

D3.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A STRONGER SOCIAL DIALOGUE FOR A UNION OF EQUALITY

Project 101145648: SD4EU

Introduction

A new culture of work and care

The concepts of justice, fairness, equality, and gender non-discrimination have been present in Europe's primary legislation from the very beginning, treated mainly for their relevance in the field of work, starting with the 1957 EEC Treaty of Rome with the principle of equal pay for male and female workers.

Over the decades, and also thanks to significant and innovative jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice—attention to gender-sensitive issues has gradually allowed further progress. However, it was only with the Treaty of Amsterdam¹ in 1997 that the principle of equality between women and men was included among the missions of the Community, with the provision of positive actions aimed at guaranteeing real equality.

From that point onwards, we can say that by introducing this principle as a corollary of the broader concept of equal opportunities, the Union developed a genuine gender equality policy, which—through the Charter of Fundamental Rights² of Nice in 2000, later elevated to primary legislation with the Treaty of Lisbon³ in 2007—has been the subject of multi-year action plans, starting in 2010 with the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality⁴, from which the European Strategy for Gender Equality subsequently emerged.

Gender equality policy is now a cross-cutting priority for the European Union. In the 2021-2027 programming period, it is targeted not only by specific actions and programmes but also by measures aimed at achieving gender equality through the strengthening of gender mainstreaming and intersectionality⁵—that is, systematically integrating the gender perspective at all stages of policy-making in all EU policy areas, both internal and external.

¹ Treaty of Amsterdam amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties establishing the European Communities and certain related acts <http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/ams/sign>

² Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/char_2016/oj

³ Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007 <http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/lis/sign>

⁴ European Commission, Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019, Publications Office of the European Union, 2016, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/89af673e-daf5-455d-b4f0-948b7fae01f0_en?filename=strategic_engagement_en.pdf&prefLang=it

⁵ According to EIGE: Analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which sex and gender intersect with other personal characteristics/identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination.

On 5 March 2020, the European Commission published the *European Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025*⁶, which represents the evolution and turning point of its equal opportunities policy towards recognising and addressing the gender gaps in the context of “European society”.

In this evolving framework, it is increasingly evident that the full implementation of gender equality requires not only legal instruments and tools, but also a profound cultural transformation.

A new culture of work and care becomes essential, especially in today’s labor market, where the implementation of innovative models for work-life balance is often accompanied by reflection on the very concepts of work and family care.

Indeed, in order to the application of the principle of equal pay between men and women for the same work or work of equal value, as outlined in Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council, one could begin by considering work not only as a means of economic sustenance.

Work-related income must guarantee each individual the autonomy necessary to meet their basic life needs, forming the material foundation of full citizenship. In line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, the recognition of a “decent income” is a key objective in achieving upward social convergence among the Member States.

On the other hand, the importance of family care work must be rediscovered, also at the social level, as essential for the healthy development of the entire community.

Comparative work and the study of best practices show us that the most successful experiences are those that value not the time spent “sitting at a desk”, but the contribution made to a project, and the responsibility and trust placed in the professional.

Furthermore, within families themselves, the dignity of any profession must be acknowledged, avoiding comparisons that increase or reduce its perceived value solely based on salary or on the time taken from or given to caregiving.

We should therefore reconsider the very concepts of work time and family care, rediscovering the social value of both: by implementing **project- and objective-based** work, and by assigning **appropriate and fair** leave and care time to all family members who take care of children, elderly people or persons with disabilities.

The real challenge is cultural: to rethink work not merely as a means of survival, but as a **fundamental right**—an essential aspect of personal dignity and each individual’s journey of self-realisation and social participation, regardless of gender, contractual status or professional role, and recognized as such for every citizen.

A change of this magnitude also requires investment in training: it is necessary to **spread a new vision of work and care across institutions, educational contexts and businesses**—one that does not oppose the two spheres, but integrates them in a shared project.

