

Answer to the Public Consultation “Revision of the
Barcelona targets on childcare to increase women’s labour
market participation”:
An integrated approach to childcare services, from a child's
rights perspective

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Introduction

A revision of the **Barcelona targets** is planned in the European Gender Equality Strategy and in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan to support reaching the employment deadline target. For Make Mothers Matter (MMM), achieving the Barcelona targets is fundamental to **allow women to better conciliate work and family life** and to reduce the gender gaps in employment, income, and pension. It is in the best interests of all girls and children to grow up in a world with greater gender equality, but more than this, a system that empowers mothers and families to choose the right childcare option for their unique needs enables children and families to benefit from their rights as set forth in the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

To build a system that empowers mothers and families, and thus the children that they care for, it is essential to **redistribute unpaid family care work between men and women and between families and society**. As such, it is crucial to **provide accessible, affordable, quality, non-segregated and inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC)**. The care work that parents provide is essential not only to the functioning of the global economy, by raising and educating the next generation of workers, but also to the stability, resilience and diversity of society. Therefore, MMM advocates for “family centred” solutions that allow parents to be able to choose options based on their needs.

Family-centred childcare projects

Member States should also implement **"family centred" childcare solutions** that take into account the unique needs of each family and offer different options to suit a variety of family structures and life stages. In a national survey of over 23.000 mothers in 2021 organised by MMM France,¹ mothers repeatedly stated that they wanted to have childcare options that were adapted to their needs, whether insourced or outsourced. These solutions have to be accompanied by policies that economically support **parents' choice, mothers in particular**. Parents should not have to fear repercussions on their income, pension, and ability to return to work if they decide to take time out from their formal career to care for children.

Furthermore, in order to provide a range of services that are adapted to the needs of different families, it is crucial to **invest in local, community-based initiatives** and care projects for children's education. An example of such care projects for children is what Germans call Leihomas² ("borrow" a grandmother). Leihomas are typically older people who volunteer to serve as grandparents for a family with young children. The older person offers this service primarily out of a desire to support the family. They enjoy caring for children and may rarely see their own grandchildren due to physical distance. Furthermore, they want to pursue a meaningful task and

¹ See the results of Make Mothers Matter 2021 survey: <https://mmmfrance.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/09/Principaux-resultats-enquete-MMMF-1.pdf>

² See <https://kinderschutzbund-bochum.de/2020/09/11/einblick-in-den-grosseltdienst/>

pass on their knowledge to others. This service gives to all parties a feeling of belonging and prevents isolation not only of the older generation but also of the family itself.

Other community based and local initiatives include child minders, a person who cares for the children of others in their own home. Organisations and families report that these more family centred initiatives work well, serving as means of social cohesion and empowerment for families.

A report of March 2022 from the French *Conseil économique, social et environnemental*³ acknowledges that financial accessibility (the rate of effort and the rest to be borne by the families), whatever the mode of childcare, is a major challenge for developing childcare services and guaranteeing a real free choice for all families.

"After childcare at home and the micro-nursery, the use of a child-minder is the least financially accessible mode of childcare in France, while the working hours and the difficulties of reconciling family life/professional life apply to all families. There is therefore **a real challenge in making individual care accessible to all families**". Finally the Committee stresses the fact that "due to a lack of satisfactory childcare, it is the vast majority of women who interrupt their activity for varying lengths of time to look after their child."⁴

Since women and mothers are the most likely to face financial and career related repercussions caused by taking time out to care for family members, we strongly believe that gender equality will never be achieved until unpaid care work is **recognised, reduced, and redistributed**. Ways to **recognise** unpaid care work include:

- Introducing '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
- Recognizing and validating the skills acquired while doing unpaid family care work
- Introducing career breaks entitlement such as the Belgian 'time-credit' system
- Collecting Data across the EU on paid and unpaid care work, recording time use based on gender, age, ethnicity and nationality⁵

³ The Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC) is a constitutional consultative assembly from France. It represents key economic, social and environmental fields, promoting cooperation between different socio-professional interest groups and ensuring they are part of the process of shaping and reviewing public policy.

