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Mothers  
Matter

# **The Recognition of Skills acquired through Caring: Upskilling and Reskilling**

**2026**

**Make Mothers Matter**

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## Context

This paper contributes to the public consultation on the European Union’s upcoming Skill Portability Initiative and provides feedback to the Commission regarding the need for the **recognition of ‘soft skills’ acquired through caring and their transferability to the labour market**. Through informal learning experiences such as parenting, newly acquired skills can be upskilled or reskilled to facilitate worker mobility and ultimately reduce employment challenges and inequalities across the EU. Make Mothers Matter (MMM) strongly believes that the EU should adopt a framework to **integrate care-related skills into EU skills strategies and policies**, and to encourage all Member States to provide appropriate and more direct pathways for career development, in line with existing and ongoing EU skills initiatives and the European Pillar of Social Rights. These initiatives include: The Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012), the European Skills Agenda (2020), the Union of Skills (2025).

Mothers, and parents, in the workforce are confronted with a unique set of **obstacles** in order to succeed. Whether it be re-entry after maternity leave or the ongoing challenges associated with caregiving, mothers find themselves consistently **under recognised and unsupported**. In 2024, Make Mothers Matter (MMM) conducted a survey to report on the **‘State of Motherhood’** across the European Union. Our findings amplify the voices of mothers as both carers and workers in society.

The survey showed that women across the EU continue to face insufficient maternity leave provisions and inadequate mental and physical health support. In addition, **27%** of mothers report that motherhood has **negatively impacted their careers**, while **30%** feel that their **learning opportunities or professional progression** have been restricted following maternity leave.

The lack of transitional or flexible return-to-work arrangements further exacerbates this situation. A majority of mothers (**55%**) report **changing their working status** to accommodate daily caregiving responsibilities after having a child, and **15% are unable to re-enter** the labour market for various reasons, including **workplace discrimination**.<sup>1</sup>

As acknowledged by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), care responsibilities and household duties are key time issues, and contribute to the **time poverty** parents – particularly mothers – experience. In fact, this unequal distribution of care responsibilities,

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<sup>1</sup> “MMM State of Motherhood in Europe 2024 Survey” (2024) MMM. Available at: <https://makemothersmatter.org/mmm-state-of-motherhood-in-europe-2024/> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).



combined with the lack of adequate support frameworks, has wide-ranging implications for mothers. It affects their **pay and pension rights, employment opportunities, career advancement and professional development**, participation in **social and leisure** activities, as well as their **health** and that of their children<sup>2</sup>.

Together, these factors reinforce the **motherhood penalty** — the discrimination women face in the workforce because of their status as mothers, the associated difficulties in remaining in the labour market, and the economic and social injustices they experience as a result.<sup>3</sup>

This career stagnation ultimately contributes towards emotional strain as feelings of worth, productivity, and value diminish throughout time away from the labour market. However, throughout this period of absence from the labour market, parents are developing crucial yet unrecognised skills. Motherhood can no longer be seen as a hindrance; instead of being a career disruption, we must view it as an opportunity for growth in which the **skillsets acquired through parenting** can be appropriately recognised and valued in the labour market. In order to apply the skills gained through motherhood, appropriate systemic support must be in place, along with greater accountability at national level to recognise and value these skill sets and to facilitate smooth transitions back into the workforce, ensuring that no mother is left behind.

Recognition frameworks at the EU level are not exhaustive — and the relevant texts explicitly acknowledge this. While **volunteering** is clearly recognised within validation systems, **caregiving** — particularly parenting — remains insufficiently operationalised in practice. There is therefore a need to further develop and implement existing frameworks so that recognition becomes a reality for the millions of parents, mothers in particular, who struggle to combine work and family responsibilities. The system must **adapt to the realities of parents** — not the other way around.

The EU has made important efforts to broaden the understanding of how skills are acquired and how they can be valued in the labour market. For example, the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning encourages Member States to establish systems allowing skills acquired outside formal education – including through life experience, volunteering, and activities at home – to be identified, assessed and validated. The Recommendation defines **informal learning** as “learning resulting from daily activities related

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<sup>2</sup> *Poverty and inequalities* | European Institute for Gender Equality. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/newsroom/beijing-platform-for-action/poverty-and-inequalities> (Accessed: February 24, 2026).