Transforming the culture of work will, of course, require the adoption of new organisational models. Some of these are already being tested or successfully implemented in innovative national and corporate contexts:

- **Goal-oriented work:** which overcomes the paradigm of time, control and physical presence, promoting autonomy and responsibility;
- **Shared care policies:** equal parental leave for men and women, flexible working hours, support services for parenting and caregiving.

⁶ 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 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152>

- **The right to disconnect:** protecting free time and rest as essential dimensions for mental health and the overall well-being of the individual.

At the same time, policies should be implemented to promote a truly shared culture of family care: genuine equality cannot be based on economic support and leave measures aimed only at the underrepresented gender, as these tend to perpetuate imbalances rather than overcome them.

It must also be recognised that the necessary change is not a form of aid for women, but a cultural and structural transformation aimed at building a more equitable and inclusive society, in which everyone—regardless of gender—can share responsibilities and opportunities. This new culture—respectful of both work and care—should be nurtured starting from families and schools, as it would ultimately have an impact on the labour market, levelling gender disparities.

A key role can be played in this regard by **social partners**, who are best placed to understand the characteristics of specific professional contexts. Through **social dialogue** with institutions, they could promote targeted interventions to foster the right balance in people's lives between the different dimensions that define them.

These transformations are in line with the commitments undertaken at European level in the **European Strategy for Gender Equality 2020–2025**, which recognises the crucial role of pay policies, shared care responsibilities and the valorisation of work in all its forms as key to achieving effective gender equality.

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Recommendations from the Social Protection Committee

Introduction

Gender inequalities in social protection stem primarily from career fragmentation, lower lifetime earnings, and unequal caregiving burdens.

Starting salaries may be equal, but career paths and income trajectories diverge due to structural barriers.

Social partners have a crucial role in bridging these gaps via collective agreements, bilateral funds, and sectoral initiatives.

These recommendations aim to strengthen gender equality in access to social protection by addressing structural disparities in income, career continuity, and caregiving responsibilities. They are addressed to national and European social partners, as well as public institutions, and reflect the discussions and findings of the Social Protection Committee under the SD4EU project.

Recommendations

1. Promote Financial Compensation Mechanisms for Career Interruptions Due to Care Responsibilities

- Address the income penalty experienced by women due to caregiving (childcare, eldercare) through:
 - Collective bargaining tools and bilateral funds
 - Sectoral or company-level schemes that supplement earnings during periods of reduced work or leave — as seen in Italy, where bilateral bodies provide maternity bonuses and income top-ups to support continuity during caregiving.
- Encourage the creation of compensatory mechanisms that recognise unpaid care work as a factor impacting long-term income and pensions.
- Encourage compensatory measures that can be activated during crises (e.g. COVID-19), where unpaid care responsibilities disproportionately fall on women and lead to reduced labour market participation.
- Promote the individualisation of access to social protection benefits and caregiving-related subsidies, ensuring that eligibility is based on personal income rather than household or spousal income. This helps prevent economic dependency and better supports women's autonomy during career interruptions.

2. Ensure equitable and accessible parental leave for both parents

- Advocate for equal, individual and non-transferable parental leave rights for mothers and fathers, supported by adequate income replacement.
- Ensure that compensation levels are sufficient to eliminate disincentives for fathers to take leave, especially in low-income households.
- Extend parental leave entitlements to self-employed and non-standard workers, ensuring comprehensive and inclusive protection.
- Promote cultural and institutional measures—including simplified procedures, awareness campaigns, and examples of best practice—to normalise men's involvement in caregiving.
- Take inspiration from models such as Spain, where since 2021 both parents benefit from 16 weeks of fully paid, non-transferable and compulsory leave, and Finland, where 2022 reforms significantly increased male take-up by allocating non-transferable leave days.

