**Contribution of the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe to the European Commission Public Consultation on reinforcing Social Europe**

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| |  | | --- | | *The Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE) represents 28 national and local associations: we are the voice of families from a Catholic perspective at the European level. FAFCE holds a participatory status with the Council of Europe since 2002 and is a member of the Fundamental Rights Platform of the European Union.* | |

# Chapter 1: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market

## Education, training and life-long learning

*Improve access to education for all children*

As education is one of the key instruments to combat poverty and social exclusion, it is crucial to ensure an equal access of all children to education. Learning from the lessons of COVID-19, enabling financial support for digital equipment of families is much needed, especially for single-parents, low-income and large families. Special attention must be devoted to children’s security online with regards to the fight against child pornography, online child sexual abuse and the access of minors to online pornography.

In addition, education policy programs must always consider the parent's primary role of educators and respect their educational decisions. Overall, family-friendly policies remain an efficient mean to support children’s access to education, as a better work-life balance of parents improve the quantity and quality of time available to help their children in their schooling.

*Tackle the digital gap*

Digital education is key to create a more inclusive society for the elderly, and can be an efficient tool to combat loneliness and support intergenerational bonds. There is a need to ensure the integration of the elderly in the community by developing digital tools to facilitate family and community care.

## Gender equality

*Fight maternal mobbing*

Women still face today greater discrimination in the labour market, which most often comes from the perceived risks by employers of costs connected to the maternity. “Mobbing” describes health-harming abusive conducts at work, which “*attempt to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment, emotional abuse, and/or terror*”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Maternal mobbing not only target pregnant women and mothers, but also women who desire to have children. Maternal mobbing is a direct violation of Principles 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the European Pillars of Social Rights.

Motherhood changes the way in which women are viewed as workers in terms of expected work focus, proficiency and commitment, which creates a ground for discriminatory practices: disincentives to maternity, refusal to recruit, detrimental changes in the terms of the contract of employment upon return from maternity leave, harassment, refusal to extend fixed-term contracts of employment and even dismissal.

In 2019, the European Parliament voted a Resolution on “[Measures to prevent and combat mobbing and sexual harassment at the workplace, in public spaces, and in political life in the EU](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0331_EN.html)”, stating that “*the fight against harassment on grounds of pregnancy and motherhood is necessary in order to achieve a true work-life balance for women*” and calling “*on the Commission and the Member States to recognise the phenomenon of harassment on grounds of pregnancy and motherhood in employment*”.

In order to meet work and family aspirations, women rely on the flexibility of their employers and the support of public policies. It is crucial for the labour market to adapt to mothers’ needs, both through a flexible labour policy and a comprehensive family policy. The overall goal is to ensure women the financial, cultural and mental freedom to balance their work and family aspirations on their own terms. It is crucial to:

* Legislatively recognise the phenomenon of maternal mobbing, as called by the 2019 European Parliament resolution;
* Identify discriminatory practices toward pregnant women and mothers in the workplace;
* Raise awareness and implement transparencies measures regarding women, pregnant women and mothers’ rights in the workplace;
* Offer concrete help for victims of maternal mobbing.

## Equal opportunities

*Erase the obstacles faced by families in their role*

In a context of pandemic and disastrous economic consequences, families face many obstacles when fulfilling their role, and struggle to reconcile childcare and schooling at home, along with work obligations and domestic tasks. However, this extraordinary situation should not make us forget the ordinary precariousness of having children for a family.

From an economic point of view alone, it is crucial to recall that the family is not a cost but, on the contrary, generates savings for public finances and is a driving force for economic development. Indeed, the family naturally contributes to the common good through its public interest functions of education, care and even generation of children.

The unpaid work is often not considered as a work because it does not produce monetarised services. However, working for free does not mean that nothing is produced, on the contrary. The family, in the care and education of children, not only generates human capital, but also produces quality services for the society, free of charge. A family therefore acts not only as a mere agent of consumption, but also as an agent of service production. This function should also have consequences for lower taxes, as it already happens for example for companies.

Families are big consumers and pay a very high amount of taxes on products. Yet, many necessary products for families (diapers, baby milk) are taxed. A first possibility to reduce family costs without increasing public expenditure would be to erase the value-added taxes (VAT) on the basic products of consumption of families.

Families are a crucial asset in supporting the economic recovery from crisis, such as the current pandemic. They are not only consumers, but represent as well a long-term investment for the future. In addition, their savings are directly financing the banking system. Supporting them is away to invest in a virtuous circle of long term and sustainable economic development. Monetary policies should encourage banks to keep lending to families.

Enabling families to fulfil their role is rather an investment than a public expenditure for states. In that sense, the State has a responsibility not only to prevent family poverty, but above all to remove any obstacle that would prevent the family from fulfilling its role under the best possible conditions. This is a matter of fair recognition of a service provided by families. In that sense, fiscal justice is crucial to grant families equal opportunities.

# Chapter II: Fair working conditions

## Work-life balance

*Support parents*

Parents today play the most crucial role in the care and the education of their children. Yet they face greater obstacles in their service and need to be supported by family-friendly policies, especially with regards to work-life balance.

Working and having a family is a struggle for parents, especially mothers. In the EU, 34% of women and 23% of men are ineligible for parental leave.[[2]](#footnote-2) Subsequently, half of parents are constrained to come back to work full-time with no flexible working arrangements.[[3]](#footnote-3) The lockdown showed us that arrangements for parents to work from home and with flexible working hours are possible and should to be pushed forward. Working parents also need to have access to accessible, affordable and quality child care services.