<sup>3</sup> “Discriminations in the economic sphere: the ‘motherhood penalty’” MMM. Available at: <https://makemothersmatter.org/peaks-of-action/mothers-and-the-economy/discriminations-in-the-economic-sphere-the-motherhood-penalty/> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



to work, **family** or leisure and which is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective.”It further highlights examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning, including:

**Skills acquired through life and work experiences;** project management skills or ICT skills acquired at work; languages and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country; ICT skills acquired outside work; skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, youth work and through **activities at home** (e.g. **taking care of a child**).

The Recommendation also underlines the “importance of making visible the knowledge, skills and **competences gained through life** and work experience.”<sup>4</sup>

More recently, in the 2025 Commission Communication on the Union of Skills, the EU reiterates that “skills should be understood in a broad sense ... encompassing skills, knowledge and competences for life, well beyond the skills needed for the labour market.”

The Communication also recognises that “women and vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities encounter additional obstacles which hinder their participation in training,” and states that the Roadmap for Women’s Rights will promote equal opportunities and access to upskilling and reskilling.

If the EU wants to “**attract, develop and retain talent**,” as set out in the Union of Skills, it must ensure that parents, mothers in particular, are not left outside that objective. Caregiving develops high-level, transferable competences, including organisation, crisis management, negotiation, emotional intelligence and complex multitasking. Yet these skills remain largely invisible within formal validation and career progression systems<sup>5</sup>.

Emerging practices demonstrate that recognising such competences benefits both employers and employees. Companies such as Lifed, as well as EU-funded initiatives like MAV, have shown that translating caregiving experience into measurable professional skills can strengthen workforce engagement, productivity and retention, as explained later in this paper.

Recognising volunteering while failing to operationalise the recognition of caregiving creates an inconsistency in implementation. To close this gap, Member States should explicitly **integrate caregiving competences into validation practices**, guidance systems and micro-credential

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<sup>4</sup> “Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.”

<sup>5</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: *The Union of Skills* (2025). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0090&qid=1771692938011> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



frameworks, ensuring that parenting-related skills can be identified, assessed and translated into recognised qualifications or partial certifications.

## I Soft Skills and Motherhood

### 1. Skill Transferability

The term ‘**soft skills**’ encompasses a wide range of non-technical skills such as interpersonal skills, social skills, and people skills that can often be referred to as general human competencies<sup>6</sup>. In particular, these skills are often developed through informal learning processes related to unstructured or daily life experiences such as volunteering, caregiving, and **parenting**<sup>7</sup>.

Due to their versatility, soft skills are often prerequisites for a variety of jobs with **leadership** and management roles prioritising interpersonal skills in tandem with formal skills. The concept of **upskilling or reskilling** involves acknowledging already existing populations and their skills and providing them with the resources to transfer their knowledge to other sectors.

Throughout motherhood and informal caregiving roles, individuals learn a variety of applicable skills to both their lives and the workforce. Motherhood introduces an increase in responsibility and tasks that require a **unique skillset encompassing multi-tasking, time-management, stress-management, self-regulation, and communication**<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, caregiving skills — and their potential to support upskilling and reskilling — are often overlooked in professional pathways and across the labour market. This represents a missed opportunity to enhance the employability and mobility of an already skilled population, while also using these competences as a means to empower mothers and informal caregivers.

## II Existing Framework and Policies

### 2. EU Action and Frameworks

#### 2.1 Council Recommendation

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<sup>6</sup> Marin-Zapata, S.I. *et al.* (2022) “Soft skills, do we know what we are talking about?,” *Review of Managerial Science*, 16(4), pp. 969–1000. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11846-021-00474-9>.

<sup>7</sup> “Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.”

<sup>8</sup> Ma, E. *et al.* (2022) “On the bright side of motherhood—A mixed method enquiry,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 92, p. 103350. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2022.103350>.



