1-26.](#)

<sup>57</sup> [Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy on the rights of the child, 10024/22, 9.6.2022, p. 3.](#)

<sup>58</sup> Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Opinion, 'The care gap in the EU: a holistic and gender-transformative approach', 13 September 2021, [opinion\\_care\\_gap\\_2021\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#).



facilities are essential for parents to work, in particular mothers. Social partners also called for the revision of the Barcelona targets to promote the value of working in the sector, and for good working conditions, including by strengthening collective bargaining and ensuring quality, stable jobs, fair salaries and adequate level of social protection. They also called for action to attract staff to the sector, in particular men. These views were confirmed at the social partners hearing in April. In particular, social partners highlighted the need for an integrated life-cycle approach, and the need to increase investment in the sector and make it more attractive for workers against the background of demographic change and economic outlook.

- **Collection and use of expertise**

The Commission built on the expertise of its Joint Research Centre (JRC) and external experts to inform the evidence base for this initiative. The related input is made available to the general public together with the current proposal for a Recommendation.

JRC provided an in-depth review of the EU-SILC reference data set in order to test the feasibility of possible refinements of the indicators and robustness of measurement at Member States level<sup>59</sup>. JRC also produced a simulation of the possible impact of different levels of the target for the relevant indicators in terms of female labour-market participation based on the EUROMOD model<sup>60</sup>. Finally, a literature review was commissioned to gain an overview of effective childcare reforms in the Member States<sup>61</sup>.

Furthermore, an expert group<sup>62</sup> with 15 members including individual experts and representatives of the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), EIGE, Eurofound, ILO, OECD and Unicef provided input on the state of play and country differences in the approach to ECEC, workforce conditions, and quality of ECEC. They also provided input on the measures to enhance ECEC participation, in particular for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and on the elements relevant for enhancing upwards convergence.

- **Fundamental rights**

The revision of the Barcelona targets will contribute to achieving equality between women and men in all areas, including employment, work and pay. It will contribute to safeguarding the right of everyone to education and the rights of all children to such protection and care for their well-being, and to the economic protection of the family (Articles 23, 14, 24 and 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU).

## **4. BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS**

The proposal has no financial implications for the EU budget.

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<sup>59</sup> Flisi S., Blasko, Zs. and Stepanova E., Indicators for early education and care. Reconsidering some aspects of the Barcelona target. JRC Science for Policy Report, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Narazani E., Agúndez García A., Christl M., Figari F., Impact on female employment of revising the Barcelona targets for childcare (GENDERMOD), JRC Working Paper on Taxation & Structural Reforms, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Nieuwenhuis R., Yerkes M., Backman L., Strigén J., Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): A focused review of reform impact studies, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

<sup>62</sup> [Register of Commission expert groups and other similar entities \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eu-register-expert-groups/);

## 5. OTHER ELEMENTS

### • **Monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements**

The European Commission will continue to monitor the Barcelona targets in the context of the European Semester, which is a key instrument for monitoring women's labour-market participation and gender equality, including through the analysis provided in country reports and through country-specific recommendations, where appropriate. It will additionally include in its assessment the intensity of participation by all children in ECEC (number of hours attended per week), and the participation of children from different groups, including children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and, where feasible, children with disabilities, with a migrant background, Roma children and other relevant groups, taking into account the age of the children and specific national features.

In addition, the implementation of the Recommendation will be monitored through the Commission's Annual Report on Gender Equality and the Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal<sup>63</sup>.

The revision of the targets covers additional dimensions relevant to reaching the Barcelona objectives (accessibility, affordability and quality). Where indicators are available on these dimensions, they will be included in the Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal and the Annual Report on Gender Equality.

In order to enhance the availability, scope and relevance of pertinent data at EU level, this Recommendation invites Member States to develop or improve data collection in a number of areas related to its implementation. Member States should notably improve data collection on the participation of children in ECEC including with reference to children in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged groups.

The Commission will publish an in-depth report within five years to give an overview of the state of play of the implementation of the Recommendation, based on the Barcelona targets and all relevant dimensions, including policies and good practice examples from Member States.

