



Make
Mothers
Matter

The European Care Strategy: Time to place Mothers centre stage

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Make Mothers Matter (MMM)
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Introduction

It's time for change.

In these unprecedented times, when Europe is navigating a global pandemic, when political tensions are boiling over threatening to destabilize the global order, it is vital to reflect on the people who hold the fabric of society together. The pandemic has shone a light on the front-line workers, who continue to save lives every day, even if it means risking their own. Many of these workers are mothers, but for them, care work does not end at the hospital or nursing home.

Behind the scenes, in millions of homes around the world, mothers have another crucial role: they work every day to ensure that their families and children are fed, educated and healthy. This work, also known as unpaid family care work keeps families, communities and businesses running. This is a process that has gone on for decades, with mothers shouldering the greater share of care. It is time for change. It is time for this invisible and inequitable care work to be recognised and shared.

Their work and personal investment in their families and their children place mothers amongst the most important **care providers**. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the unpaid care work done by mothers that keeps societies functioning. The gender care gap aggravates economic gender inequalities by keeping mothers out of the workforce and hindering their ability to advance their careers and education.

Mothers are also care recipients. Maternal health is an indicator of global health. A healthy mother can take on her educational responsibilities and fully participate in economic and social life. Maternal health also ties into issues of economic inequality between the genders, since a mother who is unwell and has insufficient access to maternal healthcare may be unable to participate in economic and social life.

Make Mothers Matter recommends that common European action on care should aim to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. The wellbeing of carers and mothers should also be addressed by the Strategy. To achieve this, the European Care Strategy should aim to provide available, accessible, acceptable and high-quality maternal care for all women.

Maternal Health

Safe access to maternal healthcare in the EU varies between Member States is based on the following factors:

Affordability of maternal healthcare

A report of the EXPH¹ has indicated that affordability is the greatest barrier to accessing medical services in the EU.

¹ Expert Panel on effective ways of investing in Health (EXPH), Preliminary Report on Access to Health Services in the European Union.

- Many migrant women choose not to seek any antenatal care during pregnancy since some Member States require undocumented migrant women to cover all additional costs incurred during or after childbirth.
- The practice of making "informal payments" to health care professionals has been identified in Central and Eastern European countries. This practice makes access to good specialists and necessary procedures unaffordable for many people. The prevalence of these payments can be traced back to underpaid medical staff and gaps in maternal funding.

Language barriers and lack of information

In a study by PLOS², many migrant women reported an inability to communicate with health care personnel because of language barriers in their new country. Due to these language barriers, most women stopped attending follow-up appointments.

Undocumented migrants and fear of deportation

Some states require healthcare professionals to report the immigration status of their patients, others prohibit it.

Geographical distance to medical facilities

The geographical concentration of health care facilities and the availability of affordable public transport is also a common complaint. Public transport in many EU countries is expensive, making it difficult for many women to reach health care facilities.

Culture and faith

Disparities in access to health care services are also influenced by cultural and religious diversity.

Disrespectful practices

Neglect and abandonment during labour

A disrespectful practice reported in various health facilities is the long delay in receiving care. According to the PubMed, CINAHL, and Embase databases³, the treatment of women by health care professionals before and during delivery make women going through labour feel ignored and abandoned.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse during labour can include being struck, forcibly restrained or nonconsensual surgical procedures. Although the type and scale of the abuse vary per country, the WHO reports that the most vulnerable groups are minors, unmarried women and migrants, and women from minority groups.

Maternal mental health

Women are at an elevated risk of developing mental health problems during the pregnancy and first year post-partum period. 1 in 5 women will develop a peripartum mental illness, according to the Cost Action research project RISE-UP PPD⁴. These mental health concerns are exacerbated by the health crisis, impacting Europe's most vulnerable women the most.

² PLOS is a non-profit, Open Access publisher empowering researchers to accelerate progress in science and medicine by leading a transform in research communication.

³ Meghan A. Bohren, Joshua P. Vogel et al., The Mistreatment of Women during Childbirth in Health Facilities Globally: A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review, PLoS Med. 2015 Jun; 12(6): e1001847. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4488322/>

⁴ Rise up PPD, Research Innovation and Sustainable Pan-European Network in Peripartum Depression, see <https://www.riseupppd18138.com>

Maternal health: recommendations

Common European action on care, through the European Care Strategy, should address the issue of available, accessible, acceptable, and high-quality maternal care for all women. Guidance and funding need to be invested in the maternal health care sector to achieve Principle 16 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (which provides that everyone has the right to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative health care of good quality) as well as **limit negative effects on patients' maternal health of practices and measures, such as:**

- **Discriminatory attitudes and biases among health care professionals** based on cultural or religious differences and disrespectful practices such as physical abuse and abandonment during birth.
- **Absence of clear health information and policies**, expressed clearly and in the appropriate language.
- **Reporting of patients' immigration status**, a practice which hinders vulnerable and migrant women and mothers from seeking care. Policies need to therefore implement rules allowing health care professionals to guarantee their patients' privacy of information.

