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Policy Brief

The Recognition of Caring Skills – Upskilling and Reskilling

Across the European Union (EU), millions of mothers and informal caregivers develop high-level, transferable skills through parenting and care responsibilities. Yet these **competences remain largely invisible** within formal validation systems and labour market frameworks. At a time when Europe faces **skills shortages, digital transformation, and demographic change**, failing to recognise caregiving-derived skills represents a missed economic and social opportunity.

This policy brief calls on the European Commission and Member States to explicitly **integrate parenting and caregiving competences** into EU validation systems, qualification frameworks, and lifelong learning strategies. Building on existing EU initiatives, including the European Skills Agenda and the Union of Skills, the EU must ensure that **caregiving skills are formally recognised**, portable across borders, and linked to upskilling and reskilling pathways.

Mothers across the EU continue to face structural barriers in the labour market. According to MMM's 2024 State of Motherhood survey, 27% of mothers report that motherhood negatively impacted their careers, and 30% feel restricted in their **learning opportunities or professional growth** after maternity leave. More than half (55%) adjusted their employment status to meet caregiving demands, while 15% were unable to re-enter the workforce due to **multiple barriers**, including discrimination¹.

This contributes to the **motherhood penalty** – a pattern of reduced earnings, career stagnation, and long-term pension disadvantages and social injustices mothers experience linked to caregiving. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has identified unequal care responsibilities as a key driver of time poverty, income inequality, and limited career progression for women².

Yet **time away from formal employment does not equate to a skills gap**. Parenting and informal caregiving foster advanced competences including organisation, negotiation, emotional intelligence, stress management, digital coordination, and complex multitasking³. 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

¹ “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).

² *Poverty and inequalities* | European Institute for Gender Equality (no date). Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/newsroom/beijing-platform-for-action/poverty-and-inequalities> (Accessed: February 24, 2026).

³ 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>.



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inequalities across the EU. Europe's competitiveness strategy cannot afford to overlook this talent pool.

I Soft Skills acquired through Motherhood

The 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning recognises **learning that occurs outside formal education**, including skills gained through **family life**. It defines informal learning as learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family (e.g. **taking care of a child**) or leisure. However, implementation across Member States has largely prioritised volunteer work and formal employment experience, leaving parenting insufficiently recognised and operationalised in practice⁴.

The concept of **upskilling and reskilling** should not begin from scratch; it should build on competences already acquired. Motherhood develops leadership, crisis management, budgeting, conflict resolution, resilience, and adaptive learning. Such skills are directly relevant to sectors experiencing labour shortages, particularly in digital and service-based economies⁵. To meet labour market demands, Europe must shift from viewing caregiving as a **career interruption** to recognising it as experiential learning.

II Existing Framework and Policies

The EU has made significant advances in promoting lifelong learning and validation systems:

- **The 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning** encourages Member States to identify, document, assess, and certify skills acquired outside formal education.
- **Europass** provides tools for documenting some competences across borders⁶.
- **The European Skills Agenda** promotes upskilling and reskilling through 2030 targets⁷.
- **The 2025 Union of Skills** calls for a broad understanding of skills “well beyond those needed for the labour market.”⁸

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

⁵ 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>.

⁶ Home | Europass (no date). Available at: <https://europass.europa.eu/en> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).

⁷ *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 (Accessed: February 23, 2026).

⁸ *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).



- **The CEDEFOP European Inventory on Validation** documents national practices⁹.

Despite these frameworks, **caregiving competences remain inconsistently recognised**. **Volunteer** experience is often validated, yet **parenting**, which is explicitly referenced in EU definitions of informal learning, **rarely translates** into micro-credentials or recognised qualifications.

This **inconsistency** undermines the EU's objective of talent retention, mobility, and ultimately equality. Several Member States demonstrate that validation could be possible:

- **France** allows for qualifications or credentials to be acquired based on informal or non-formal learning and life experience.¹⁰
- **Portugal** acquired through formal education, non-formal learning, and life experience.¹¹
- **Belgium** recognises, assesses, and certifies skills acquired through non-formal and 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.¹²
- **Germany** implements regional or pilot validation initiatives.¹³

Similar to EU-funded projects and private initiatives with promising models:

- **MAV** (Mom Virtual Assistant) supports digital upskilling linked to motherhood competences.¹⁴
- **Lifed** reframes parenting as leadership training, reporting productivity and wellbeing gains.¹⁵
- **MothersCan** provides training and mentorship for labour market reintegration.¹⁶

⁹ *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).

¹⁰ *France VAE | Welcome to the VAE portal* (no date). Available at: <https://vae.gouv.fr/> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).

¹¹ *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).

¹² *Validation framework* | CEDEFOP (2020). Available at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/28010> (Accessed: February 21, 2026).

¹³ *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).

¹⁴ *MAV* “<https://www.mav.mom/>” (no date). Available at: <https://www.mav.mom/> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).

¹⁵ “New parents” (no date) *Lifed*. Available at: <https://lifed.io/en/solutions/new-parents/> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).

¹⁶ “*Project publication | MothersCan*” (no date). Available at: <https://www.motherscan.eu/en/projektpublikation-2/> (Accessed: February 18, 2026).



- **FamCompass** developed tools to assess family-acquired competences.¹⁷

While impactful, these initiatives remain **fragmented** and project-based. Structural recognition requires EU-wide integration.

III Benefits

Economic Benefits

The Union of Skills highlights that **90% of jobs require basic digital skills**, yet only half of European adults possess them¹⁸. Soft skills such as **adaptability, resilience, and communication** are critical complements to **digital competence**. Evidence from initiatives such as Lifeed indicates improved productivity, employee engagement, and retention when caregiving skills are acknowledged. The recognition of parenting competences can reduce labour shortages, increase workforce participation and retention, and support internal mobility.

Societal Benefits

The European Pillar of Social Rights guarantees **equal opportunities and lifelong learning**¹⁹. Systematically validating caregiving skills supports gender equality, reduces poverty risks, and strengthens pension outcomes. It aligns with EU commitments to **social fairness, mobility, and inclusive growth**.

IV Recommendations

1. Formal Recognition of Parenting Competences

- Explicitly **integrate parenting and caregiving competences** into ESCO and Europass.
- Develop micro-credentials linked to national qualification frameworks and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).
- Ensure **validation pathways** apply equally to informal caregiving, not only professional care roles.

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ *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).

¹⁹ Tajani, A., Juncker, J.-C. and Ratas, J. (no date) “*European Pillar of Social Rights.*”



2. Credential Portability

- Link validated caregiving competences to **EQF levels** to ensure cross-border recognition.
- Encourage Member States to embed caregiving recognition into national legislation and qualification systems.

3. Integrated and Accessible Services

- Increase **awareness and accessibility** of validation platforms, particularly for women outside formal employment.
- Expand flexible, modular learning pathways combining digital and soft skills.
- Support employer participation through incentives and co-designed training models.

4. Alignment with Broader EU Objectives

Recognition of caregiving competences should complement:

- Work-life balance measures
- Maternity, paternity and parental leave protections
- Pension recognition for caregiving periods
- Gender equality strategies

Europe's competitiveness and social cohesion depend on fully **mobilising its human capital**. Mothers and informal caregivers represent an experienced, resilient, and skilled significant demographic whose **competences remain undervalued**.

The EU has already established the legal and strategic foundations for validation of informal learning. **The next step is operational**: explicitly integrating caregiving competences into validation, credentialing, and mobility systems, thereby **transforming caregiving** from an invisible labour market penalty into a **recognised asset** for economic growth and social cohesion.