3. Integrate Childcare Policies and Services into the Social Protection Ecosystem

- Recognize that the lack of accessible and affordable childcare is a major structural barrier to women's full and continuous labour market participation.
- Encourage sustained investment in public and private childcare services, especially for children under the age of 3, as a core pillar of inclusive social protection. France's system offers a comprehensive example, combining subsidised crèches and licensed childminders for children under 3 with a universally accessible *école maternelle* from age 3 to 6. This continuity promotes early childhood socialisation while supporting parents—especially mothers—in maintaining employment, and should be seen as a strong model of integrated childcare policy.
- Integrate childcare into employment and welfare policies to support stable return to work after caregiving periods.
- Involve social partners in designing and negotiating childcare solutions through collective agreements and bilateral mechanisms.

4. Adapt Working Time Frameworks to Support Income Protection and Care Responsibilities

- Promote flexible working time arrangements through collective agreements, enabling workers —especially women with care duties—to maintain employment and income continuity.
- Encourage models such as temporary hour reductions or adaptable schedules, that prevent the need for long career breaks. In Italy, for example, collective agreements in the commerce and tourism sectors include flexible scheduling measures to support return from maternity leave.
- Support individual rights to request flexible working, particularly in sectors where service delivery allows it.
- Encourage the integration of gender-sensitive defaults in workplace systems (e.g. payroll, leave management, return-to-work tracking), so that employees returning from maternity or parental leave are automatically reintegrated into wage progression, bonuses, and career tracks. While seemingly technical, such defaults can reduce unintentional bias and ensure continuity in protection.

5. Ensure Adequate Income for a Dignified Life

- Promote research and adoption of the *Living Wage* concept, based on the real cost of living beyond basic wage benchmarks. Encourage social partners to align collective bargaining outcomes with these adequacy principles, ensuring that all workers — including low-paid and part-time — can meet essential needs.
- Recognise that income inequality and poverty risks persist even among working professionals, particularly women in freelance or atypical roles.
- Guarantee that contributory social protection systems are accessible and financially viable for self-employed and non-standard workers with irregular income patterns. Recent Belgian reforms improving pension access for part-time workers—most of them women—represent a step in this direction.
- Ensure that pension systems are financially sustainable and adapted to longer working lives, without penalising those with fragmented or part-time careers—particularly women. Addressing the gender pension gap must be part of a broader strategy to prevent future income insecurity and ensure dignity in old age.
- Self-employed women and men shall have equal opportunities to acquire pension rights, ensuring a retirement lived in dignity.

6. Strengthen the Role of Social Partners in Building Inclusive Social Protection

- Reinforce the capacity of national and sectoral social partners to co-design gender-sensitive social protection mechanisms, especially in areas where legal entitlements fall short.
- Promote collective bargaining as a key tool to close coverage gaps and extend rights to self-employed and non-standard workers.
- Encourage the use of bilateral bodies and welfare funds to provide complementary benefits—such as maternity bonuses, income support during caregiving, or care-related leave top-ups.
- Support social partners in engaging with EU and national policy frameworks (e.g. European Gender Equality Strategy, European Pillar of Social Rights) to align negotiated solutions with broader equality and protection goals.
- Promote the role of social partners in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of gender-sensitive protection policies. Ongoing assessment helps improve the effectiveness of negotiated solutions and prevents fragmentation or duplication of efforts.
- Ensure that social partners actively monitor the transposition and implementation of the Minimum Income and Pay Transparency Directives in Member States, aligning national practices with the project's core objectives: gender equality, income adequacy, and inclusive access to social protection.
- Promote the inclusion of small professional organisations and micro-enterprise representatives in national and sectoral dialogue structures, ensuring that emerging voices are heard and supported with institutional resources. France offers a relevant example, where trade unions and employer organisations co-manage pension and unemployment insurance systems and jointly promoted national agreements on gender equality.

Recommendations from the Committee

on Equal Pay and the Gender Pay Gap

In line with the European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, these recommendations aim to address the gender pay gap by tackling structural, cultural, and economic inequalities in the labour market.