Other recommendations include:

- **Enforcing a European Universal Health Coverage** ensuring equal access and reducing the financial burden for women in need.
- **Providing robust and accessible maternity services**, especially in emergency situations.
- **Implementing national schemes for health-care providers on antenatal and postnatal care**, to reach the most vulnerable.
- **Implementing legal compliance monitoring systems for hospitals** to ensure regulations on perinatal care are followed and to fight obstetric and gynaecological violence.
- **Raising awareness and implementing measures addressing maternal mental health disorders.**
- **Implementing policies guaranteeing privacy of information**, including patients' immigration status during maternal health care visits.

Gender Equality

In the EU today, the gender pay gap stands at 16% and the pension gap, culminating point of pay inequalities over the life course, is at 30%. In addition, women still undertake most unpaid work – 79% do housework every day for an hour or more, compared to just 34% of men⁵. Recent literature⁶ has documented that gender inequalities in earnings and income are closely related to care duties for children, which falls disproportionately on mothers. Unpaid care work and the COVID-19 crisis have the potential to deepen these inequalities.

Make Mothers Matter is convinced that the employment, earnings and pension gaps between men and women cannot be solved without substantive action on care work, mostly undertaken by

⁵ T. M. Alon, M. Doepke, J. Olmstead-Rumsey, and M. Tertilt, "The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality", 2020; EIGE, "Tackling the gender pay gap: not without a better work-life balance", 2019

⁶ *Ibid.*

mothers. We strongly believe that gender equality will never be achieved until unpaid care work is **recognised, reduced, and redistributed**.

Gender Equality: recommendations

Recognition of unpaid care work

- **Introduce 'care credits'** to offset breaks from employment taken to provide informal care to family members and periods of formal care leaves, such as maternity and count those credits towards pension entitlements (see “Old age and income”).
- **Recognize & validate the skills acquired while doing unpaid family care work** (see “Lifelong Learning”).
- **Introduce career breaks entitlement** such as the Belgian ‘time-credit’ system.
- **Conduct time-use surveys more frequently**, with a focus on surveys measuring the allocation of time spent doing care and domestic work. We recommend reviewing EU Regulation on structural statistics on earnings and on labour costs and to conduct the Structure of earnings survey more frequently and in all EU countries and make HETUS compulsory.

Reduction of unpaid care work

- Provide **high quality** childcare centres that are **accessible** and **affordable**.
- Support and provide **other forms of care possibilities** such as community-based childcare services, Gardienne, and childminder.

Redistribution of unpaid care work

- **Implement policies that directly encourage fathers to take leave**, such as well-compensated individual leave entitlements and policies aimed at changing workplace cultures.
- **Adopt work-life balance measures that allow families to adjust employment situations** according to the needs of each child, the ages and number of children.
- **Implement at national level longer and adequately paid maternal, paternal, and parental leave**.
- **Extend parental leave to 6 months per parent**, remunerated decently and make it more accessible.

Work-life balance

Maternity leave policies

Under the EU Maternity Leave Directive, women have the right to a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave. Although this Directive acts as guidance for member states, there are still differences in the way that these policies are structured nationally. Additionally, the Directive is out of date and should be reviewed to empower modern mothers.

Policies can differ by duration of leave, whether it is mandatory or not, degree of compensation, the agency in charge of providing it, and the level of flexibility allowed in the mode of uptake⁷.

⁷ Rand Europe, “Maternity leave policies Trade-offs between labour market demands and health benefits for children”, 2016.

Paternity and parental leave

It is essential that fathers are involved from the start with childcare. However, several factors affect the uptake of leave by fathers. These include the level of compensation, the availability of affordable childcare, the flexibility of leave arrangements, gender norms and cultural expectations.

Childcare

To reduce the gender gaps in employment, income, and pension, it is essential to redistribute care between men and women and between families and society. As such, it is crucial to provide accessible, affordable, quality childcare services until mandatory school age. This also allows parents, especially mothers, the choice to care for their own children without being penalised.

Flexible working arrangements

According to EIGE, 57% of women and 54% of men are unable to change their work schedule⁸. Most mothers in Europe prefer to remain in the labour market but to also have time to devote to their families, especially when their children are young. Flexible working arrangements are crucial to achieving this.

Work-life balance: recommendations

Maternity leave policies

- **Revision of the maternity leave Directive** extending the period of leave to at least 18 paid weeks with a remuneration at least of sick pay level.

Paternity and parental leave

- Implement policies that directly enable fathers to take leave, such as well-compensated individual leave entitlements and policies aimed at changing workplace cultures.

Childcare

- Children's rights are **best met in the family environment**, and **the interests of the children can't be defined separately from the interests of their parents**, extended family and the immediate communities
- Foster **flexible and family-centred solutions** that give parents a **real choice** between formal, informal, semi-formal childcare solutions or caring for their under school-age children themselves.
- Provide **accessible, affordable** and of a **quality childcare services** until mandatory school age.
- Introduce **career breaks entitlement** such as the Belgian 'time-credit system.'
- Introduce, '**care credits**' to offset breaks from employment taken to provide informal care to family members and periods of formal care leaves.
- Support and provide **other forms of childcare** (community-based childcare services, Gardienne, childminder, e.g).
- Ensure that mother's and father's participation in the labour market is achieved in order to meet societal and personal developments, and not to serve labour market needs, placing the focus on individuals' needs

⁸ EIGE., Index 2019., op.cit. p. 102.