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<sup>63</sup> European Commission, Gender Equality Strategy, monitoring portal, accessible via: [ges-monitor.page.main \(europa.eu\)](https://ges-monitor.page.main.europa.eu)

Proposal for a

## COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

### on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 292 in conjunction with Article 153(1), point (i), thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) In order to remove disincentives for female labour-market participation, the European Council set in 2002 the Barcelona targets on childcare, which consist of two targets: a participation rate in early childhood education and care (ECEC) of 33% of children under 3 years of age and of 90% for children from age 3 until mandatory school age<sup>64</sup>. While these targets have been reached on Union average, significant differences persist between and within Member States, in particular for children from lower income households and for the youngest group of children.
- (2) The objective of this Recommendation is to encourage Member States to increase participation in ECEC in order to facilitate women's labour-market participation and enhance the social and cognitive development of all children, and in particular for children in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- (3) Care responsibilities for children, particularly for very young children, are a strong constraint to female labour-market participation. In 2021, in the Labour Force Survey (LFS), 27.9% of women aged 25–49 outside the labour force indicated that looking after children or adults in need of care was the main reason for not seeking employment, compared to only 8.0% of men; in 2019, so pre-pandemic, these figures stood at 32.6% and 7.6% respectively<sup>65</sup>. At the same time, the employment rate of persons 25-49 years old with children below the age of 6 was 90.1% for men compared to 67.2% for women. Unpaid care responsibilities keep around 7.7 million women in Europe away from participating in the labour market, compared to only 450 000 men.

<sup>64</sup> Barcelona European Council of 15 and 16 March 2002 (2002), SN 100/1/02 REV1.

<sup>65</sup> Eurostat database table LFSA\_IGAR, "Care of adults with disabilities or children and other family or personal reasons", percentage of population outside the labour force and wanting to work, age group 15-64.

- (4) Women are also more likely to adapt their working patterns to care responsibilities, which has a lasting impact on their careers and contributes to the gender pay and pension gap. Employed women spend on average 90 minutes more than employed men on housework and direct care activities on a daily basis. Addressing gender gaps in employment represents a clear business case as it contributes to growth and is likely to generate positive impacts for productivity. In addition, addressing gender gaps has well-established positive impacts on poverty reduction and social inclusion and constitutes one of the responses to a shrinking workforce.
- (5) The availability of affordable and high-quality care services has a strong positive impact on the employment situation of carers, in particular women. While the provision of ECEC increased across the Union, the gender employment gap was reduced from 17.7 percentage points in 2002 to 10.8 percentage points in 2021. However, progress has stalled in recent years.
- (6) The European Pillar of Social Rights highlights the importance of gender equality, work-life balance and early childhood education and care as key objectives of the Union. The European Pillar of Social Rights states that equal treatment and opportunities between women and men must be ensured and fostered in all areas, including as regards participation in the labour market, terms and conditions of employment and career progression. It also recognises children's right to affordable ECEC of good quality; children's right to protection from poverty; and the right for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities. The European Pillar of Social Rights action plan proposes, among its Union headline targets to be achieved by 2030 that at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030. To achieve that target, the action plan sets the goal of at least halving the gender employment gap compared to 2019, including through the revision of the Barcelona targets. The action plan acknowledges that increasing the provision of formal ECEC would support stronger female labour-market participation and a better reconciliation between professional and private life. With the present recommendation the Union is delivering on its commitment in the action plan.
- (7) At Union level, several recommendations and directives in the areas of gender equality and working conditions address certain elements that are relevant for the Barcelona targets. Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council<sup>66</sup> creates a framework for a gender-balanced take-up of family leaves and flexible working arrangements as well as of carers' leave.
- (8) Several Union initiatives have highlighted the importance of ECEC for children. This recommendation builds upon these policy initiatives: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems<sup>67</sup> helps Member States improve ECEC services and underlines that such services must be inclusive, accessible, affordable and of high quality. The EU Strategy on the Rights of

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<sup>66</sup> Directive 2019/1159 (EU) 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. 79-93.

<sup>67</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 4-14.

the Child<sup>68</sup> provides a framework for EU action to better promote and protect children's rights and recognises the role of ECEC as beneficial to children's cognitive and social development. Council Recommendation of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee<sup>69</sup> aims to ensure that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have free and effective access to key services, including to ECEC, in all regions, also remote and rural areas.