In December 2012, the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Its objective was to **promote employability and mobility** by encouraging Member States to establish national arrangements for validating skills acquired outside formal education and training. The Recommendation calls on Member States to improve access to validation and to facilitate entry, progression, and transitions into and within the labour market at **all stages of life**.

It encourages Member States to put in place systems that make learning outcomes acquired outside formal education visible and usable for careers and further learning — including skills gained through work, volunteering, or other life experiences. The Recommendation emphasises that validation arrangements should be linked to national qualifications frameworks and aligned with the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**. It further highlights that validation can enhance employability, mobility and lifelong learning by enabling individuals to identify, document, assess and certify competences acquired outside formal study, including at home, at work, or through voluntary and mobility experiences. Such validation arrangements reflect a commitment to **lifelong learning** as a **fundamental principle** for personal development and labour market participation<sup>9</sup>.

Following the Council Recommendation, many national validation frameworks have more explicitly incorporated **volunteer work and other forms of informal learning**. However, **parenting-related competences** remain insufficiently reflected, beyond references to childcare-related tasks. While childcare is an essential component of parenting, reducing parenting to childcare activities alone fails to capture the full range of competences involved, nor does it provide adequate pathways for formal recognition through qualifications or micro-credentials.

## 2.2 Europass

Created by the EU to make skills more **comparable** between Member States, the Europass framework documents skills and qualifications for users to generate a **personalised portfolio** to be used and applied across various sectors across the EU. While informal or non-formal learning experiences have the potentiality to be validated through Europass and EQF frameworks, they are limited to volunteer work (through Youthpass) or to formal caregiving roles such as respite support<sup>10</sup>. Despite some national systems allowing for skill recognition and validation, caregiving skills are rarely acknowledged and **legal mechanisms** that allow such competencies

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<sup>9</sup> “Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.”

<sup>10</sup> Home | Europass (no date). Available at: <https://europass.europa.eu/en> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).



to be assessed and certified are not consistently used or integrated into the labour market, or national equality policies.

### 2.3 European Skills Agenda

The European Skills Agenda is a five-year plan (2020–2025) of the European Commission to improve skills, employability, and competitiveness. It features 12 key actions, including the Pact for Skills (Action 1) and Skills for Life (Action 8). It is an ongoing, long-term initiative designed to foster upskilling and reskilling, with key targets and partnerships aiming for goals by 2030. Initially developed in response to **rapid economic changes involving digitisation**, the European Skills Agenda is investing in strengthening labour market competitiveness while ensuring social fairness and promoting the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>11</sup>. However, despite its broad scope, the Agenda does not provide specific or practical mechanisms for the recognition of caregiving skills, nor does it explicitly integrate parenting-related competences into its implementation tools.

### 2.4 Union of Skills

Introduced in 2025 by the European Commission, the Union of Skills is a plan for the EU to improve education and lifelong learning initiatives. The Union of Skills states that skills should be understood in a broad sense by encompassing skills, knowledge and competences for life, well beyond the skills needed for the labour market. Through the evidence that European competitiveness and economic success ultimately rely on **human capital**, the Union of Skills recognises the skills shortages and gaps in the EU resulting from underutilised talent. Included within this shortage are limited resources to enable **upskilling and reskilling** particularly for those encountering additional obstacles when interacting with the labour market. The Union of Skills asks the Member States to accelerate these changes and ensure equitable, yet successful, economic change in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>12</sup>. While the Union of Skills recognises obstacles to further learning such as **time constraints, financial considerations, care responsibilities**, and motivations, it does not explicitly account for informal caregivers and parents as an **untapped potential** in the EU labour force. There is a reference to the Roadmap

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<sup>11</sup> *European Skills Agenda - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion* (2026). Available at: [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en) (Accessed: February 23, 2026).

<sup>12</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The Union of Skills* (2025). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0090&qid=1771692938011> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



for Women’s Rights<sup>13</sup> in order to promote these changes but no accountability or concrete actions have yet to surface. If Europe wants to “attract, develop and retain talent” it needs to address and formally acknowledge the skills acquired through experiences such as **motherhood**, or the **unpaid act of parenting**, performed by a significant segment of the population. In order to grow the European economy, we must foster and support skill development to ensure success in learning, work, and life.