Life-long learning

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. However, parenthood is a learning experience that provides parents with soft skills that contribute to social inclusion, personal development, empowerment, and employability⁹.

Life-long learning: recommendations

- **Incentivise employers to address unpaid care work and implement family-friendly policies** as highlighted in the Action Plan for the Pillar of Social Rights: "A rulebook that rewards entrepreneurs who take care of their employees."
- **Develop validation mechanisms and learning tools for carers soft skills**, in particular e-validation and e-learning tools that allow these skills to be recognised and valued on the labour market.
- **Access to lifelong learning should be made easier**, especially for parents, as this would facilitate their return to the labour market after a career-break due to care responsibilities.

Single mothers

The risk of poverty, social exclusion and homelessness is particularly high among the most vulnerable groups in society. These include mothers (especially single mothers), refugee and migrant women, women with disabilities and rural women.

Single mothers: recommendations

MMM calls on universal measures and policy tailored specifically to single parents.

- **Child support, guaranteed advances and financial supplements to child benefits** targeted at single parents in poverty.
- **Adequate, accessible, and enabling Minimum Income schemes.**

Old age income and pensions

The European population is ageing. In 2019, more than a fifth of the EU population was aged 65 and over. The share of older persons in the total population will increase significantly in the coming decades¹⁰, and with that so will the need for care. Yet, about 80% of the time spent caring for people with a disability or for the elderly is provided by informal carers: family, friends, or neighbours. This duty mostly falls on women.

⁹ MOM (Maternity Opportunities and Mainstreaming) Project., <https://www.eu-mom.eu/en/public/215>.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.alliance4investinginchildren.eu/contribution-of-the-eu-alliance-for-investing-in-children-to-the-european-commission-public-consultation-on-the-child-guarantee/>.

As highlighted by M. Vothknecht (DG EMPL)¹¹, gender gaps in pensions reflect the gender gaps in remuneration, working hours and years of employment of women. Household and caring duties relating to children and older relatives fall mostly upon women who, as a result, experience more career interruptions and hold part-time jobs more often than men. Without recognition, mothers of retirement age are exposed to a higher risk of poverty because they reduced their working time or dropped out of the labour market for caring activities with a direct consequence on their contribution to social security.

Old age income and pensions: recommendations

- **Considering unpaid care work as essential work and giving access to social rights**, (e.g., access to social security, education, and training)
- **Introducing 'care credits' to offset breaks from employment taken in order to provide informal care to family members and periods of formal care leave**, such as maternity, paternity and parental leave, and to **count those credits towards pension entitlements fairly**.
- **Promoting time-credit** which allows parents to take a career break for a certain period, during which they receive an allowance.
- **Reform Member States' systems for survivor's pensions and widow's pensions in order not to penalise unmarried women** and study the effects of different systems providing survivor's pensions in light of the high rates of divorce, the incidence of poverty among non-married couples and the social exclusion of older women.

Conclusion

This report has elaborated on maternal health, gender equality, work-life balance, lifelong learning, single mothers, and old age income, and has made detailed recommendations under each section. As we have seen, women and mothers are key care providers in society. MMM believes that is crucial to recognize their invaluable contribution. Childbearing, educational and care responsibilities impact their mental and physical health, which make them in turn care recipients. Therefore, MMM advocates for inclusive, accessible, affordable and qualitative maternal health services to be reflected in the next European Care Strategy.

In addition to the recognition of mothers' unpaid work, MMM believes that this work should also be reduced through supportive childcare policies and services, respectful of families' choices and children's development.

Unpaid care work should be further redistributed to close the gender care, employment and pension gaps. It is essential that fathers have the ability – culturally, financially and time-wise – to take an active role in the upbringing of their children. Other actors such as grandparents also play an important role in the education of grandchildren and support to their parents. In several EU Member States, systems of care credits towards pensions of parents and grandparents have been emerging. MMM will encourage such initiatives in the hope that the European Care Strategy will include such innovative practices in an intergenerational approach.

¹¹ European Commission., "What explains the higher poverty risk of elderly women? ", 2015, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=752&furtherNews=yes&newsId=2349>.

The private sector also has an important part to play. Recognizing, valuing, and supporting unpaid care work could benefit both employees and employers. For employees this means an improvement in work-life balance and wellbeing. While for employers the benefits include talent acquisition and retention, productivity and employment engagement. Such initiatives are part of a circular approach to parent's careers in which competences between family and work life are transversal.

MMM strongly hopes that the new Care Strategy will recognize the crucial role mothers play when it comes to care, and put forward a set of transformative policies that redress the economic and social inequalities they face when it comes to unpaid family care work.