⁴ Avis du Conseil économique, social et environnemental de France sur proposition de la Commission permanente des affaires sociales et de la santé: "Vers un service public d'accueil de la petite enfance " Rapporteurs : Marie-Andrée Blanc et Pascale Coton . Journal officiel de la république française , Mandature 2021-2026 – Séance du 22 mars 2022

https://www.lecese.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/Avis/2022/2022_04_sp_accueil_enfance.pdf p. 20,36,37,39

⁵ Ursula Barry, "Gender Equality: Economic value of care from the perspective of the applicable EU funds", June 2021

Intertwined rights of children & parents

Researchers highlight the worrying and paradoxical fact that at present, children represent the poorest sections of society.⁶ This happens when policies do not help parents in their struggle to create a life of dignity for themselves and their children. Social investment and anti-poverty policies cannot have just the child as the central object of intervention while making the parent, who is considered responsible for the well-being of the child, a means for this 'social investment'. Poverty and social isolation are not only the responsibility of each individual. They are also a broader societal concern and "a lack of individual educational competencies of parents'... are the result of unequal opportunities or structural inequalities."⁷

Vulnerable mothers under social protection systems are likely to experience increased difficulties in the workplace, especially when they are urged to start working prematurely, after becoming mothers. Some of MMM's grassroots members have shared the lived experiences of mothers in these situations. Le Petit Vélo Jaune⁸, Acción Familiar⁹, Association Chant d'Oiseau¹⁰, La Maison de Tom Pouce¹¹ and Migrant Women Malta¹² have provided multiple examples of how women without access to education are likely to go into a precarious job with high hours and low pay. The whole system collapses if someone falls sick or the mother ends up with burnout. These situations give rise to more expenses for the states than a social system that provides mothers a financially feasible choice about when to return to work. These mothers - usually single, migrants, or economically vulnerable - often have added barriers related to language or social support. Evidence shows how this is the beginning of a cycle of discrimination and poverty, for the mothers and their children. To support all mothers and children regardless of their background or income, MMM calls for an **integrated approach on childcare services** that acknowledges how the rights of mothers, children and families are intertwined.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UNCRC**) recognises that **children's rights are best met in the family environment**, which secures their care and protection.¹³ Children have the right to benefit from family support oriented policies, measures, institutions and services. Research and evidence show that **Family Support** is a fundamental **right of the Child**. Scholars¹⁴ argue that

⁶ Gordon, L. (2008) The perils of innocence, or what's wrong with putting children first. *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 1, 331–50

⁷ Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., Vandebroek, M. (2014) Do families in poverty need child and family social work? *European Journal of Social Work*, 18, 5, 647–660

⁸ *Le Petit Vélo Jaune* offers support to parents who in precarious situation, <https://www.petitvelojaune.be/>

⁹ Acción Familiar, Helps and supports the family, offers specific social assistance to people in situations of poverty and social exclusion or other situations of special vulnerability. <https://accionfamiliar.org>

¹⁰ Association Chant d'Oiseau, *Supports mothers facing loneliness due to depression, violence, poverty, and homelessness.* www.ama.be/les-membres/5104/le-chant-doiseau/

¹¹ *La Maison de Tom Pouce*, An emergency shelter that welcomes any pregnant woman experiencing difficulty and assists in her reintegration, www.lamaisondetompouce.com

¹² Migrant Women Malta — Promotes and supports the personal empowerment of migrant, refugees and asylum-seeking women, including many mothers, through the learning of new skills and knowledge www.migrantwomenmalta.org

¹³ Gordon, L. (2008) The perils of innocence, or what's wrong with putting children first. *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 1, 331–50s.