## 2.5 European Inventory on Validation

The European Inventory on Validation is a resource through the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) that documents how Member States implement validation systems across the EU. CEDEFOP provides a **toolkit** for those who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) and who have developed skills through non-formal or informal learning experiences. Similar to Europass, CEDEFOP tends to target younger demographic or those seeking general skill validation to be used towards lifelong learning opportunities or return to work programmes<sup>14</sup>.

## 2.6 The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy Resolution of the EU Parliament

As of February 2026, the European Parliament has put forth a Resolution to address poverty and inequality levels across Europe. The Resolution recalls the discrimination faced by women in the workplace and disparities in access to education and social services. While the EU has set a collective target of ensuring that at least 60% of adults participate in lifelong learning each year by 2030, this objective has not yet been achieved across the Member States. In 2022, only 39.5% of adults participated in learning.

In order to help combat poverty, particularly among women, the Resolution stresses the importance of individualised guidance, the recognition of informal skills, and stronger links between training and quality employment opportunities. It calls on Member States to develop and expand national frameworks for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, enabling the recognition of practical experience across a wide range of sectors, including, but not limited to, construction, agriculture, healthcare and social care, hospitality, manufacturing, crafts,

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<sup>13</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Roadmap for Women’s Rights* (2025). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0097> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).

<sup>14</sup> *Validation of non-formal and informal learning | CEDEFOP* (2020). Available at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/neets/intervention-approaches/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning-0> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



logistics, and information and communications technology, building on the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>15</sup>.

This is a step in the right direction toward addressing the widespread labour market discrimination faced by women while adopting a comprehensive approach to eradicating poverty across the EU.

### 3. Current/Previous Initiatives

#### 3.1 National Examples

##### 3.1.1 France

France has incorporated the *validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE)* into its national labour code to allow for qualifications or credentials to be acquired based on informal or non-formal learning and life experiences. Specifically, the VAE only includes **caregiving experiences** if those skills correspond to national qualification standards. The caregiving considered here primarily refers to **healthcare-related care**. Such skills are widely used in care professions as well as health and social assistance qualifications<sup>16</sup>. The VAE is the **strongest example** of an EU member state legally recognising informal skills.

##### 3.1.2 Portugal

Portugal's national system for recognition of prior learning, *Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências (RVCC)*, is legally established and integrated into the national qualifications framework, enabling adults to have competences acquired through formal education, non-formal learning, and life experience validated and certified for access to qualifications and improved employability<sup>17</sup>.

##### 3.1.3 Belgium

Belgium's *Validation des Compétences / Erkenning van Verworven Competenties (EVC)* systems operate regionally to recognise, assess, and certify skills acquired through non-formal and

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<sup>15</sup> EU Parliament Resolution- Developing a new EU anti-poverty strategy - Thursday, 12 February 2026 . Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2026-0049\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2026-0049_EN.html) (Accessed: February 24, 2026).

<sup>16</sup> France VAE | Welcome to the VAE portal (no date). Available at: <https://vae.gouv.fr/> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).

<sup>17</sup> Recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) | CEDEFOP (2020). Available at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/28703> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



informal learning, including prior work experience, volunteering, or life experience. In Flanders, EVC can lead to professional qualifications, while in French-speaking Belgium, validation des compétences enables recognised skills certificates. The system is **sector-neutral**, allowing any skill that aligns with qualification standards to be assessed, whether in industry, services, education, or health. Uptake varies, but the framework provides a legal basis for recognising skills beyond formal education<sup>18</sup>.

### 3.1.4 Germany

Germany does not have a single national framework for validating non-formal or informal learning. However, two initiatives support recognition of skills: the **Recognition Act (Anerkennungsgesetz)**, which evaluates foreign professional qualifications and relevant work experience, and **ValiKom Transfer**, a pilot project recognising skills gained through work. Both aim to promote lifelong learning and help adults return to or change employment<sup>19</sup>.

