



**MMM response to European Commission's
call for evidence on on the 2026-2030 Gender
Equality Strategy: *Placing Motherhood at the
centre of gender equality***

Summary

Make Mothers Matter (MMM) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the upcoming 2026-2030 Gender Equality Strategy.

Gender equality, along with women's rights, are an indispensable and indivisible parts of human rights. Mothers play an essential role in society, and their rights and challenges must not be overlooked.

Yet, despite the EU's commendable efforts, mothers in Europe continue to confront systemic inequalities. Mothers face unique challenges that intersect with other forms of discrimination. Key areas requiring urgent attention include:

- Unpaid care work
- Economic and financial barriers
- Support for vulnerable groups of mothers

A truly inclusive Gender Equality Strategy will recognise, support, and empower mothers across Europe.

MMM urges policymakers to:

- Fully integrate mothers' needs into all gender equality frameworks and policies.
- Ensure that investments reflect and address the inequalities mothers face.
- Strengthen enforcement and accountability measures at national and local levels.
- Develop targeted EU-wide campaigns to combat discrimination against mothers.
- Development a dedicated action plan for both the EU Care Strategy and the EU Mental Health Strategy — with a clear focus on supporting primary carers, particularly mothers.
- Distribute Care work more equitably between genders and across society,
- Recognise unpaid care as essential to both the economy and social cohesion

Detailed comments and recommendations

Mothers represent a substantial portion of the female population in the EU. They experience multifaceted inequalities and intersectional discrimination as mothers face unique challenges that intersect with other forms of discrimination.

Recognising the inequalities faced by mothers

Motherhood remains a central yet **undervalued issue in gender equality**. Despite the EU's commendable efforts, mothers in Europe continue to confront deep-rooted systemic inequalities. This has been confirmed by **Make Mothers Matter's (MMM)** grassroots members who work closely with mothers and families across Europe. It is also strongly reflected in the data from our **2021 French survey of 23,000 mothers** and our most recent **2024 European survey of 9,600 mothers** across **11 EU Member States and the UK**.

Across these surveys, mothers report that:

- Motherhood is not properly recognised or supported by society;
- It leads to discrimination in the labour market;
- They continue to bear the brunt of unpaid care work;
- They experience significant economic, educational, and social penalties.

Key Findings from the 2024 European Survey:

- **55%** of mothers changed their employment status after having a child; **23%** reduced their working hours.
- **27%** reported that motherhood **negatively impacted their career**.
- Only:

- **35%** benefited from a **gradual return to work**,
- **46%** had access to **adapted working hours**,
- **25%** could **telework**.
- Just **one in three fathers** took their full paternity leave entitlement.
- **30%** of mothers are dissatisfied with the **length of maternity leave**, and **44%** are dissatisfied with **maternity allowances**.

Mental Wellbeing and Emotional Toll:

- **67%** of mothers feel **overloaded** by responsibilities.
- **59%** report experiencing **mental health issues**, including depression, anxiety, burnout, and peripartum depression.

These findings highlight the pressing need for:

- **Effective and comprehensive implementation** of EU frameworks at the national level;
- **Increased public and private investment** to close gender gaps;
- **Stronger accountability mechanisms** to drive real, measurable progress.

National and local governments, as well as employers, must be held accountable for ensuring that motherhood no longer comes at the cost of equality, mental wellbeing, or career advancement.

We call for the development of a **dedicated action plan** for both the **EU Care Strategy** and the **EU Mental Health Strategy** — with a clear focus on supporting primary carers, particularly mothers. Care work must be more **equitably shared between genders and across society**, and **unpaid care** must be **recognised as essential** to both the economy and social cohesion.

Finally, the EU needs to launch **expanded campaigns** that amplify the voices of mothers and actively challenge the structural and cultural discrimination they continue to face.

Addressing intersectional challenges for mothers

Key areas requiring urgent attention include:

1. Unpaid care and domestic work

Women, particularly mothers, shoulder the majority of unpaid care work, which is essential for the functioning of families, communities, and economies. Care work fosters valuable soft skills like empathy, multitasking, and problem-solving, which can enhance social inclusion and employability. However, these skills are undervalued and unrecognised.

Care work remains unrecognised and undervalued, perpetuating economic and social injustices for mothers, often referred to as the **Motherhood Penalty**.

This unequal distribution negatively impacts their economic security, professional growth, education, political participation, and social standing. They experience multiple gender gaps and workplace discrimination. As a results:

- Their caregiving skills remain unrecognised in professional pathways.
- They are at greater risk of poverty and domestic violence.
- Their mental and physical health is disproportionately affected.