- (9) When investing in ECEC services, Member States should take into account a number of dimensions beyond the mere availability of places such as the time-intensity of participation, the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion participating as well as the accessibility, affordability and quality of care services provided. This recommendation therefore sets out measures to tackle these aspects.
- (10) To facilitate labour-market participation for primary carers, predominantly women, the number of ECEC hours attended should be sufficient to allow parents to meaningfully engage with paid work. Attendance should be encouraged, taking into account the best interest of the child. Where children do not yet attend ECEC full time, both parents should make use of the rights to family leave and flexible working arrangements granted by Directive (EU) 2019/1158, like part-time work, flexible working hours and telework, to ensure that care responsibilities are equally shared, and attendance should gradually increase with the age of the child. Given the importance of this dimension, the time-intensity of child participation should be monitored together with the participation in ECEC.
- (11) Furthermore, women with low professional skills and women from low-income households with children face more barriers in training and to finding a job and more disincentives to (re)enter employment because of financial and non-financial constraints to their children's participation in ECEC. Encouraging higher participation of children in vulnerable situation and from disadvantaged backgrounds in inclusive ECEC would have a beneficial impact on their mothers' return to work. The situation of women with disabilities or women with children with disabilities is especially difficult.
- (12) Participating in ECEC has multiple benefits for children. Evidence shows that the provision of quality ECEC plays a crucial role in improving children's cognitive, social and educational development from an early age. According to the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care systems, ECEC participation can be an effective tool for achieving educational equity for children in a disadvantaged situation, such as children with disabilities or with special needs, children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, children with a migrant background, refugee children, Roma children and children from other minority groups, children living in rural and remote areas with inadequate care infrastructure and children in alternative care.

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<sup>68</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU strategy on the rights of the child, COM(2021) 142 final, 24.3.2021, p. 1-23.

<sup>69</sup> Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, OJ L 223, 22.6.2021, p. 14-23.

- (13) The Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee<sup>70</sup> and the Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation<sup>71</sup> highlight that equal access to quality and inclusive ECEC is central to breaking the transmission of social exclusion and securing equal opportunities for children in a disadvantaged situation. The European Child Guarantee asked Member States to submit national plans implementing the Recommendation within 9 months after adoption. However, their attendance rates are considerably lower, notably among the youngest children, which may result later in worse educational outcomes and high school drop-out rates, in particular of Roma children or children with a migrant background as well as children deprived of parental care. Participation in ECEC is also relevant for children fleeing the war in Ukraine, as for other children seeking or benefitting from protection in the Union. For all these potentially vulnerable children equal access to mainstream inclusive and non-segregated ECEC services should be ensured.
- (14) Similarly, children with disabilities have the right to participate in mainstream ECEC on an equal basis with others. Half of children with disabilities are cared for only by their parents. It is therefore important to ensure that ECEC is accessible, inclusive and combined with targeted measures that help address specific needs, including through measures tackling barriers and segregation, equipping staff with the necessary competencies or hiring dedicated staff to address individual needs and individualised curricula where needed.
- (15) A high quality of ECEC is essential to ensure that children benefit from participation in ECEC. While there is no single way to define and measure the concept of quality in ECEC settings, its essence lies in the quality of interaction between adults and children, irrespective of the ECEC system in place. Member States should ensure the provision of high-quality ECEC, taking into account various dimensions set out in the Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, including access to ECEC services, the qualifications and working conditions of staff, the pedagogical curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding. Of particular importance should be elements such as staff/child ratio, staff qualifications and continuous professional training.
- (16) Quality of ECEC provision is also an important factor for establishing trust between parents and the institutions providing education and care, and therefore an important factor in facilitating increased participation in ECEC.
- (17) Accessibility is another important dimension of ECEC provision. It includes adequate infrastructure and available reception capacities and opening hours. It further covers adaptation to special needs of parents, and assistance in overcoming complex administrative procedures. Support in navigating administrative procedures should be provided in various forms, including linguistic and digital support, especially for groups in a vulnerable situation or from disadvantaged backgrounds who, for example, are not able to use or do have access to digital tools. It also includes accessibility for persons with disabilities, including children, parents and professionals, in accordance

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<sup>70</sup> Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, OJ L 223, 22.6.2021, p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Council Recommendation of 12 March 2021 on Roma equality, inclusion and participation, OJ C 93, 19.3.2021.



with accessibility requirements set out in Annexes I and III of Directive (EU)2019/882.