Unpaid care work is work. Parents ensuring the full or part-time care of their children must be recognised as a particular category of work that grants access to rights (education, long-life learning, pension). The time taken off for children education or care for older relatives must also be considered in the calculation of pension entitlements.

Freedom of choice must be at the center of work-life balance policies. Parents should be free to organise their work-life balance on their own terms. Work-life balance within a family is a team work that should be respected.

On the level of the Member-States, the EU work-life balance directive must be implemented while respecting the national specificities. EU-Member States also need to be encouraged to go beyond the minimal standards set by the EU directive:

* Increase the eligibility to maternal and parental leave;
* Legally recognise of the value of unpaid family work as a particular category of work that give access to pension rights;
* Ensure access to accessible, affordable and quality childcare services;
* Promote new forms of works for mothers through teleworking and flexible working hours and arrangements;
* Address the motherhood pay gap and pension pay gap by considering family work and breaks due to motherhood in the calculation of pay and pension entitlements;
* Ease lending facilities for families as an economic investment;
* Erase the value-added taxes on basic products of consumptions of families;
* Have a special attention and support for mothers in challenging situations (low-income mothers, single mothers, mothers of large families and mothers with children with disabilities);
* Promote a financial, mental and cultural freedom of choice for women regarding the configuration of their work-life balance.

# Chapter III: Social protection and inclusion

## Childcare and support to children

*Ensure access to childcare services and recognise the value of unpaid work*

With 34 % of children under the age of three in formal childcare, the EU has reached its Barcelona target set of 33 %.[[4]](#footnote-4) Around 85 % of children from the age of three to school age are in formal childcare in the EU. However, a complete access includes also the affordability and the quality of the childcare services. In the EU, 14% of households report unmet needs for formal childcare services.[[5]](#footnote-5) Affordability (50 %) is the most often cited reason for unmet needs, followed by the lack of available places (12 %), opening hours (8 %) and distance (5 %).[[6]](#footnote-6) Working mothers need to have access to accessible, affordable and quality child care services.

Stay-at-home parents that ensures the informal care of their children are often seen as not working and in a situation of economic inactivity. Yet care is work. In economic terms unpaid care work is a productive investment with a real value. Mothers ensuring the full-time care of their children must be recognised as a category of work that gives rights (access to social security, education, training, pension entitlements, etc.).

## Old age income and pensions

*Fight the gender pension gap*

In Europe, women earn around 16% less than men. When addressing the root causes of this gap, one realise that if women earn less than men, it is not because they are women, but because they are mothers. A 2015 study of the International Labour Office showed clearly that the pay evolution of never-married women is very similar to that of married men, which means that women without children earn as much as men (with or without children). The pay gap between men and women almost entirely comes from the loss of pay of women with children. Due to their family and caretaking investments, mothers will take maternity and parental leaves, decrease their working hours, refuse extra-hours required to obtain a big promotion and prefer stability to a well-paid but unstable work. A mean to reduce this motherhood pay gap is to ensure the fair transfer of benefits when a mother stops her career or decide to work part-time to take care of her children.

The motherhood pay gap directly fuels the pension pay gap, as the years taken off to care for the upbringing of a child are not considered as a work, even unpaid, and therefore not considered in the calculation of pension entitlements. To reduce the pension pay gap of mothers, the time taken off for children duties and education must be considered as a valuable period of unformal work in the calculation of pension entitlements.

## Long-term care

*Support flexible working arrangements for carers*

“*In the EU, 15 % of women and 10 % of men are involved in informal care for older persons and/or persons with disabilities several days a week or every day. Among informal carers, 42 % of women and 56% of men are working*”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Families play a crucial role in taking care of their dependent relatives. This unpaid work is work, and constitutes a win-win action for our communities, as it is produced for free, and with an attention on the quality of the care. In economic terms, it represents a positive externality for the economy and the society overall. It is crucial to recognise the value of the family work and consider it in labour policies and family policies.

Under the EU Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers, workers are entitled to take 5 working days per year for carers' leave. 5 days per year remain extremely limited in case of dependant relatives. Carers should also rely on flexible working arrangements to continue both working and caring for a dependant relative.

Carers also rely on the insurance of the respect of the right to disconnect, be it with reasonable working hours or with a weekly and synchronized day of rest. On Sundays, grandparents, parents and children able to spend time with each other. A school-free and work-free day enables families to visit their older relatives and spend time with them. This day is crucial to maintain intergenerational bonds and for a more sustainable economic development. Policies should be designed both at the EU and the national level in order “*to ensure a weekly rest period which shall, as far as possible, coincide with the day recognised by tradition or custom in the country or region concerned as a day of rest*” (European Social Charter, Art. 2).

*Promote the family long-term care as the optimum solution*

When autonomous living is no longer possible for elderly people, care systems have to offer best possible living conditions. Yet, most of older persons wish to stay in their family settings as long as possible.

Families taking care of a dependent relative often lack time and avalaible space in their household. In order to support families when ensuring long-term care, the European Commission should encourage Member-States to implement flexible work-life balance arrangements for carers, propose housing benefits for households welcoming an elderly relative and create a tax-free system for modifications regarding access and accommodation for elderly people.



1. Namie G., 2014. Workplace Bullying Institute. U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index 2019 Work-life balance*, 2019, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. EIGE, *op. cit.*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index*, 2019, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. EIGE, *op. cit.*19, p.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)