### 3.1.5 Netherlands

The Netherlands does not have one central legal framework solely for validation of informal learning, but the **Erkennung van Verworven Competenties (EVC)** system is integrated into the education and training landscape and allows skills acquired outside formal schooling to be assessed and recognised, supporting reintegration into employment. It is consistent with the Dutch National Qualifications Framework and aligned with the EQF<sup>20</sup>.

## 3.2 Mom Virtual Assistant (MAV)

Mom Virtual Assistant (MAV) is an EU funded project via **Erasmus +** that provides both new mothers, and employers, with access to **high-quality training** to upskill and apply transversal motherhood skills – soft skills – to the labour market, particularly the **digital sector**. Through the provision of workplace pilots and digital training tools, MAV helps women re-enter or remain in the workforce with its flexible and personalised content delivery methods. With a focus on the role of virtual assistants, MAV highlights the **transferability of soft skills** honed during motherhood such as adaptability and flexibility to digital skill development. As the EU's

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<sup>18</sup> *Validation framework* | CEDEFOP (2020). Available at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/28010> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).

<sup>19</sup> *VET in Europe database | Vocational education and training in Europe | Germany* | CEDEFOP (2022). Available at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/germany-u2> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).

<sup>20</sup> *Recognition, Validation and Accreditation in Netherlands* | Institute for Lifelong Learning (no date). Available at: <https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/articles/recognition-validation-and-accreditation-netherlands> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



workplace skill demand continues to shift towards digitisation, MAV aims to combat the **motherhood penalty** through applicable skills that will ultimately benefit the labour market. Despite these efforts, MAV still emphasises the ongoing need for legislative improvement across the EU to further recognise and support mothers, and parents, re-entering the workforce<sup>21</sup>.

### 3.3 Lifed

The company, originally developed in Italy in 2017 as Maternity as a Master (MAAM), incorporates **life-based learning** methods into virtual self-coaching sessions and skill portfolios to empower new parents in transferring soft skills to the labour market. Lifed can be used as a **collaboration tool** between employees and employers, or a tool of self-discovery to re-frame parenting as a powerful skill as well as provide a guide towards **work-life balance**. Regardless of its use, Lifed aims to facilitate personal growth and **empower new parents** to recognise and upskill competencies acquired through parenting. Lifed's programmes have been successfully used by numerous global organisations with companies exhibiting improved morale and decreased stress upon its adoption. In addition to prioritising diversity and supporting the greater workforce, Lifed has been able to prove that organisations that invest in their employee development will have **higher profitability and workplace retention**<sup>22</sup>.

### 3.4 MothersCan

MothersCan is a European-level project aimed at reducing **gender inequalities** in the workforce through education, empowerment, and mentorship. One of their primary focuses is to facilitate labour market reintegration for mothers through the upskilling and reskilling of care skills. This goal is achieved through pilots for both mothers and employers to **reframe motherhood as advantageous**. These training courses strengthen key competencies as well as further develop individual digital skills to be applied to the workforce. Furthermore, MothersCan provides packages for hiring managers based on skill transferability and the benefits of employing mothers. In addition to training, MothersCan provides women with a **mentorship programme** to equip new mothers with career advice and opportunities which ultimately improve self-worth and confidence about returning to the labour market. Through their emphasis on empowerment, MothersCan creates and fosters **inclusivity** through skill recognition<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> MAV "https://www.mav.mom/" (no date). Available at: <https://www.mav.mom/> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).

<sup>22</sup> "New parents" (no date) Lifed. Available at: <https://lifed.io/en/solutions/new-parents/> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).

<sup>23</sup> "Project publication | MothersCan" (no date). Available at: <https://www.motherscan.eu/en/projektpublikation-2/> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).