- (18) Furthermore, accessibility includes the professionalisation of staff and specialists to adequately support children with disabilities or with special needs, in mainstream non-segregated facilities. Member States should ensure that barriers to the use of ECEC services are removed and prevented, including for persons with disabilities, and ECEC services are truly inclusive.
- (19) When addressing accessibility, territorial imbalances should be taken into account. Long commuting time linked to distance, lack of or limited transport connections and traffic congestion can be a barrier to participation. Remote and rural areas are particularly disadvantaged by the lack of sufficient ECEC services locally. Such territorial imbalances can add to affordability issues. It is therefore important to consider the different profiles of ECEC services users in mobility plans, and include territorial coverage in data collection for evaluation and monitoring purposes.
- (20) In many Member States, the high cost of ECEC is still a strong barrier to participation. Eurostat data show that the cost factor plays a significant role in the decision not to use formal childcare services in many countries, in particular for households at risk of poverty. According to European Union statistics on income and living conditions for 2016, 13% of parents do not make use of childcare because of its cost<sup>72</sup> and 11% have moderate or great difficulties in affording it<sup>73</sup>. These percentages more than double respectively to 28% and 27% for households at risk of poverty. Scientific research shows substantial economic, social, educational and developmental benefits of high-quality ECEC. Ensuring affordable ECEC, is therefore beneficial for women's labour-market participation; and this also has a positive long-term growth impact on education from an early age, laying the ground for a positive attitude towards learning throughout lifetime, going beyond the children involved and extending to society at large. Therefore, Member States should ensure that the costs of ECEC are proportionate to the household income and do not constitute a barrier for taking up ECEC. Moreover, Member States should also take into account other costs related to participation in ECEC such as transport, clothing and equipment needed in a care situation.
- (21) One way to ensure adequate provision of accessible and affordable high-quality ECEC is by establishing a legal entitlement to ECEC, by which public authorities guarantee a place for all children whose parents demand it, regardless of their employment, socio-economic or family status. In most Member States, such legal entitlement already exists but the starting age for the entitlement varies significantly. Ideally, there should not be a gap between the end of adequately paid family leave and a legal entitlement to a place in ECEC.

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<sup>72</sup> Data source: EU-SILC ad-hoc module 2016 on *Access to services*, [ilc\\_ats04](#) "Children by household type, income group, degree of urbanisation and main reason for not meeting needs for formal childcare services" (date of extraction 20/06/2022).

<sup>73</sup> Data source: EU-SILC ad-hoc module 2016 on *Access to services*, [ilc\\_ats03](#) "Children receiving formal childcare services by household type, income group, degree of urbanisation and level of difficulty to afford formal childcare services" (date of extraction 20/06/2022).

- (22) Increasing availability of high-quality, accessible and affordable ECEC for families and improving working conditions and salaries in the sector is expected to have economic benefits. At the same time, fiscal sustainability of investing in ECEC can be optimised by evaluating the impact on public finances and by regularly monitoring and continuously improving cost-effectiveness, building on best practices, including an efficient design of funding mechanisms that are coherent with the overall sustainability of public finances.
- (23) Easy access to adequate online and offline information on ECEC is of key importance for parents. This pertains to information on the entitlements to and availability of suitable services, access modalities and the eligibility for financial support, where applicable.
- (24) The lack of awareness of parents' and children's rights as regards ECEC and its relevance for future educational achievements is an additional hurdle for taking up services which impacts women's labour-market participation. Informing parents correctly and thoroughly, should lead to well-considered, informed decisions about care options.
- (25) ECEC suffers from staff shortages in many countries. This can be addressed through multiple strategies, such as improving working conditions, career prospects and adequate remuneration, regular up- and reskilling possibilities, developing creative recruitment strategies, and calling on different under-represented groups to join the ECEC workforce, such as men or people with various cultural backgrounds, e.g. migrants and refugees. A simple and rapid qualifications recognition mechanism could help address shortages. For instance, the Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/554<sup>74</sup> addresses the access of those fleeing the war in Ukraine to regulated professions.
- (26) The promotion of fair working conditions for staff in ECEC should contribute to attracting new workers and at the same time help ensure that those who are working in this sector are willing and able to remain in their job until retirement. It may equally contribute to tackling gender segregation in the sector. In this context, the ILO policy guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel<sup>75</sup> give guidance on the possible implementation of recommendations concerning professional and career development, appropriate remuneration, including equal pay, sustainable employment and working conditions, as well as the promotion of social dialogue in this sector.
- (27) Care for children does not stop when they go to primary school. Care needs for children as of primary school age can also limit mothers' labour-market participation and working times if there are no adequate, quality and affordable solutions for care after-school and during holidays, in the context of national school systems. If no care

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<sup>74</sup> Communication Recommendation (EU) 2022/554 on the recognition of the qualifications for people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, OJ L 107, 6.4.2022, p. 1-8.

