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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: Key Messages from the Employment Committee on gender-related aspects of job quality
- *Presentation by the EMCO Chair*
- *Exchange of views*

Delegations will find attached the Key Messages of the Employment Committee on gender-related aspects of job quality to be presented by the EMCO Chair to the Council (EPSCO) at its session on 29 June 2026.

Gender-related aspects of job quality

Key messages

1. INTRODUCTION

On 24-25 March 2026, the **Employment Committee Policy Analysis Group (EMCO PAG)** convened a tripartite meeting bringing together representatives of EU-level and national social partners, Member States and the Commission to discuss the gender dimension of job quality. The meeting took place in the broader context of EMCO's ongoing work on job quality, building on the *Opinion* presented to the Council in June 2025¹ and ahead of the update of the related monitoring framework by the EMCO Indicators Group (IG)². Discussions were informed by evidence presented by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Eurofound, Eurostat and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), focusing on three interrelated themes: (i) collective bargaining and sectoral segregation; (ii) the gender pay gap, career progression and social protection; and (iii) work-related stress, mental health and work-life balance.

¹ [Opinion of the Employment Committee on the dimensions of job quality](#), 6 June 2025.

² 2026 Employment Performance Monitor (EPM), *forthcoming*.

2. KEY POLICY ASPECTS ON THE GENDER DIMENSION OF JOB QUALITY

The discussions pointed to a common underlying reality across the EU: gender inequalities in job quality remain structural and cumulative in nature. Persistent gaps in pay, career progression, working conditions and pension adequacy reflect the combined effect of labour market segmentation, unequal care responsibilities, persistent gender stereotypes and repeated career interruptions over the life course. These dynamics reinforce each other over time, contributing to lower lifetime earnings, weaker social protection outcomes and reduced labour market opportunities for women.

Collective bargaining and social dialogue were identified as important levers for progress, but their contribution remains uneven across sectors and Member States. Evidence presented during the meeting suggested that collective bargaining can contribute to reducing gender gaps when a gender perspective is systematically integrated into collective agreements and when women are adequately represented in trade union and social partner structures. At the same time, persistent structural constraints continue to limit progress, including the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and their concentration in sectors such as care, commerce and tourism, where working conditions are often less conducive to gender equality and involuntary part-time work remains widespread.

Gender pay gap and gender differences in career progression should not be understood solely as equal pay issues, but as the result of cumulative disadvantages developing over the course of life. Occupational segregation, unequal distribution of care responsibilities and repeated career interruptions were identified as key drivers of lower lifetime earnings and weaker pension outcomes for women. In this context, participants stressed the importance of combining labour market policies with family and social protection policies, notably through affordable childcare, parental leave systems encouraging a more equal sharing of care responsibilities, and stronger social protection coverage for non-standard forms of work.

Work-life balance and mental health emerged as an increasingly important dimension of job quality, particularly in the context of unequal care burdens and evolving forms of work organisation. While flexible and remote work arrangements can improve autonomy and support work-life balance, they can also blur the boundaries between professional and private life and increase the risk of overwork, especially for women who continue to carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities. Particular concern also emerged regarding the continued incidence of workplace violence and harassment, including sexual harassment. More broadly, the discussions underlined that work-life balance cannot be reduced to flexibility alone, but requires safeguards, prevention, the right to disconnect, and occupational safety and health frameworks that integrate a stronger gender perspective.

Across all themes, the dialogue also highlighted differing views regarding the most effective policy instruments to accelerate progress. Trade unions stressed that voluntary approaches alone have not delivered sufficient change and emphasised the importance of stronger enforcement, monitoring and binding frameworks. Employers' organisations, while recognising the structural nature of the challenges identified, argued that issues such as sectoral and hierarchical segregation cannot be solved through legislation alone and highlighted the importance of incentives, upskilling initiatives, workplace-level solutions and proportionate implementation requirements, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

3. CONCLUSIONS

Further improvements in job quality for women cannot be achieved through isolated measures or interventions confined to female-dominated sectors. The evidence points instead to structural dynamics that require coordinated action across labour markets, social protection systems, skills policies and social dialogue, alongside measures that support more balanced sharing of care responsibilities and address the persistence of gender stereotypes in shaping educational and occupational choices.

A key implication is that persistent inequalities in pay, career progression, working conditions and pensions reflect the cumulative effect of disadvantages accumulated over the life course.

Without policies capable of interrupting this dynamic, progress is likely to remain limited. While approaches differ regarding the relative weight of binding regulation and incentive-based measures, there is broad recognition that more decisive and better-aligned action across employment, care, social protection and skills policies is necessary to deliver sustained reductions in gender gaps.

Looking ahead, several priorities for action at EU level emerged from the discussions. These include ensuring effective and proportionate implementation of the Pay Transparency Directive, a strong gender dimension in upcoming initiatives on job quality, improving data collection and monitoring frameworks, and ensuring effective use of available EU funding - notably the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) - to support reforms and upskilling efforts. The dialogue with social partners also confirmed that collective bargaining and social dialogue can play an important role in addressing labour market segregation, unequal care responsibilities and persistent gender stereotypes in the world of work.