### 3.5 FamCompass

FamCompass, or the Family Competencies Portfolio, was an EU-funded project of 2007, that aimed to help **lower systemic barriers** and facilitate access to the labour market through the validation of soft skills. Through the utilisation of the EU-recommended **competence balance method**, FamCompass was able to provide individuals with career counselling and training programmes to bridge the gap between family life and the workplace. The skill validation and credentialing offered through FamCompass was **industry-specific** and focused on applying homecare skills to social work, education, or the professional care sector. Despite its limited application, FamCompass is an example of how to better utilise the existing labour force through upskilling and reskilling<sup>24</sup>. The FamCompass 2.0 of 2017, developed a tool for evaluation and recognition of competences acquired in **family contexts**. Family competences are those acquired in family life or in coaching families: in raising children, in partner relationships, in caring for older relatives, in organising the household<sup>25</sup>.

## III Benefits

### 4. Economic Benefits

The recognition and validation of skills acquired through caring introduces a variety of **benefits to the labour market**, both for employers and employees.

#### 4.1 Employer Benefits:

In an economy that has historically prioritised academic learning and hard skills, Europe remains under-equipped to address the digital transformation of the labour market. According to the **Union of Skills**, 90% of jobs now require basic digital skills, yet only about half of the European adult population possesses them<sup>26</sup>. In a workplace increasingly dominated by technology, employees need both technical competencies and adaptable soft skills to navigate emerging challenges and opportunities.

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<sup>24</sup> *DJI - Familienkompetenzen Portfolio (FamCompass) - Bewertung und Anerkennung im Familienleben erworbener Fähigkeiten und Kompetenzen* (no date). Available at: <https://www.dji.de/en/about-us/projects/projekte/family-competencies-portfolio-famcompass-assessing-and-validating-skills-and-competencies-obtained-in-family-life.html> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).

<sup>25</sup> *FamCompass 2.0* (no date). Available at: <https://famcompass.odisee.be/> (Accessed: February 23, 2026).

<sup>26</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The Union of Skills* (2025). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0090&qid=1771692938011> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



There is growing evidence that **soft skills developed through caregiving — such as organisation, multitasking, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving — are highly transferable to digital and technology-driven roles.** These skills can help address critical skill gaps in the European labour market, complementing digital literacy and enhancing overall workforce adaptability.<sup>27</sup>

As demonstrated by **Lifed**, the validation of soft skills and adoption of a life-based learning approach also benefits employers by improving employee well-being. Lifed reports that recognising employees' competencies leads to a **12% increase in overall productivity**, while employees who feel visible and valued are **4.6 times more likely to feel motivated to perform at their best.** These skills are increasingly important to foster resilience in the workplace.<sup>28</sup>

By implementing and promoting **reskilling and upskilling opportunities for mothers and caregivers**, employers and policymakers can simultaneously address digital and soft skill gaps, increase employability, and strengthen talent retention across the EU.

#### **4.2 Employee Benefits:**

Apart from increasing employability rates amongst European individuals, the formal validation of soft skills – particularly those acquired through acts of care – would generate countless opportunities irrespective of long-term workforce absences or caregiving periods<sup>29</sup>. For those **returning to the job market** after a leave of absence, the validation of skills that have been gained during that leave can result in an increase in self-confidence and therefore an **increase in overall job performance.** Promoting resources that enhance skill transferability not only increases the visibility of these qualifications but also strengthens individual self-worth, fostering a sense of achievement and recognition, whether the skills are formally certified or not. Lifed reported significant benefits to employees such as an 87% increase in self-awareness, 83% increase in managing change, 82% increase in empathy, 74% increase in managing complexity and 71% increase in managing stress with 78% of participants transferring the skills exercised through parenting practice to their work. Soft skill validation unlocks the **hidden potential** of the economy and enhances employment rate, employment retention, employee satisfaction, and

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<sup>27</sup> Poláková, M. *et al.* (2023) “Soft skills and their importance in the labour market under the conditions of Industry 5.0,” *Heliyon*, 9(8), p. e18670. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e18670>.

<sup>28</sup> “Method” (no date) *Lifed*. Available at: <https://lifed.io/en/innovation/method/> (Accessed: February 23, 2026).