<sup>75</sup> International Labour Organisation, 'Meeting of Experts on Policy Guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel', available at: [https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/WCMS\\_236528/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/WCMS_236528/lang--en/index.htm)

possibilities are available for older children, availability of ECEC for younger siblings will not allow labour-market participation of the parents, which might in turn impact on the uptake of ECEC for younger siblings. Member States should therefore provide for adequate, quality and affordable out-of-school care. This should include, where relevant, an offer for the supervision of and support for homework, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- (28) Work-life balance remains a great challenge for many parents, in particular women. The difficulty of balancing work and care responsibilities is a major obstacle that contributes to the underrepresentation of women in the labour market. In this context, gender stereotypes often influence the roles of women and men with regard to care. The imbalance between caretaking by women in comparison to men in turn reinforces gender stereotypes in both men's and women's occupations and roles.
- (29) This persisting gender care gap should be tackled, in particular through encouraging uptake by fathers of family leave and flexible working-time arrangements, where relevant, coupled with more equal sharing of care responsibilities within couples as regards paid and unpaid work. The implementation of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 should enhance the rights of workers with care responsibilities to family leave and to request flexible working-time arrangements. Further action should focus on raising awareness of these new rights and monitoring whether workers can fully make use of these rights without experiencing unfavourable treatment at work.
- (30) In order to better understand care needs and constraints, Member States should ensure the availability of adequate data with a sufficient degree of granularity, reliability and comparability. Given that Directive (EU) 2019/1158 does not contain specific provisions on data collection, this data should include the take-up of family leaves, taking into account the methodological manual for the work-life balance indicator framework developed by the Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee to support the proper monitoring and evaluation of the Directive.
- (31) Progress in implementing this Recommendation should be regularly monitored in the context of the European Semester, the annual report on gender equality in the European Union and the Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal. To this end, Member States should notably support the Commission in the development and calculation of an indicator for measuring the gender care gap, which means the difference in time devoted to care by women and men, the gender pay gap, and the use of time in paid and unpaid work, to better understand the interdependencies between these elements with a view to supporting the development of evidence-based gender equality and social policies. Member States should also continue their efforts to design and implement reforms in the area of ECEC making best use of the Commission's support, including via the Technical Support Instrument, through exchange of good practices, appropriate processes and methodologies, data collection, stakeholder involvement and more effective and efficient inter-institutional coordination and human resources planning, allocation and professional development in the ECEC sector.
- (32) The term 'early childhood education and care' should be understood as defined in the Council Recommendation on High Quality ECEC, as referring to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to the compulsory primary school age — regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours or

programme content — and includes centre and family day-care; privately and publicly funded provision; and pre-school and pre-primary provision.

- (33) In order to assess the impact of this Recommendation, the Commission and the Member States should monitor its progress and regularly report on it.

#### **HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION: OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE**

1. This Recommendation aims to encourage Member States to increase participation in early childhood education and care in order to facilitate women's labour-market participation and enhance the social and cognitive development of children, in particular for those in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds.
2. This Recommendation concerns early childhood education and care for all children.

#### **REVISION OF THE BARCELONA TARGETS**

3. Member States should encourage female labour-market participation by providing high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in line with national patterns of provision, ensuring that by 2030:
  - (a) at least 50% of children below the age of 3 participate in ECEC<sup>76</sup>; and
  - (b) at least 96% of children between the age of 3 and the starting age for compulsory primary education participate in ECEC<sup>77</sup>.

#### **INTENSITY OF PARTICIPATION**

4. Member States should encourage a time intensity of children's participation in ECEC that is compatible with meaningful labour-market participation of parents, especially mothers.
5. Member States are invited to ensure that ECEC services are available to allow participation of children, which could gradually increase with the age of the child, of:
  - (a) at least 25 hours per week for children below 3 years of age; and
  - (b) at least 35 hours per week for children from age 3.