1. Advance Pay Transparency Beyond Hourly Wages

- Implement Directive (EU) 2023/970 on Pay Transparency across all relevant sectors. While the Directive formally applies to employees, its principles should inspire parallel initiatives for self-employed and freelance workers, through national legislation, sectoral agreements, or professional association frameworks. Its real impact remains limited unless workers are equipped to interpret and act upon wage data, and unless structural earnings indicators—beyond hourly wages—are made available. In this context, it is essential to emphasise the use of transparent, objective, and standardised pay-setting criteria, to prevent individualised, opaque wage determination practices that can exacerbate gender disparities.
- Promote the use of comprehensive earnings-based indicators—such as annual income and employment continuity—to capture structural inequalities in pay. These metrics are essential to reflect the impact of career breaks, part-time work, and unpaid care responsibilities (caring for children, disabled or old people, and in general caring for significant others), that disproportionately affect women.
- Acknowledge that some Member States have already implemented mandatory gender pay audits for companies with more than 50 employees, showing that national-level initiatives can complement the EU Directive and help institutionalise transparency practices.
- Pay transparency efforts should also address digital labour platforms and app-based professions, where income-setting mechanisms are opaque, and classification as self-employed often conceals dependent work relationships.
- Recognising that women's total work time often exceeds men's due to unpaid responsibilities, equal pay strategies must go beyond hourly rates. A systemic revaluation of women's labour—including non-remunerated work—can offer a path toward truly closing the gender earnings gap.
- Promote the development of compensatory mechanisms—financial, in-kind, or service-based— to address the structural inequalities in career paths and unpaid care responsibilities that contribute to the gender earnings gap. While transparency reveals disparities, these measures are key to correcting them where formal wage equality alone is not sufficient.

2. Revalue Gendered Labour Across Sectors

- Develop tools to assess the societal and economic value of professions with high female participation, such as care, administration and education which is quite female dominated.
- Use this data to guide equitable pay-setting across sectors and challenge undervaluation of essential, care-related work.

- Recognise and address persistent pay gaps in high-value sectors with high male participation—such as finance, ICT, and real estate—by promoting gender balance and equitable pay structures also in male-dominated industries.

3. Ensure Fair Wage Progression Across All Career Paths

- Investigate how non-linear and interrupted careers—more frequent among women—translate into lower lifetime earnings, which is usually the penalty a woman must suffer for taking care of her offspring. Provide for compensatory action for lost time during career breaks, to be included in collective agreements.
- Promote wage structures that recognise skills, outcomes, and responsibilities, not only tenure or uninterrupted full-time presence. So that the request, for caring reasons, for part-time work doesn't impact career trajectories.
- Encourage career development policies that address gender-based career interruptions, care responsibilities, and sectoral segregation. Ensure equal access to services, markets, credit, and professional opportunities—particularly for self-employed and freelance women. Tackle occupational and sectoral segregation through awareness campaigns, mentoring platforms, and targeted initiatives aimed at diversifying traditionally gendered career paths and supporting women's professional advancements.
- Support continuous training, re-skilling, and career progression opportunities—before, during, and after career breaks—to ensure that caregiving responsibilities do not lead to long-term wage penalties, and in general not penalizing women for taking the responsibility of caring for others

4. Improve Gender-Disaggregated Labour Data

- Collect and regularly publish pay gap data for both salaried and self-employed workers.
- Disaggregate by employment type, sector, and working pattern to enable targeted and evidence-based policymaking.
- Ensure that gender-disaggregated income and working condition data cover emerging forms of work, including platform-based and digitally mediated employment relationships.

5. Empower Social Partners to Drive Pay Equality

- Implement the right to collective bargaining. Strengthen the role of trade unions, employer organisations, and professional associations in identifying, monitoring, and correcting structural pay inequalities, including through gender-sensitive collective bargaining, sectoral agreements, and professional regulations. Their proactive involvement should also be encouraged in the implementation and monitoring of the Pay Transparency Directive, including through the negotiation of framework agreements defining its practical application.
- Integrate gender pay equity objectives into collective frameworks, setting specific targets, monitoring mechanisms, and ensuring regular assessment of the overall gender pay gap—considering total hours worked, career interruptions, part-time employment, differences in social contributions, and the impact of unpaid care work.
- Encourage the inclusion of gender pay audits and certification systems (e.g., as introduced in Italy under Law 162/2021) in collective agreements and sectoral practices, ensuring transparency and accountability through social dialogue.

