



MMM'S Response to the European Commission's Care Strategy

INTRODUCTION

From our very first moments on earth and throughout our whole lives, we all need care. We need care when we are very young or very old, experiencing sickness or disability and the people who provide this care are indispensable actors in European economies and societies. Women and mothers are amongst the most important providers of care and so MMM welcomes the European Commission's proposal for a European Care Strategy. This is very important to MMM's advocacy because acknowledging and redistributing care responsibilities amongst the genders and improving the provision of care at the state level is key to increasing women's and mothers' access to the labour market and thus in closing the pension gap and decreasing women's risk of poverty, especially when aging.

When the Commission issued a call for evidence in March 2022, MMM formulated recommendations, many of which are reflected in the Commission's proposal. In this document, MMM would like to continue to participate in the Care Strategy discussion by offering feedback on the proposal from the perspective of mothers' and children's rights. This feedback will be broken down into sections based on the structure of the **Care Strategy**, which is an **umbrella strategy** encompassing **two proposals for a Council Recommendation**, one on **childcare** and one on **long-term care**. By doing so, MMM hopes to help strengthen this strategy so that it can best support and empower mothers, families and children.

EUROPEAN CARE STRATEGY

What is the EU Care Strategy?

The EU Care Strategy which is an initiative with the goal to "ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union and improve the situation for both care receivers and the people caring for them, professionally or informally"(European Commission, 2022a). To achieve this goal, the strategy focuses primarily on the following dimensions of care: the quality, affordability, and accessibility of care, early childhood education and care, long-term care and fair working conditions and training for care staff.

The proposal for the Council communication on childcare (Barcelona Targets)

A proposal for a Council Recommendation is a document in which the EU Commission makes proposals and presents evidence to the European Council. Should the Council pass the recommendations, it would help guide and shape the Member States' goals and policies. In this proposal, the Commission addressed the provision of early childhood education and care and a potential revision of the Barcelona Targets.



The Barcelona Targets are a series of objectives set by the Barcelona European Council in 2002 with the aim of reducing disincentives to female workforce participation by ensuring the provision of early childcare. The original goal was for Member States to provide childcare to at least 90% of children between the age of 3 years until school age and 33% of children under the age of 3. Since then, the Barcelona Targets have been a significant guiding force for EU decision making (European Commission, 2013).

As part of the European Care Strategy, the EU Commission has put forward a proposal for the European Council to revise the Barcelona targets, a move which would support and empower mothers and families. The Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation revision can be split into two categories: the participation of children who are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and the number of hours children use early childhood education and care (ECEC) services per week.

These new revisions are especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, children with disabilities, children from homeless families, migrant and refugee children, Roma children, and children from minority groups. Increased participation in ECEC is in a child's best interest to end the cycle of poverty and promote social inclusion. Furthermore, increased participation of disadvantaged children in the early childhood education system may facilitate their mothers' return to work. This is especially important because disadvantaged women who may have low level or obsolete professional skills may experience increased barriers to entering the workforce (European Commission, 2022b).

MMM welcomes the following measures:

- A focus on providing after-school services for school-age children. Quality after-school services are essential when parents' work hours are not compatible with school hours. ECEC services should be provided for enough hours to allow parents, especially mothers, to engage in paid work should they need to or choose to. This should include supportive services such as tutoring or homework help and should support the health and wellbeing of children.
- The strengthening of the EU policy framework for the rights of all children comprising the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee, which aim to reinforce children's rights and ensure access to basic services to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including children with disabilities (Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030).
- Prioritizing women's access to the labour market and the measures recommended to support this, namely: reducing gender-based stereotypes in the care sector and attracting more men to the care sector and redistributing care responsibilities in the home between the genders.
- Making the care sector more appealing to people of all genders by: promoting the labour rights of workers, promoting collective bargaining, increasing wages and training opportunities, addressing the physical and psychological risks of the sector.



- Focusing on the relationships between carers and care recipients of all ages. In the case of ECEC, the relationships between parents and carers is especially important as parents need to trust in ECEC services in order for their children to attend and reap the benefits.
- The recognition of both formal and informal carers.
- Focus on the role of carers as social economy actors and the importance of allocating resources to support the European social economy on both the national and EU level.
- Recognizing the value of social economy actors' person-centred approach which leads to the provision of high-quality care.
- The more ambitious targets for children participating in ECEC as follows:
 - 33% to 50% of children under 3 years participating in ECEC;
 - 90% to 96% of children between 3 years and school age participating in ECEC.
- The proposal for legal entitlement and universal access to ECEC for all children with target measures for children under 3 years from disadvantaged backgrounds regardless of guardians' employment status or the children's country of birth, ethnicity, residence status or socioeconomic background.
- The focus on how ECEC can positively impact children's life outcomes as it can help reduce the risks of social exclusion and poverty later in life. It should also promote a healthy, active lifestyle.
- The recognition of barriers to accessing ECEC such as financial and administrative barriers.
- The call for Member States to ensure that the cost of ECEC for children who are not covered by the Child Guarantee is proportionate to other household expenses with consideration for low-income households.
- The suggestion of national quality frameworks including staff to child ratios, time requirements, and support and training for care staff.
- A call for Member States to collect further data on ECEC, especially for children in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.
- Measures for increased accessibility including flexible hours for working and single parents, administrative/literacy support, disability accessible buildings, resources for children with disabilities and their parents, linguistic and cultural assimilation resources, staff training on inclusivity and nonsegregated facilities.