#### **INCLUSION OF CHILDREN FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS, CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES OR WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

6. Member States should:
  - (a) have targeted measures in place to enable and increase participation in ECEC of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including children at risk of

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<sup>76</sup> Data source: Eurostat, EU-SILC 2020 operation, "Children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration - % over the population of each age group - EU", online data code: [ilc\_caindformal].

<sup>77</sup> Data source: Eurostat, UOE data collection, "Pupils from age 3 to the starting age of compulsory education at primary level - % of the population of the corresponding age", online data code: [educ\_uae\_enra21].

poverty or social exclusion, as well as children with disabilities or with special needs;

- (b) close the participation gap in ECEC between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and the overall population of children.

## **QUALITY**

7. Member States should ensure that:

- (a) ECEC services for all children are of high quality, in order to increase parents' trust in the services, and contribute to the healthy physical, social, emotional, cognitive and educational development of the child;
- (b) the national quality frameworks which Member States are encouraged to develop in line with the Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems include provision of services for children of both age groups covered by this Recommendation. National quality frameworks should notably provide for:
  - adequate staff-child ratios and group sizes, taking into account the age of children and any disability or special needs they may have; and
  - support the professionalisation of all ECEC staff, including by increasing the required level of initial education and ensuring continuous professional development through adequate and life-long training opportunities.

## **TERRITORIAL DISTRIBUTION**

8. Member States should address challenges for children and their families in accessing a suitable education and care facility by providing sufficient territorial coverage of ECEC provision. To this end, Member States should in particular:

- (a) organise ECEC provision adequately across urban and rural areas, affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods and regions, taking into consideration specific features of areas such as the density of the child population, the distribution of children by age, whereas this should be fully in line with desegregation and non-discrimination principles and take place in close cooperation with local and regional authorities;
- (b) take into account the need for reasonable commuting times, in particular by public transport, when deciding on locations for ECEC services.

## **AFFORDABILITY**

9. For children other than those covered by the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, who should enjoy free and effective access to ECEC services, Member States should ensure that the net cost of ECEC is reasonably proportionate to other household expenses and disposable income, paying particular attention to low-income households. In particular, Member States are encouraged to:

- (a) limit the out-of-pocket expenses for parents;
- (b) where applicable, introduce sliding-scale fees proportionate to family income or a maximum fee for ECEC.

## **ACCESSIBILITY**

10. Member States should continuously remove obstacles to access to ECEC. In this context, particular attention should be given to:
  - (a) offering solutions for parents with atypical working hours to better reconcile work and private life;
  - (b) addressing the needs of single parents;
  - (c) ensuring access to ECEC regardless of the labour market status of the parents in manner coherent with providing incentives to work;
  - (d) ensuring the accessibility of buildings, infrastructure and transport as well as learning material and digital tools for parents and children with disabilities or with special needs;
  - (e) offering effective support and appropriate information and communication for children and parents with disabilities or with special needs, and addressing linguistic and cultural barriers, to enable their participation in mainstream inclusive and non-segregated facilities;
  - (f) proactively providing clear information about the benefits of attending ECEC and about existing opportunities, eligibility rules, and administrative procedures for access to ECEC services;
  - (g) providing administrative support for enrolment, with particular attention to parents in a vulnerable situation or from a disadvantaged background.
11. Member States should introduce a legal entitlement to ECEC. When determining the starting age for the legal entitlement, Member States should take into account the availability and length of adequately paid family leave, aiming at avoiding gaps between the end of such leave and the start of ECEC.

## **OUT OF SCHOOL CARE**

12. In addition to ECEC, Member States should ensure a comprehensive approach to care for children, taking into account care needs for children of different ages, including primary school age, by facilitating affordable and high quality out-of-school care for all children in primary school (after-school and holiday cover), including those with disabilities or with special educational needs, taking into account the national organisation of school and holidays. This should include support for homework, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or in vulnerable situations.

## **AWARENESS OF RIGHTS**



13. Member States should ensure that parents are aware of their rights, including, where applicable, of the entitlement to a place in ECEC, bearing in mind that different traditions and backgrounds might influence the knowledge, perception and trust in the ECEC system.
14. Member States are encouraged to proactively inform parents about the possibilities, benefits, costs and, where in place, financial support for using ECEC. Consideration should be given to:
  - (a) the parents' needs for information on ECEC taking into account their diversity of skills, capabilities, socio-economic background, and any disability;
  - (b) making information easily accessible online as well as offline, taking into account different language needs and the availability of digital tools.
15. Member States should put in place effective, impartial and accessible complaints procedures to report issues or incidents to the competent authorities.