- Strengthen the role of social partners in shaping national tools—such as pay assessment instruments and equality certification schemes—and ensure their widespread adoption, particularly in sectors with limited union presence.
- Encourage social partners to establish ethical standards for platform-based freelance work, to promote fair compensation, transparent rate-setting, and basic protections regardless of employment status.
- Promote the exchange of good practices among Member States to strengthen the role of social dialogue in achieving gender pay equality.

6. Challenge Cultural Biases in the Labour Market

- Promote educational programs and awareness campaigns to counter gender-based assumptions about leadership, competence, and pay —encouraging the active engagement of both men and women in all professional and educational settings.
- Introduce structured gender equality education from primary school onward, in cooperation with social partners and local institutions, to tackle stereotypes early and systematically; and expand these efforts beyond formal education through extracurricular, civic, and digital learning initiatives. Cultural transformation must also involve both public institutions and media sectors to dismantle deep-rooted biases.
- Promote inclusive language and gender-sensitive communication practices across public and private sectors as a key component of cultural and institutional responsibility.

These improvements are essential to reveal the true scale of the gender pay gap and to enable effective, structural corrective action at both national and sectoral levels.

Recommendations from the Work-Life Balance Committee

Introduction

Persistent inequalities in the division of unpaid care work continue to limit women's access to employment, career progression, and full participation in economic and social life. Ensuring effective work-life balance measures is essential to achieving gender equality and strengthening inclusive labour markets across the EU.

These recommendations focus on the practical and institutional conditions needed to support parents and caregivers—particularly in the context of non-standard work, evolving family models, and demographic ageing. They are addressed to national authorities, EU institutions, and social partners engaged in the development and implementation of work-life balance policies.

Common Challenges:

- Limited uptake of paternity leave, due to financial disincentives and persistent workplace stigma, particularly among men.
- Insufficient support services, such as childcare and eldercare, particularly at the local level.
- Underuse of EU structural funds and lack of alignment between funding and care-related needs.
- Lack of awareness and information among self-employed professionals regarding available rights and support measures.
- Limited and unequal compensation for parental and paternity leave, discouraging participation, particularly among men.
- Restrictive eligibility criteria excluding non-standard, freelance, and precarious workers.
- Insufficient public communication and limited use of digital platforms to inform workers about available rights and procedures.

Recommendations:

1. **Ensure equal and adequately compensated parental leave for both parents**, promoting gender-balanced caregiving and enabling fathers to take on a more active role in unpaid care.
2. **Promote flexible and adaptable working arrangements**—such as remote work, part-time options, and care-related leave—through legislation and collective agreements, ensuring they meet diverse family and caregiving needs. Particular attention should be given to parents returning from maternity or parental leave, through tailored schedules that support reintegration and respect care demands – such as time for child illness or breastfeeding. In this regard, local policies may also take into account the World Health Organisation's recommendation for exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of a child's life, ensuring workplace arrangements that support this. Truly flexible work options help prevent involuntary part-time work, especially for women, and supports sustained labour market participation.
3. **Extend eligibility for leave and work-life balance measures** to non-standard workers, freelancers, and the self-employed, closing protection gaps in fragmented labour markets.

4. **Recognise unpaid care work as a social and economic contribution**, and reflect this in the design of paid leave schemes, flexible work policies, and public communication. Promote non-transferable, well-paid parental leave for both parents.
5. **Invest in accessible, quality public and community-based care services**, particularly in rural and small municipalities, to support working families and reduce unpaid care burdens.
6. **Engage social partners actively in policy development and monitoring**, particularly in the strategic use of EU funds (e.g. ESF+, RRF), to ensure inclusive and gender-sensitive work-life balance frameworks.