MMM's recommendations:

- Parents should be well-informed on their rights and opportunities to receive the support they need to properly care for their children regardless of their income or employment status.
- A more child and family-centred approach:



- Support for mothers should not only include encouraging them to seek employment, but also support their mental health and personal development, parenting skills, respite care, navigating family crises, building relationships with their children, and managing family relationships. This means ensuring the focus is on individual needs – those of parents and children in this case - rather than on the market needs.
- The recommendations should aim to protect children's rights with consideration that children's rights are best met in the family environment. The wellbeing of children, parents and families are deeply interconnected. A family-centred approach means that all families have access to ECEC options that work with their unique needs and life cycle stage. This means increasing local and community-based initiatives.
- The Barcelona Targets will only be monitored through the European Semester, which is a cycle of policy coordination within the EU. This should be expanded as the functions of the Semester are primarily fiscal and economic, with limited capacity to monitor issues of children's rights.
- The proposal should aim to focus more on understanding ECEC beyond the creche setting and further support smaller and private options (e.g. micro-creches, home care, childminders, joint custody, etc.), which often are not supported or covered by government grants, but which are necessary to meet the needs of different families. The lack of funding leaves parents who need these options without support.
- With consideration to the current cost of living crisis, there should be increased focus on providing quality affordable ECEC to children in poverty across all Member States.
- Certain dimensions of data collection on the provision of ECEC were not mentioned such as qualitative data measuring the professionalism of staff.
- A greater focus should be put on encouraging Member States to engage in social dialogue, listening to the voices of mothers, children, parents and families and civil society organizations on how the recommendations should be implemented.
- Given the importance of maternal health and parental engagement in ECEC to child development , the Recommendation should help ensure access to maternal health care during the peripartum period (pregnancy and first year postpartum).
- Member States should provide financial support to informal care systems and social benefits to cover the costs for informal carers, most of whom are women and/or mothers.
- The European Commission should support those states who have the furthest to go in terms of meeting the Targets.
- The EU should support Member States to implement the Care Strategy. This could be encouraged by providing a framework and implementation plan.
- More concrete financial support for intergenerational carers (e.g. intergenerational housing, grandparents as childcare providers).



Access to affordable high-quality long-term care

MMM welcomes the following measures from the Commission's Proposal for a Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care:

- The recognition of how important family and informal care is to the creation of a sustainable care system. The suggestion of measures to support informal carers and to tackle pay and pension gaps as well as gender stereotypes at work and at home.
- A focus on protection care workers' rights such as enforcement of EU labour law and the ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention put forward by the International Labour Organization.
- The call to take steps to regulate the situation of live-in carers and domestic workers, many of whom are mobile and migrant women who may also be mothers.

MMM's recommendations:

- The Proposal still needs common targets and indicators for the provision of the LTC. This should include a Social Scoreboard to evaluate Member States' progress towards a Wellbeing Economy and request relevant data collection from Member States.
- The Strategy should aim to ensure that there is a selection of home- and community-based care options for all people in need of care and that the receivers of care are able to choose what kind of care they receive and in what environment.
- The Recommendation should protect the working conditions of carers including ensuring their mental and psychosocial wellbeing.
- The Recommendation should promote the recognition and financial compensation of informal carers for their essential services.

CONCLUSION

The EU Care Strategy is an important step towards improving the provision of care all across the EU. MMM looks forward to continuing to work towards creating an economy where those who choose to be carers are not penalized for their informal care work, but acknowledged and supported in providing these essential services. We hope that by continuing this work, women and mothers will one day have equal and flexible access to the labour market so that they might ensure their economic wellbeing in old age without sacrificing family relationships.



SOURCES

European Commission. (2013). Barcelona objectives: The development of childcare facilities for young children in Europe with a view to sustainable and inclusive growth. Official Website of the European Union. Retrieved October 10, 2022, from

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European Commission. (2022a). A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers. European Commission. Retrieved October 10, 2022, from

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10382>

European Commission. (2022b). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: the European care strategy . Brussels; European Commission.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

The European Commission's news, publications, and documents about the EU Care Strategy:

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10382#navitem-relatedDocument>

Communication from the EU Commission on the European Care Strategy

[Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European care strategy – COM\(2022\) 440 \(2022\)](#)

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care

[Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care \(2022\)](#)

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Long Term Care

[Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on access to affordable high-quality long-term care – COM\(2022\) 441 \(2022\)](#)