## **STAFF WORKING CONDITIONS AND SKILLS**

16. Member States should ensure fair working conditions for ECEC staff, in particular by promoting social dialogue and collective bargaining and by supporting the development of attractive wages in the sector, while respecting the autonomy of social partners.
17. Member States should address skill needs and worker shortages in ECEC, in particular by:
  - (a) improving initial and continuous education and training to equip current and future ECEC workers with the necessary skills and competencies;
  - (b) building career pathways in the ECEC sector, including via upskilling, reskilling and information and guidance services;
  - (c) offering attractive professional status and career prospects to ECEC workers;
  - (d) implementing measures to tackle gender stereotypes and gender segregation and to make the profession attractive to both men and women.

## **GENDER CARE GAP**

18. Member States should encourage equal sharing of care for children between parents by:
  - (a) combating gender stereotypes and encouraging a balanced involvement of both parents in care responsibilities on an equal footing, including through communication campaigns;
  - (b) promoting and supporting family-friendly working-time arrangements and the uptake of family leave by both parents, especially men, over the life course.

## **GOVERNANCE AND DATA COLLECTION**

19. Member States should ensure sound and effective policy governance in early childhood education and care, in particular by:
- (a) ensuring strong cooperation between different policy-making institutions and ECEC services, and supporting cooperation with other policy-making institutions and services in charge of early childhood development and education; and
  - (b) mobilising and making cost-effective use of appropriate and sustainable funding for early childhood education and care, including by making use of Union funds and instruments, and by pursuing policies conducive to the sustainable funding of childcare services that are coherent with the overall sustainability of public finances.
20. Member States should develop or improve data collection on:
- (a) participation of children in ECEC, on an annual basis and with adequate sample size surveys, including with reference to children in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds;
  - (b) the differences in time use in paid and unpaid work between women and men with care responsibilities, preferably by using time use surveys on the basis of the standard set by the Harmonised European Time Use Surveys;
  - (c) take-up of family leaves by gender, from administrative data in an EU-harmonised way and endorse the work-life balance indicator framework developed by the joint subgroup of the **Employment Committee (EMCO)** and **Social Protection Committee (SPC)**;
  - (d) working conditions of staff in ECEC, covering notably the aspects referred to in Recommendations 16 and 17;
  - (e) ECEC shortages, accessibility, affordability and quality of ECEC on a regular basis at least every 6 years; and on territorial distribution of ECEC, notably to assess territorial disparities, including in remote and rural areas.
21. Member States should scale up efforts to ensure that data are comparable at EU level with sufficient granularity.

## **IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

22. Member States should inform the Commission on measures to implement this Recommendation by [1 year after adoption].
23. Member States should cooperate with the Commission as regards its intention to:
- (a) improve regular data provision by making available on the Eurostat website as well as on the Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal:
    - (1) a further breakdown by age of children participating in ECEC, the time-intensity of participation and the participation rate for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion;

- (2) confidence intervals for the EU-SILC main indicator “Children in formal childcare or education” and other relevant indicators alongside the participation rates to ensure comparability across years and countries;
  - (3) more comprehensive explanatory information on the data collected, in particular as for ECEC programmes covered by the definition of the indicators.
- (b) mobilise Union funding to support national reforms and investments in ECEC;
- (c) monitor the implementation of this Recommendation in the context of the annual report on gender equality in the Union and of the European Semester, including, where appropriate, by issuing country-specific recommendations to the Member States, and report to the Council within five years on progress in relation to this Recommendation;
- (d) facilitate the development of further indicators in the Social Protection Committee and the Employment Committee, of exchange of good practices and mutual learning among Member States as well as technical capacity-building activities, and continue supporting Member States in their efforts to design and implement reforms in the area of ECEC notably via the European Education Area Strategic Framework and the Technical Support Instrument;
- (e) encourage Union agencies such as the European Institute for Gender Equality and Eurofound to collect data regularly, develop indicators and carry out analyses on the gender care gap, the gender pay gap, and the use of time in paid and unpaid work, individual and social activities by women and men with care responsibilities and on work arrangements throughout their working life.

Done at Brussels,

*For the Council*  
*The President*