¹⁴ Family Support as a right of the child, Patrick Dolan, University of Ireland, Galway, Nevenca Zegarac, Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Serbia, Jelena Arsic, School of Law, Union University Belgrade.

the UNCRC¹⁵ needs to be understood widely by child welfare and Family Support programs, because there is evidence showing the **relationship between children's wellbeing and the wellbeing of his or her family**. The family is indeed "a vital institution in society for the protection, development and ensuring the overall well-being of the child". It is the responsibility of states to provide conditions in which families could "provide [...] appropriate direction and guidance", in order to enable the child, as the holder of rights, to fully exercise them (UNCRC, 1989, Art. 5).¹⁶

Families are at the centre of nurturing care for young children. To provide it, they need information, resources and services. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UNCRC**) recognises that **children's rights are best met in the family environment**, which secures their care and protection.¹⁷ Children have the right to have family support oriented policies, measures, institutions and services. Research and evidence show that **Family Support is a fundamental right of the Child**¹⁸. Scholars ¹⁹argue that the UNCRC²⁰ needs to be understood widely by child welfare and Family Support programs, because there is evidence showing the **relationship between children's wellbeing and the wellbeing of his or her family**. The family is indeed "a vital institution in society for the protection, development and ensuring the overall well-being of the child". It is the responsibility of states to provide conditions in which families could 'provide...appropriate direction and guidance... ', in order to enable the child, as the holder of rights, to fully exercise them (UNCRC, 1989, Art. 5).²¹

As discussed, Children's rights are best met in the family environment and according to the authors,²² the **interests of the children cannot be defined separately from the interests of their parents and extended family and the immediate communities**. Current policies do not acknowledge or foster this link. Parents are asked to be exemplary parents as well as expected to fluently adapt to and integrate into the labour market. At the same time, family and childcare programs are usually provided separately from family and social relationships, regardless of their environmental and economic circumstances. This does not promote a healthy balance between

¹⁵ Convention on the Rights of the Child

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
Articles 18(.1, .2, .3); Article 24.2(d, e, f); Article 27.3

¹⁶ Convention on the Rights of the Child, *ibid*

¹⁷ Gordon, L. (2008) The perils of innocence, or what's wrong with putting children first. *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 1, 331–50s.

¹⁸ Family support field is an area that embeds several traditional disciplines (such as social work, psychology, and social education). It involves both a set of activities and an approach to practice that encourages positive informal social networks through integrated programmes. The services are mainly provided in the family household and in the community, aimed to promote and protect the health, well-being and rights of all children, young people and their families. COST Action CA18123, the European family support network. a bottom-up, evidence-based and multidisciplinary approach (Eurofam-net) <https://eurofamnet.eu/about/aim-and-objectives>

¹⁹ Family Support as a right of the child, Patrick Dolan University of Ireland, Galway, Nevenca Zegarac Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Serbia, Jelena Arsic School of Law, Union University Belgrade.

²⁰ Convention on the Rights of the Child

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
Articles 18(.1, .2, .3); Article 24.2(d, e, f); Article 27.3

²¹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, *ibid*

²² Family Support as a right of the child, Patrick Dolan University of Ireland, Galway, Nevenca Zegarac Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Serbia, Jelena Arsic School of Law, Union University Belgrade.

work and home life for parents or empower them to create a better life for their children.

The EU needs to address structural issues of poverty and inequality, and to ensure universal access to basic services and support such as healthcare, education, housing and Family Support services in all aspects and stages of life, not only in times of crisis or when families are designated as 'at risk'.²³ These measures need to be complemented by targeted support for the most vulnerable families at risk of exclusion, as a fundamental building block of cohesive societies.²⁴

The Finnish model of ECEC

A good example of ECEC is the Finnish model. In Finland, "all children under school-age are entitled to early childhood education and care, **should** their parents so decide."²⁵ After the parental leave period parents have several options to choose from:

- Municipal ECEC services
- Private ECEC services or childcare with the private childcare allowance
- Staying at home on care leave and child home care allowance until the youngest child turns three²⁶