<sup>29</sup> Ma, E. *et al.* (2022) “On the bright side of motherhood—A mixed method enquiry,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 92, p. 103350. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2022.103350>.



labour force attachment<sup>30</sup> while simultaneously supporting re-entry into the labour market for those that are often ignored.

## 5. Societal Benefits

### 5.1 European Pillar of Social Rights: Chapter I

The recognition of soft skills can further the European Union’s agenda towards **equality** through its alignment with the European Pillar of Social Rights’ (EPSR) Chapter I: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market. As stated, gender equality and equal opportunity refers to equality in all areas including participation in the labour market and facilitating career progression. Further included within active support to employment, is the mandate that everyone has the right to training and requalification<sup>31</sup>. While education and training remain national competences, the EU has established several policy frameworks and recommendations to support reskilling and upskilling across Member States. In this context, it would be beneficial to move towards a more harmonised entitlement to the recognition of soft skills across the EU. Those who would benefit most from the recognition and validation of soft skills are often individuals already disadvantaged or restricted in the labour market — particularly women. Strengthening and harmonising the validation of soft skills, and ensuring their transferability into national qualification frameworks and labour market systems, would enhance social protection, promote equal opportunities, and facilitate more inclusive access to employment across the EU.

### 5.2 Lifelong Learning

Further in alignment with the European Union’s initiatives of the Union of Skills, Europass, CEDEFOP, and numerous Erasmus+ funded projects, **lifelong learning has become a central priority across Europe**. As stated by the EPSR, everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and successfully manage **transitions** in the labour market<sup>32</sup>. It is in this same vein that lifelong learning is seen as a catalyst towards **gender equality**<sup>33</sup>. Skills acquired through non-formal and informal experiences should be systematically recognised

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<sup>30</sup> Ma, E. *et al.* (2022) “On the bright side of motherhood—A mixed method enquiry,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 92, p. 103350. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2022.103350>.

<sup>31</sup> Tajani, A., Juncker, J.-C. and Ratas, J. (no date) “European Pillar of Social Rights”

<sup>32</sup> Tajani, A., Juncker, J.-C. and Ratas, J. (no date) “European Pillar of Social Rights”

<sup>33</sup> *Lifelong learning | European Institute for Gender Equality* (no date). Available at: [https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2019-report/lifelong-learning?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2019-report/lifelong-learning?language_content_entity=en) (Accessed: February 22, 2026).



across the EU to acknowledge lifelong learning and ensure that competences developed outside formal education are transferable and valued in the labour market.

## IV Recommendations

### 6. Soft Skill Recognition

In line with the principles of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** and the **Union of Skills**, soft skills — including those developed through caregiving or parenting — **should be recognised and considered for inclusion** within national qualification frameworks, even though this is not yet formally mandated at the EU level.

The EU Commission should **include parenting and associated skills** on Europass/ESCO skills and competencies pillars. While ESCO recognises ‘baby care’ and ‘caring for children’ as skills, it excludes categories such as ‘parent’ or ‘mother’ in which the terms themselves encapsulate more than just caregiving<sup>34</sup>. Such roles require a level of multi-tasking, adaptability, and leadership that are **not currently recognised**. If the EU recognises formal employment involving the care of children — such as early childhood educators, daycare providers or nannies — it should also acknowledge the competences developed through parenting. Making these skills visible would strengthen validation pathways and better reflect the full range of transferable competences developed through caregiving responsibilities.

MMM believes that a dedicated category reflecting this unique knowledge set should be added to **ESCO**, with pathways through **Europass** to acquire certificates of qualifications and skills. Furthermore, the European Union should encourage all Member States to formally recognise mothering and parenting as a source of qualification, while promoting lifelong learning initiatives to enhance soft skill transferability in the labour market.

Furthermore, the European Union should encourage all Member States to **recognise mothering and parenting as a qualification** and further facilitate more lifelong learning initiatives to promote soft skill transferability within the labour market.

#### 6.1 Credential Portability

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<sup>34</sup> *Caring for children | European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO)* (no date). Available at: <https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en/classification/skill?uri=http%3A%2F%2Fdata.europa.eu%2Fesco%2Fskill%2FS3.6.3> (Accessed: February 20, 2026).



