

Caring for elderly and other dependents - Key messages from COFACE Families Europe

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EU Context

Earlier this week, the European Parliament voted in Strasbourg the resolution “[Creating labour market conditions favourable for work-life balance](#)” (by 443 votes in favour, 123 against and 100 abstentions. COFACE – Families Europe, representing 59 family platforms in 23 countries, welcomes this vote because it represents a major step in responding to the needs of families and individuals in Europe and expresses a clear political commitment of the European Parliament to work to support families across the EU. With this vote, the EU Parliament is also making a clear call to Social Partners and to the European Commission, to present a comprehensive and ambitious reconciliation package, as announced in last year’s [Roadmap](#) on addressing the challenges of working families.

Policy mix: We believe that, to be effective, reconciliation policies must be a mix of different elements and should cover families’ needs along the life-cycle. What families need is a coherent EU package that include legislative and non-legislative initiatives on leave schemes, for parents but also carers, provision of quality accessible and affordable care and support services, for children, elderly and persons with disabilities, and flexible working arrangements.

Dimensions of reconciliation: The European Reconciliation Package published last year with a coalition of European NGOs (e.g. AGE, European Women’s Lobby and many others) analyses four main areas which are considered essential to build a *reconciliation economy*, allowing families to genuinely reconcile work and family life:

- Chapter1: Reconciling for Carers
- Chapter2: Women at Work
- Chapter3: Reconciling at the Workplace
- Chapter4: Childcare, Education and Parenting

I’ve been asked today to refer to the family carers’ dimension of reconciliation.

Definition: The family / informal carer is “a non-professional person who provides primary assistance with activities in daily life, either in part or in whole, towards a dependent person in his / her immediate circle. This regular care may be provided on a permanent or non-permanent basis and may assume various forms, in particular: nursing, care, assistance in education and social life, administrative formalities, co-ordination, permanent vigilance, psychological support, communication, domestic activities, etc.”. I’m sure a number of you here today can identify with this definition.

Gender and age dimensions of caring: It is worth highlighting the gender and age dimensions of family care. The gender distribution of care within the family is still unequal and women represent the majority of carers, with great impact on their paid employment. Too often, care duties force women to reduce working hours, terminate work contracts in their early career, take up part-time or low-qualified employment. An alarming phenomenon that cannot be neglected is the one of the so-called “sandwich generation” women, aged 50+ who find themselves in between the need for caring for an elderly person (often parent or parent-in-law) and their grandchildren or their adult children with disabilities. The impact of such demographics must be considered seriously in policy discussions. Reconciling work and family life for the “sandwich generation” will be a huge challenge to address. This will become even more relevant in the context of a mobile Europe, where workers will increase their mobility throughout the EU and in their own country during their careers, increasing the possibility of geographical distance between the person in need of care and his/her family and friends. We refer to these as transnational families.

Needs of family carers: Family carers have a number of challenges, and I would like to highlight four in particular, also referring to solutions to address these challenges:

1. We need adequate **leave schemes** for carers, in addition to maternity, paternity and parental leave. We believe that an EU carers' leave directive would be of huge added value to families, to supplement the provision of professional care, enable workers to care for dependants and offer the carer adequate remuneration and social protection; this should include sufficient incentives for men to take up carers' leave. This leave could be applied through different models (allocated time throughout a career, linked to the person cared for, allocated in days/month or to be taken bulk). This needs more careful examination, and I believe the ESPN study (to be presented by Mr Vanhercke) gives some useful pointers.

2. We need **accessible, affordable services**, as well as a plurality of services to support families and their dependents, through high-quality community-based support services for those needing care, or support. This means a continuum of support services from light to heavy support according to specific needs. The lack of available and affordable care solutions for children, elderly, or persons with disabilities, chronic illness or special needs is an important prohibitive factor in labour market inclusion. We call on the Commission and the Member States to introduce targets on care for elderly persons, persons with disabilities and other dependants, similar to the Barcelona targets, with monitoring tools which should measure quality, accessibility and affordability. Eurostat, Eurofound and the EIGE should collect relevant data and to carry out studies to support this work.

3. We need **flexible working arrangements** - this goes hand in hand with leave schemes, and would even result in lower uptake of leaves if indeed flexibility is provided at the workplace. Labour markets policies and companies' practices often do not reflect the needs of an ageing and inclusive society. More and more workers are forced out of the labour market because of their difficulties, not to say impossibility, of reconciling their work and care responsibilities, may they be for a caring parent, for a family member with disabilities or, as it happens more and more often, for both. We therefore support any initiatives to introduce smart working as an approach to organising work through a combination of flexibility, autonomy and collaboration, which does not necessarily require the worker to be present in the workplace or in any pre-defined place and enables them to manage their own working hours, while nevertheless ensuring consistency with the maximum daily and weekly working hours laid down by law and collective agreements.. We recommend that Member States promote the potential of technology at work, such as high-speed internet, audio and video technology for smart (tele)working arrangements, etc. However, we would warn against a shift from a culture of presence to a culture of permanent availability . We will actually launch a first discussion about this at our conference in Berlin on 7-8 November on the impact of digitalisation on 21st century families.

4. Lastly, we need the role of the family carer to be **recognised**. We advocate for family carers, who give their time and help free of charge, to be recognised through a certain number of rights, social and other benefits (see our European Charter for Family Carers, a reference tool that contributes to reconciling family and working life by allowing an informed choice by the person with care needs and the carer too). These rights should also enable them to make an informed choice on caring arrangements, in agreement with their relative who has care needs and still preserve the quality of family life. Member States should introduce legal instruments to recognize the status of family and informal carers, including provisions for their social rights and assimilating periods spent caring to employment, especially in the calculation of their pension and for their access to specific medical and social support; their eligibility for training and skills validation. To this end, we support the European Parliament's call for Member States to introduce 'care credits' through labour and social security legislation for both women and men as equivalent periods for building up pension rights in order to protect those taking a break from employment to provide informal, unpaid care to a dependant or a family member and to recognise the value of the work of these carers for society as a whole.

Ultimately, we would advocate for elderly people, people with disabilities and other so-called "vulnerable groups" to have the option to choose the care or support they need (in line with human rights laid down in different international treaties) and (1) that family carers are provided with social rights, benefits and respite and (2) a wide range of accessible, quality services are available in the community. **Flexibility to use a combination of family and formal support is very important.**