

Policy Brief: European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

This position paper highlights the urgent need to **integrate mothers' demands and interests into the priorities** of the new European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. While Make Mothers Matter (MMM) calls for the consideration of the specific vulnerabilities of mothers in all areas of this Action Plan, it will outline concrete positions for the principles below, covering the field of **economic empowerment, work-life balance, childcare** and the recognition of **unpaid care work** as well as **accessible and high-quality maternal healthcare**.

Our **2024 State of Motherhood in Europe survey** of 9,600 mothers across 11 EU Member States and the UK confirms that mothers continue to experience significant economic, educational, and social penalties: 41% of the mothers responding to our survey find that their role is not recognised by society, 67% report feeling overloaded by their responsibilities.¹ These individual penalties contribute to broader social and economic inequalities, with the weight falling most heavily on mothers in vulnerable situations—such as migrant mothers, single mothers, mothers with disabilities, and those struggling with mental health issues.

1. Education, training and lifelong learning

Time is the biggest barrier preventing women from engaging in lifelong learning. Care responsibilities and household duties are key time issues and obstacles for women within the labor market, with implications for their employment opportunities, social and leisure activities as well as training opportunities. While **caring for others**, mothers develop a new set of **soft skills**, that contribute to **social inclusion, personal development, empowerment, and employability**. Recognising and validating this new set of skills would require a lifecycle approach to education. For employees, this would translate into improved work–life balance and wellbeing; for employers, it would bring advantages in talent acquisition and retention and increased productivity.

Recommendations

- **Validation of soft skills** acquired doing **care work** by mapping them in programmes aimed at carers
- Supporting **mothers integration** to work after maternity and parental leaves with initiatives that prepare them for the job market

2. Gender equality

Unpaid care work should be **recognised, reduced and redistributed** to close the gender care, pay and pension gaps. Women bear a significantly greater share of caregiving responsibilities, with 25% reporting care duties as one of the reasons for not participating in the labour market or working

¹ Make Mothers Matter, “MMM State of Motherhood in Europe 2024,” accessed on August 29, 2025, <https://makemothersmatter.org/mmm-state-of-motherhood-in-europe-2024/>.

part-time, compared to only 3% of men.² An important step towards achieving this is to ensure that fathers are fully enabled, culturally, financially, and in terms of time, 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 the parents. **EU free movement laws** further disadvantage women by disregarding the realities of unpaid care work. They do not **recognise this work as a valid basis for residency or social protection**.

Recommendations

- Conducting **time-use surveys** more frequently, with a focus measuring the allocation of time spent doing **care and domestic work**
- Revising **EU free movement laws** to recognise unpaid care work as a basis for residency
- Providing **high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare** while also expanding the care circle of the child to persons such as grandparents and friends
- **Encouraging fathers** to take leave and play an active role in the upbringing of their children

3. Active support to employment

Mothers often take **precarious, part-time or informal jobs** to accommodate caregiving, which in turn impacts their career progression, skills development and health. According to our 2024 MMM State of Motherhood In Europe survey, 23% of mothers reduced their working hours and 55% changed their working status, shifting from full-time to part-time, or from employed to self-employed, or vice versa, in order to adapt to maternity.³ This can lead to women **lacking financial independence**, sometimes creating a power imbalance in decision-making in the home,⁴ or, in some cases, to in-work poverty.

Recommendations

- **Affordable and flexible early childhood education** as enablers of mother's participation in the labour market
- **Implementing Quality Job targets** at EU level, including fair wages, good working conditions, job security, work-life balance, equality and non-discrimination, to address in-work poverty
- Helping women **challenge pregnancy discrimination** by strengthening knowledge of their rights
- Attending to the situation of **self-employed mothers** through uniform maternity allowances, subsidised replacement staffing and support networks to ensure they can fully access family leave schemes

² European Economic and Social Committee, Opinion on The role of family members caring for people with disabilities and older persons: the explosion of the phenomenon during the pandemic, 2022/02936, February 24, 2022, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022IE2936#ntr4-C_2023075EN.01007501-E0004.

³ Make Mothers Matter, "MMM State of Motherhood in Europe 2024," accessed on August 29, 2025, <https://makemothersmatter.org/mmm-state-of-motherhood-in-europe-2024/>.

⁴EIGE, *Gender Equality Index 2024 – Sustaining momentum on a fragile path*, (Publications Office of the European Union, 2024), <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2024-sustaining-momentum-fragile-path>.

4. Work-life balance

Factors such as leave policies, the availability of care services, flexible working arrangements and the overall child-friendliness of society strongly shape how men and women balance work and family responsibilities. MMM's 2024 European Survey shows that many mothers are dissatisfied with the length and compensation of maternity leave, and over a quarter report negative career impacts linked to motherhood. Fathers' uptake of leave remains limited, largely due to insufficient compensation, cultural expectations, and inflexible arrangements. Although EU-level directives provide a baseline for maternity, paternity and parental leave, as well as the right to request flexible working conditions, these measures fall short of ensuring real choice for parents across Europe.