This model is based on a set of policies that take into consideration the choice of parents. Caring for children until they turn three is economically possible for parents who choose this option. For those who choose not to, ECEC services are made accessible and affordable.²⁷

This falls within what MMM supports: **a real choice for parents, giving them an economically feasible option between an outsourced or an in-family care solution. And the possibility for parents to care for and educate their own children without fearing economic or professional consequences.**

Corporate social responsibility

To further offset these professional and economic consequences, MMM advocates for support initiatives and measures adopted by companies to help employees better reconcile work and family life as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies. Such as the EFR²⁸ certificate which provides an audit of internal policies that have an impact on work-life balance; or the new "More inclusive and enhanced global parental support policy"²⁹, which sets minimum standards

²³ Hardy, F., Darlington, Y. (2008) What parents value from formal support services in the context of identified child abuse. *Child & Family Social Work*, 13, 3, 252-261

²⁴ Family Support as a right of the child, *op.cit.*

²⁵ See [European Commission's Eurydice network page on Finland](#)

²⁶ If a child under the age of three does not attend municipal day care, the family can claim **child home care allowance**. This allowance is flexible as parents can choose to reduce their working time to 30 hours or less and claim a flexible care allowance.

²⁷ For more information see <https://www.tyoelake.fi/en/how-much-pension/pension-for-family-leaves/>

²⁸ MásFamilia organisation., at <https://www.masfamilia.org>. Certificate promoted by Más Familia Foundation, and supported by the Spanish Ministry of Health and Social Policy.

²⁹ Nestlé, "Nestlé supports families with new parental leave policy", 2019, available at <https://www.nestle.com/media/pressreleases/allpressreleases/nestle-supports-families-new-parental-leave-policy>.

of 18 weeks parental leave for primary caregivers and 4 weeks for secondary caregivers; or the Life Based Learning, a method that gives HR the ideas and tools to transform their employees' life transitions such as parenthood into soft skills³⁰; or The Family Friendly Company Label: a project led by EPEPE (Ensemble Pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance) and commissioned by the French Ministry of Health, developed with experts and 3 companies as a pilot in order to support companies to become more family-friendly. This is achieved through a labelling process in order to better take into account knowledge on child development and meet the needs of parents.³¹

Some other concrete measures *MMM* advocates for are:

- 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 allowing families to adjust their employment according to the needs of each child, the ages and number of children
- Implementing at national level longer and adequately paid maternal, paternal, and parental leave
- Extend parental leave to 6 months per parent, decently remunerated (at least at sick pay level) with increased accessibility and flexibility
- Revise the maternity leave Directive extending the period of leave to at least 18 paid weeks and with a remuneration at least at sick pay level
- When child home care allowances are put in place, encourage fathers to take them so as not to reinforce existing stereotypes and gender gaps (employment, pay, pension)
- Extend the right to request flexible working conditions for parents of children of children up to 18 years old
- Take into account the situation of the self-employed (close to 33 million workers or 14% of the working population in Europe) so that these workers can benefit from an EU framework on family leave schemes

Conclusion

The Barcelona targets should promote family and community-centred childcare programs that provide a broader range of services to fit the varying needs of different families. Childcare systems should aim to close gender gaps in pay and pension with a special focus on mothers who are socially and economically vulnerable by approaching issues of poverty and inequality on the societal level. The Finnish ECEC model can be used as a policy guide in building such systems. Concurrently, the EU and the Member States should encourage the private sector, and nonstate actors should operate with other governmental mechanisms to build a society that supports and values parents and their unpaid care work that holds communities together and helps to fuel the global economy.

³⁰ Lified creates digital training programs that increase parents' self-awareness of the soft skills acquired through their work of caring and promotes family-friendly policies in the workplace. <https://lified.io/en/the-method/the-research/>

³¹ <https://eduensemble.org/entreprise/>