Below are the key challenges mothers still face in this respect:

Unequal distribution of care work:

- 79% of women do daily housework, compared to 36% of men
- Care responsibilities fall disproportionately on mothers (49% of women vs. 6% of men)

Economic impacts :

- Gender pay gap (GPG) in the EU stands at 12.7%; the pension gap is 29%, leaving women more vulnerable to poverty, especially in old age
- Gaps often originate with the birth of the first child and worsen with more children
- Even in countries with strong childcare systems (e.g., France, Sweden), the GPG remains significant
- Gender gap in sickness absences, which emerges only after the birth of a first child. This gap is largely driven by an increase in mental health disorders among mothers. Notably, this penalty does not fade over time: even eight years after childbirth, mothers are still 1.2 percentage points more likely than men to exit the workforce due to health-related reasons and 17% of women who leave the labor market after becoming mothers eventually claim sickness benefits. (Sébastien Fontenay, Ilan Tojerow 6.Jul. 2024)
- Non take-up of social benefits, specially by single mothers and other mothers in vulnerable situations (with a handicap, migrant, rural). Feelings of shame and failure often accompany the need to seek assistance—many mothers, report feeling as though they are begging or that they have failed in their role as providers and caregivers. This can lead to fear and reluctance to access services, even when urgently needed. The internalisation of dependency on the state, coupled with a perceived loss of independence, makes it even more difficult for mothers to assert their rights.

Financial dependency :

- Many women, especially mothers, lack financial independence
- 21% of women living in the EU as a couple depend on a single-earner partner compared to 6% of men
- Vulnerable groups like single mothers and migrant or rural mothers face heightened risks of poverty

Social and career barriers :

- Mothers often take precarious, part-time, or informal jobs to accommodate caregiving, impacting career progression, skills development, and health
- Non recognition of skills developed while caring for others. These soft skills can contribute to social inclusion, personal development, empowerment, and employability and could benefit both employees and employers, and in turn, society at large.

MMM believes that supporting caregiving roles—especially those carried out by mothers—is not an expense but a vital investment, and the only way to ensure gender equality.

2. Economic and financial barriers

Women, particularly mothers, are at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. Mothers face significant obstacles in accessing financial resources, including :

- Discrimination in obtaining credit, investments, and entrepreneurial support.
- Stereotypes that hinder their financial independence and economic empowerment.
- A lack of policies that ensure economic stability for mothers, particularly those in vulnerable situations.

3. Support for vulnerable groups of mothers

Some groups of mothers experience even greater inequalities and require specific policy interventions, including:

Single mothers

Representing the majority of single-parent households (in the EU, around 7.8 million parents live alone with their dependent child or children, and 80% of them are single mothers), the number of single mothers has

increased in recent years. They are disproportionately affected by poverty, inadequate housing, overindebtedness, discrimination, homelessness and mental health issues.

Their needs are multi-faceted, but some of the main challenges are the increased poverty and risk of social exclusion and the greater risks of experiencing poor mental health.

MMM's recommendations :

1. Encourage the development of **support policies** that allow **single mothers flexibility** in how they choose to balance work and family obligations. This may include care leave or anti-poverty protection.
2. Address the system of **gender stereotypes** that create many of these challenges for single mothers, such as hiring practices that lead many single mothers to precarious employment.
3. **Gather information** about single mothers, as there is currently low awareness surrounding their needs. Increasing this awareness could make a real difference in policy decisions that would help single mothers in the long term.

For more details, please refer to this [article](#)

Mothers with disabilities

Mothers with disabilities face different discriminations that limit their access to essential services, such as access to healthcare facilities and economic opportunities. Their struggles often go unnoticed and underappreciated which results in vast misconceptions and prejudices regarding their capability to provide care for their children and leads to discriminatory practices and attitudes and to the deterioration of their mental health. In healthcare settings, biases can lead to a lack of respectful care, where women with disabilities are not treated as autonomous individuals capable of making informed decisions.

Below are examples of the key issues mothers with disabilities face and MMM's recommendations to tackle some of the challenges.

Key issues outlined

Maternal mental health The societal stigma, caregiving challenges and lack of support can often result in significant mental health challenges including anxiety, stress and depression.

Unpaid care work Unpaid care work is disproportionately carried out by women, including those with disabilities. This work, which includes both physical household chores and emotional care, can be physically demanding and mentally taxing, but often goes unrecognised and undervalued.

Access to healthcare services Mothers with disabilities often face numerous barriers to accessing quality healthcare, including physical, informational and attitudinal obstacles. Inaccessible healthcare facilities, the absence of adaptive equipment and the lack of disability awareness among healthcare professionals further isolates these women from the healthcare system.

Discrimination and Bias Discrimination remains a significant issue and is the main driver of many of the inequalities mothers face. Negative stereotypes and misconceptions regarding their ability to care for their children leads to discriminatory practices and attitudes.

MMM's recommendations :

1. Promote a more inclusive healthcare environment that adequately addresses the physical and mental health needs of mothers with disabilities.
2. Development of an inclusive infrastructure that supports both caregivers and those they care for.
3. Ensure the voices of people with disabilities and their families are promoted in policy making and decisions regarding their rights.
4. Promote education regarding women with disabilities to tackle the discriminations they face.
Access our [policy brief](#) and [report](#)

For more details, please refer to this [article](#).