Recommendations

- **Maternity leave:** Extending the EU minimum to six months, paid at least at the level of sick pay, to safeguard maternal health and support breastfeeding and child development
- **Paternity leave:** Increasing the duration of paternity leave beyond 10 days and guaranteeing adequate pay to promote fathers' meaningful involvement in early childcare
- **Parental leave:** Extending parental leave to at least six months per parent, remunerated at no less than sick pay, with flexibility to use it until the child is 14
- **Flexible working arrangements:** Transforming the right to request flexible working into a guaranteed right to access such arrangements, extending eligibility to parents of children up to 18 years old, and ensure inclusion of self-employed workers

5. Childcare and support to children

Today, more than 94.6 million people in the EU are at **risk of poverty**, including **one in four children**.⁵ The **European Child Guarantee**⁶ is a pivotal framework to break this cycle by ensuring access to basic rights and essential services, but its success depends on adequate funding and full implementation. In addition to the recognition of mothers' unpaid work, MMM believes that **accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare** is central to reducing gender gaps and tackling child poverty, but families must also be supported when they wish to care for children themselves. Children's rights cannot be separated from the well-being of their parents, and policies must integrate **nurturing care principles** to give every child the best start in life. Special attention must be paid to single mothers and other vulnerable families, who face overlapping risks of poverty, exclusion, and housing insecurity.

Recommendations

- Requiring at least **5% of ESF+ funds** be dedicated to tackling **child and family poverty** to all Member States
- Ensuring universal access to **affordable, high-quality childcare services** until mandatory school age, with particular support for low-income households.

⁵ EU Alliance for investing in children, "Protect children, protect Europe – Fund the fight against child poverty," June 23, 2025, <https://alliance4investinginchildren.eu/protect-children-protect-europe-fund-the-fight-against-child-poverty/>.

⁶ European Commission, "European Child Guarantee," accessed August 28, 2025, https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/addressing-poverty-and-supporting-social-inclusion/investing-children/european-child-guarantee_en.

- **Guaranteeing a real choice for parents** between outsourced childcare and in-family care, including financial support for those who wish to care for children at home in the early years.
- **Investing in diverse, community-based initiatives** (e.g. childminders, intergenerational schemes, voluntary local projects) to complement formal childcare
- **Adopting family-centred models**, such as Finland's ECEC system, that make both childcare services and care provided by parents accessible and economically feasible
- **Introducing or extend career break entitlements**, ensuring parents can take time off work not only in the early years, but also during adolescence

6. Old-age income and pensions

The current pension systems, based on uninterrupted full-time work, continue to disadvantage mothers, especially single mothers, who often experience poverty in old age. The **EU gender gap in pensions** is currently at **26%**, highlighting a significant difference in the security women are provided after leaving the labour force compared to men in their same circumstances.⁷ What is needed is a redefinition of "work" to value both paid and unpaid contributions, such as through the recognition of care work through care credits.

Recommendations

- Introduce **care credits** that fairly compensate employment breaks due to childcare or other caregiving responsibilities
- Guarantee **adequate minimum pension schemes** that recognise periods of care and protect against poverty in old age, particularly for women with interrupted careers
- Promote **intergenerational housing** models that reduce housing costs and foster solidarity across generations

7. Healthcare

Childbearing, educational and care responsibilities impact the **mental and physical health of mothers**. Maternal mental health especially is an urgent but under-recognised issue, with 59% of mothers in our 2024 State of Motherhood in Europe survey stating that they experienced mental health issues including depression, anxiety, burnout and peripartum depression.⁸ Maternal mental illness not only affects women, but can also have **intergenerational consequences**, perpetuating cycles of adversity, family dysfunction, and poor health outcomes. Prioritising maternal mental health is therefore essential for both mothers and society at large.

Barriers to healthcare include high out-of-pocket costs, geographical inaccessibility, language barriers, fear of deportation, and discriminatory attitudes from healthcare providers. Disrespectful practices such as lack of consent, verbal and physical abuse, and unnecessary medical procedures further undermine women's rights and dignity.

⁷ EIGE, *Gender Equality Index 2024 – Sustaining momentum on a fragile path*, (Publications Office of the European Union, 2024), <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2024-sustaining-momentum-fragile-path>.

⁸ Make Mothers Matter, "MMM State of Motherhood in Europe 2024," accessed on August 29, 2025, <https://makemothersmatter.org/mmm-state-of-motherhood-in-europe-2024/>.

Recommendations

- Guarantee **inclusive, accessible, affordable, and qualitative maternal health services** that include maternal **mental health**
- Integrate **maternal mental health into all maternal health services**, with universal screening tools, national guidelines on the management of mental health disorders, clear referral pathways, and basic provider training
- Expand **community-based and digital mental health services** to ensure accessibility, including during crises or emergencies

8. Inclusion of people with disabilities

Nearly 40 million women and girls in the EU live with a disability, yet the experiences of mothers with disabilities remain **largely invisible in research and policy**. These mothers face structural barriers to healthcare and judgement when they decide to become parents, while also dealing with the demands of caregiving and their own health needs.

Recommendations

- Guarantee **physical accessibility, adaptive equipment, and assistive technologies** in healthcare facilities, as well as integrating disability awareness into healthcare training
- Provide **legal protections and adequate resources** for mothers with disabilities in their caregiving roles
- Combat **discrimination and bias** with an intersectional, rights-based approach, safeguarding reproductive and parenting rights
- Involve **women with disabilities and advocacy groups** in policy-making

9. Housing and assistance for the homeless

Women, especially single mothers, migrant and refugee women, and women with disabilities, face heightened risks of **poverty, housing insecurity and hidden homelessness**. At the same time, they are more likely to encounter **exploitation and abuse**. Importantly, **gender-based violence** is both a major cause and consequence of women's homelessness, making it a defining difference from men's experiences of housing insecurity. Stigma, shame, and fear of judgement further discourage women from seeking support, and many also avoid shelters if they do not feel safe.

Recommendations

- Take into account the situation of mothers when implementing the **European affordable housing plan**
- Strengthen and expand **minimum income schemes** to provide a reliable financial safety net
- Introduce targeted **policy measures for the most vulnerable**, including single mothers, that combine child support, accessible Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and financial supplements
- Ensure the availability of **women-only services** that provide tailored support to mothers