The validation of skills — particularly caregiving and parenting competences — should be more systematically linked to national qualifications frameworks and aligned with the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**. The EQF defines learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, responsibility and autonomy across eight reference levels.<sup>35</sup> Many competences developed through parenting — such as organisation, problem-solving, coordination, decision-making and responsibility for others — may correspond to elements described within these levels. However, these competences are not automatically classified within the EQF unless assessed against existing **national qualification standards**.

Parenting represents a significant source of informal learning, generating transferable skills that are relevant to the labour market. Yet these competences remain largely invisible within formal validation systems. Greater efforts are therefore needed to develop mechanisms – including micro-credentials, partial qualifications or structured validation pathways – that allow caregiving-related competences to be identified, assessed and, where appropriate, certified.

At EU level, policy guidance and coordination could further encourage Member States to allocate adequate resources and ensure that informal caregiving competences can be meaningfully validated within existing qualification frameworks, while respecting national competences in education and training.

## 7. Integrated Services

A significant portion of Europeans, particularly women, are not familiar with digital platforms such as Europass, which are designed to support employment and skills development, as highlighted in the Union of Skills<sup>36</sup>. According to the EU Roadmap for Women's Rights, access to upskilling and reskilling initiatives must be expanded to ensure that barriers to lifelong learning are effectively addressed.

### 7.1 Flexible and Mobile Learning Pathways

The EU should endorse and support more accessible public pathways for **upskilling and reskilling soft skills**. This validation would collectively contribute to and benefit other EU initiatives such as **strengthening maternity, paternity and parental leave, supporting flexible**

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<sup>35</sup> *Description of the eight EQF levels* | Europass (no date). Available at: <https://europass.europa.eu/en/description-eight-eqf-levels> (Accessed: February 23, 2026).

<sup>36</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The Union of Skills* (2025). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0090&qid=1771692938011> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



**working arrangements, recognising care work and parenting in the pension system, and promoting work-life balance.** In further alignment with the EU Roadmap for Women’s rights, the formal validation of caregiving skills aligns with Principles 3 through 5: equal pay and economic empowerment, work-life balance and care, and equal employment opportunities and adequate working conditions<sup>37</sup>. As we move towards a collective gender-equal society, it is evident that initiatives such as the integration of caregiving competences within validation practices and national frameworks are essential. The implementation of training programmes, similar to those offered through Lifeed, will ensure **structural support** for both employees and employers pre and post maternity leave while helping the EU to reach its targets regarding equality.

While our contribution primarily analyses the situation of women and mothers in the context of providing informal care, the validation of soft skills — including those acquired through caregiving — is not a gender-specific issue. Such competences are gender-neutral and should be recognised and valued for all individuals across the EU.

## Conclusion

Despite the unique skillset that mothers and informal caregivers possess, they are continuously undervalued and ignored by the labour market. While the EU has developed different initiatives and proposed numerous frameworks to account for skill discrepancies – The Union of Skills, The European Skills Agenda, the Anti-Poverty Strategy Resolution of the EU Parliament – none of which have addressed one of the leading factors contributing to the motherhood penalty.

There are however promising models and evidence to be seen through both EU-funded and private initiatives such as Lifeed and MAV that emphasise the benefits of soft skill validation through pilot training programmes. Through the **formal validation of soft skills** – particularly those acquired through acts of care such as parenting – the European economy can invest in underutilised talent while supporting its initiatives towards equal opportunity, access to the labour market, and lifelong learning. To maintain consistency across all initiatives and efforts towards equal opportunity, all Member States should explicitly integrate caregiving competences into validation practices, guidance systems and micro-credential frameworks to ensure that parenting-related skills can be identified, assessed, and translated into recognised qualifications or partial certifications.

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<sup>37</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Roadmap for Women’s Rights* (2025). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0097> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).



**Care is essential** to the functioning and sustainability of our society. By formally recognising caregiving as a valuable **life skill**, the EU can help transform it from an invisible labour market penalty into a recognised driver of economic growth and social cohesion.



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