Migrant mothers

Migrant mothers face unique and compounded challenges that hinder their social and economic integration. They often encounter language barriers, limited access to quality employment, and a lack of awareness regarding their rights and available support services. Many migrant mothers work in **precarious jobs with low wages, lacking job security and social protections**. In addition, they frequently experience discrimination in the labor market and difficulty obtaining adequate housing. Cultural and systemic barriers may also limit their access to essential healthcare, childcare, and educational opportunities for their children. These challenges, combined with the pressure of adapting to a new country while caring for their families, place significant stress on their mental well-being and social inclusion.

MMM's recommendations :

1. Encourage the recognition of the contributions of migrant mothers to the country, and to support their integration through a portability of pensions, health and social security benefits.

EU Mothers moving in Europe

The issue of the Gender Care Gap in Intra-EU Mobility is a hidden angle of the gendered impact of EU free movement laws. EU citizenship and the free movement rules neglect the reality of care in the context of intra-EU mobility and this has a detrimental impact on women's ability to access residence rights and protections. In the context of intra-EU mobility, the gender care gap, (namely the inequitable distribution of unpaid care work between women and men), is mainly supported by women, thus affecting their ability to work. Indeed, **50% of mobile EU women are inactive in the host country labor markets due to caregiving duties**. In such circumstances, it is even more crucial for mothers and women with caring responsibilities to formally secure their situation, notably in terms of residence and social protection. While intra-EU mobility is a foundational right of EU citizenship, unpaid care work—mainly performed by women—is invisible in EU law, leading to significant inequalities.

This is an urgent problem for millions of EU citizen families, both those with caring responsibilities and those being cared for, including children.

The diminished quality of women's rights means that Union citizen women are having to patch together rights in order to reside lawfully and women in the most vulnerable situations, including for example those facing domestic abuse, find themselves legally isolated, without residence rights, denied subsistence benefits for themselves and their children and risk detention or removal.

EU free movement law does not recognise unpaid care work as a valid basis for residency or access to social protections.

The key legal framework, Directive 2004/38/EC, only grants residence rights to those who qualify as workers or have sufficient resources. The Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) does not consider unpaid care as "work," meaning caregivers don't qualify for residence rights or equal treatment protections, such as access to social benefits.

The impacts:

Women with full-time caring responsibilities are: **denied independent residence rights; excluded from equal treatment provisions**, including access to welfare; **dependent on a partner's status** to reside legally, creating risks in cases of **separation or domestic violence**; **trapped in precarious or even unsafe situations**, with little legal recourse.

This dependency dynamic is especially dangerous for women facing **domestic abuse**, as the conditionality of their rights deters them from leaving abusive partners.

Women combining paid work and care work. Even women who balance employment with caregiving face **legal gaps**, during **maternity leave**; or if they stay out of the labor market beyond that—for example, to care for young children—they risk losing all associated EU rights; when they provide **unpaid care work**, including caring for a sick child, since this is **not a valid reason to retain worker status** under EU law, constituting a form of gender-based discrimination.

MMM's recommendations :

1. Implement a broader interpretation of the EU free movement rules — one that includes the economic dimension of unpaid care work and recognises the value of mothers' and women's unpaid care work as an economic contribution to the Member States.

For more details, please refer to this [article](#)

Mom-entrepreneurs:

Some measures that could address the specific inequalities and vulnerabilities faced by mothers who are entrepreneurs include:

- Extend parental leave rights to self-employed individuals, ensuring they have access to similar benefits as employees.
- Uniform maternity allowances across Member States.
- Subsidise temporary replacement services or grants for hiring temporary staff during maternity leave.
- Create peer and cooperative support networks.
- Promote awareness campaigns to inform self-employed women about their rights and available benefits, ensuring they can easily access support mechanisms.

- Collect data on the uptake of maternity and parental benefits by self-employed women to monitor the effectiveness of support mechanisms

MMM's final recommendations:

1. Recognise unpaid care work as essential to society and the economy. Introducing for example, **“care credits”** to fairly account for employment breaks due to caregiving; adopting a **life cycle approach** for carers; **recognising and validating caregiving skills**; promoting **female entrepreneurship** and business ownership as a strategic investment
2. Reduce the amount of unpaid care work through policies like **affordable childcare, generous and wellpaid parental leaves**, and **flexible working arrangements**
3. Redistribute care work more equally **between genders and within society**. Supporting for example **family-friendly policies in companies**
4. Address the issue of time poverty: Unpaid care work leads to **“time poverty,”** depriving women of opportunities for decent work, financial autonomy, and participation in community life
5. **Reflecting on the Nordic experience:** While the Nordic countries have made significant progress with strong childcare infrastructure and progressive leave policies, persistent gender pay gaps and unequal care responsibilities reveal that even advanced systems have limitations. Their experience highlights the need for deeper, **systemic change to challenge gender norms and reshape economic structures.**
6. **Wellbeing Economy:** Redesigning economic systems around care and wellbeing would improve health, equity, and sustainability while addressing the patriarchal roots of current models. Wellbeing must become central to economic priorities, focusing on care for people and the planet

For more details, please refer to this [article](#).