

Make Mothers Matter Contribution to the Commission's Micro-credentials Public Consultation

Make Mothers Matter (MMM) welcomes the Commission's Public Consultation on Micro-credentials (Mcs) as the flexibility and modularity they offer could provide flexible ways of skilling and reskilling for mothers.

According to EIGE, **time** is the biggest barrier preventing men and women from engaging in lifelong learning. **Care responsibilities** and household duties are highlighted as key time issues.¹ Mothers in the EU undertake the bulk of care duties. This has implications for their employment opportunities, involvement in social, leisure and cultural activities but also their **participation in lifelong learning**. On average, 40 % of women in the EU who faced obstacles to participating in education and training activities, could not take part due to family responsibilities.² As reported by EIGE, "*women consistently report that they cannot participate in lifelong learning because of their family responsibilities.*"

In addition, **mothers coming out of family-related career breaks** face significant challenges returning to the labour market. The primary reason for this is the **lack of proper upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning options** available to women to help them bridge the knowledge gap that can appear in the time away from work.

Among socio-demographic factors affecting the return to work, the following play an important role:

- education- the maternal employment gap is largest for women with a low level of education³
- migrant background – the employment rate of women born outside the EU is much lower than that of men in the same group, and immigrant mothers and mothers with a migrant background face particular challenges in the labour market
- single parents (and single mothers in particular) are the most underrepresented in employment.⁴

Micro-credentials have the potential to help women return to the labour market after family-related career breaks. To become an effective tool for women's employment and respect the first principle of the Pillar of Social Rights, they should also be targeted to those who need them the most: women with lower levels of education, women with a migrant background and single mothers. This also means that the cost of these credentials should not be a barrier. This is crucial to maintain their labour market skills, ensure adequate resources for families and women living by themselves, and to make further progress towards gender equity.

¹ EIGE, "Gender Equality Index 2019; Work-life balance", 2019, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-report/lifelong-learning>.

² EIGE, *ibid.*

³ OECD, "Balancing Work and Family Life: Helping Parents into Paid Employment", 2001, available at <https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/2079435.pdf>

⁴ HOFMAN, J. ET AL., "After parental leave: Incentives for parents with young children to return to the labour market", Publication for the committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg, 2020, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/658190/IPOL_STU\(2020\)658190_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/658190/IPOL_STU(2020)658190_EN.pdf)

On top of this, as it was highlighted by the Lifelong Learning Platform in their answer to the Roadmap on micro-credentials⁵, **MCS could serve as a tool for the recognition and valorisation of all the knowledge, skills and competences acquired by learners outside the formal education system.**

The recognition and validation of **soft skills for employability** have been at the heart of several EU projects.⁶ Public institutions at national level have also started to recognise the importance of soft skills. This is for example the case of the Public Service for Employment and Vocational Training in Wallonia (Belgium) which highlights the importance of these skills and is currently organising a training on soft-skills based on the methodology and tools that were developed as part of the European Step4-SFC project.⁷

More particularly, skills and competences can be acquired by caring for others. Caregiving is a learning experience that provides caregivers with soft skills that contribute to social inclusion, personal development, empowerment, and employability. “Caregivers” are those who look after an ill, disabled or dependent relative without any pay or formal training. One in three adults in the European Union is a caregiver (34.4 %). Knowing that most of them (80.4 %) are employed⁸, this means a significant portion of workers have caring responsibilities. However, this role is time and again stigmatised as employers and employees are often convinced this will have negative consequences on their professional lives. This has a more negative impact on women, and especially mothers, as they take on the bulk of caring activities.

However, if soft skills acquired through caregiving activities were properly recognised, valued, and supported these skills could benefit both employees and employers, and in turn, society at large.

This has been demonstrated by several EU projects:

- The FamCompass⁹ has developed an instrument to validate the skills obtained in the family context. This instrument assesses ‘family competences’, competences men and women have obtained in family life, in their roles as educators, homemakers and caregivers
- The MOM project¹⁰, an Erasmus+ project whose aim is to frame maternity as a learning experience that provides mothers with soft skills that are extremely useful in nowadays workforce
- The MASP project¹¹, funded by the Programme for Employment and Social Innovation EaSI and which main purpose is to change the perspective of work-life balance, moving to the concept of “work-life synergy”, highlighting the synergy between “personal” and “working” dimensions of individuals and the importance of the different roles of a person

It has also been demonstrated by Lifeed¹², an EduTech Enterprise (and member of the aforementioned MOM and MASP projects) that created digital training programs that can be used in the flow of life

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12858-Micro-credentials-broadening-learning-opportunities-for-lifelong-learning-and-employability/F2004769_en

⁶ See Retac Project (<http://rectec.ac-versailles.fr/>), Transval EU (<http://lllplatform.eu/what-we-do/eu-projects/transval-eu/>), Job Bridge (<https://job-bridge.eu/>)

⁷ <https://www.leforem.be/particuliers/competences-cles.html>, <https://step4-sfc.eu/Project-overview>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Reconciliation_of_work_and_family_life_-_statistics#Background

⁹ <https://famcompass.odisee.be/>

¹⁰ <https://www.eu-mom.eu/en/public/215>

¹¹ <https://euromasc.org/project-participation/ongoing-projects/masp/>

¹² <https://lifeed.io/en/>



designed to accompany employees through important life transitions, such as parenthood or caring for an elderly relative.

Parents who participated in these programs have shown a marked improvement in soft skills by linking their experience as parents to specific skills they use both at work and during their personal lives. The programs increase parents' self-awareness and further develop the skills they acquire through their work of caring. Such skills include **problem solving, empathy, prioritization, decision-making, leadership.**

For employers who implemented the programs, the benefits included talent acquisition and retention as well as productivity and employee engagement.

Micro-credentials could therefore be an opportunity to recognise and validate carers soft skills and allow these skills to be recognised and valued on the labour market. For this purpose, the results of the projects cited above could serve as a starting point. MCs should be extended to non-formal education providers as well, especially to the private sector who has already started to recognise the value of these soft skills.