

Ms. Dubravka Šuica,
Vice-President-designate, Democracy and Demography
European Commission,
Brussels.

Brussels, the 1st of October 2019.

Dear Vice-President-designate,

The below signatories of this letter welcome the creation of a vice-presidency of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography. We also celebrate the definition of your mission as “ensuring that Europe understands and responds to one of its deepest lying challenges: demographic change.”

The 59 organizations from 24 Member States initially signing this letter, on behalf of the around one million families of the European Union they represent, understand from experience that the different aspects included in that task – impact of demographic change, regional imbalances in internal mobility, rights of the child, etc. – can be efficiently confronted, by focusing a “**better reconciling work and family and supporting people throughout their careers**”, as underlined in the mission letter you received [1], together with fiscal policies or State allowances for parents.

A principle of our family policy is that parents should be offered the opportunity to decide the number of children they have and if they wish to stay at home and raise them for a longer period of time or to return to the labour market as soon as possible.

Consequently, we want to underline the recent Directive on Work-life balance for parents and carers. “While parents and carers will profit from work-life balance better adapted to the needs of today’s families, an **increase in women employment**, their **higher earnings and career progression** will positively impact them and their families’ economic prosperity, social inclusion and health. Companies will benefit from a **wider talent pool**, a **more motivated and productive labour force** as well as less absenteeism. The rise in female employment will also contribute in addressing the challenge of demographic ageing and **ensuring Member States’ financial stability**.” [2]

This important conclusion is also supported by one of the **United Nations General Assembly**, when it “encourages Member States to promote **work-family balance** as conducive to the **well-being of children**, the achievement of **gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls**, inter alia, through improved working conditions for workers with family responsibilities, flexible working arrangements, such as telecommuting, and leave arrangements, such as **maternity leave and paternity leave**, affordable, **accessible and good-quality childcare** and initiatives to promote the equal sharing of household responsibilities, including unpaid care work, between men and women.” [3]

Part of the active stakeholders should also be companies. As the recent summit organized by UNICEF in New York has underlined, “an increasing number of businesses are beginning to see the value of offering family-friendly policies to improve this situation, given the emerging business case – because it is not just the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do.” [4] For example, The Boston Consulting

Group published a report in February 2017 highlighting the business benefits of paid family leave – from increased employee retention and a wider talent pool for recruitment, to brand equity. [5]

Though this transformative fact is starting to permeate the business and policy worlds, progress is evidently too slow. **Time for declarations has been over for long, and millions of European citizens need decisive action on this topic.**

The wage gap between men and women remains wide everywhere, making it more difficult to achieve the **Sustainable Development Goals**, and in particular SDG 5 in due time. And exists, to the detriment of women, in all countries regardless of the stage of economic development. [6] Differences in accessing employment opportunities are often based on family situation, household income and parental employment. [7] This implies that the role of policies that affect families and parental employment in particular, along with family benefits and services, are essential to achieving SDG 8. [8]. At a system level, some of the major causes of youth unemployment are inflexible labour markets and regulations that make it difficult for young people to secure stable employment trajectories [9].

Therefore, we ask you to strategically engage in advocating urgently for greater investment in family-responsive policies [10] – including paid parental leave, breastfeeding breaks, quality childcare and child support grants – and to show their value for a triple bottom line of financial profit, women’s empowerment and young children’s positive development. In doing so, the European Commission will take a decisive role and responsibility, together with governments and businesses, and the intersection between them, in giving children the best start in life.

The vision for it should be an increased provision of family-friendly policies by governments and private sector employers.

To reach this goal, we aim the following shifts to be created (as underlined, among others, by the UNICEF’s advocacy agenda) [11]:

- **From ‘Maternal’ to ‘Parental’ leave:** Time and support from all key caregivers is important for young children’s development. Evidence indicates that a father’s participation before, during and after birth increases his commitment and responsibility in the long run, which has a positive impact on the child. Greater participation in child rearing from the father not only helps with early childhood development, but also breaks the cycle of violence perpetuated by beliefs and attitudes around masculinity. The shift from maternal to parental leave is one way to strengthen this bond.
- **From ‘Infrastructure’ to ‘People’:** These policies should go beyond infrastructure changes such as breastfeeding rooms etc. to a strengthened approach of investing in families so they can provide both time and support to the young child. This should include protection for women against discrimination or retaliation from employers. [12]
- **From ‘Individual’ to ‘Co-Responsibility’:** It is also crucial to move the debate from viewing work-family as an individual matter to reframing it as a shared responsibility of governments, employers and families. [13]
- **From ‘Reducing Parental Stress’ to ‘Enhancing Family Wellbeing’:** Social structures and the work environment have been shown to shape stress associated with parenting: Family-friendly policies can help to reduce parenting stress and promote wellbeing in parents, which in turn can lead to more positive outcomes for children. [14]

The Plan of Action should include strengthening the evidence base **to create a coordinated ‘Policy Coherence on Demography,’** through the following steps:

- Resuming the European Demographic Forum (interrupted by the outgoing Commission), as a place of debate and exchange of best practices.
- Resuming the European Platform for investing in children (which succeeded the European Platform for families initiated under the German Presidency).
- Create an even stronger investment case for family-friendly policies, which also incentivizes governments to improve their policies (there may be a need to create regional investment cases as well).
- Identify and approach business sectors that would be ready for the policy change.
- Offer alternatives on the policies so there is flexibility in adoption, as all companies may not reach the gold standard immediately.
- Relationship between the government policy-legislative framework and the realities of families working in the informal sector.

The first step is the implementation of the very recent directive on Work-life balance for parents and carers. [15] Member States could also improve their policies in the following points: [16]

- Provide statutory, nationwide paid leave to both mothers and fathers, where it is lacking.
- Remove barriers to the take-up of childcare leave, especially those faced by fathers.
- Enable all children to access high-quality, age-appropriate, affordable and accessible childcare centres irrespective of their personal or family circumstances.
- Fill the gap, where it exists, between the end of parental leave and the start of affordable and accessible childcare in centres so that children can continue their development without interruption.
- Ensure that mothers can breastfeed both before and after they return to work by providing such things as guaranteed breastfeeding breaks, places to pump and store milk and quality childcare nearby.
- Build the capacity of health professionals to provide breastfeeding support in hospitals and communities.
- Collect more and better data on all aspects of family-friendly policies so that programmes can be monitored, policies compared, and countries held accountable.
- Above all, **ensuring that every future impact assessment put in place by the Commission take in due consideration the impact of every new piece of EU legislation on families and demography.**

We sincerely hope that this letter would be considered as a contribution to your plan of work for the immediate future, once you take office. Meanwhile, we will always remain at your disposal for any further request or clarification you may need.

International Federation for Family Development

World Youth Alliance Europe

European Large Families Confederation

Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe
Asociatia Familiilor Numeroase (Rumania)
Asociatia Pro Familia Transilvania (Rumania)
Associação Portuguesa de Famílias Numerosas (Portugal)
Associazione Nazionale Famiglie Numerose (Italy)
Cana Movement (Malta)
Centro de Orientação Familiar - Cenofa (Portugal)
CNAFC (France)
Conferenza Permanente Dei Centri Di Orientamento Familiare (Italy)
Családképző Fórum Egyesület (Hungary)
Eesti Lasterikaste Perede Liit (Estonia)
Families Alliance (Poland)
Family Development Foundation - FDF (Great Britain)
Family Enrichment Ireland - FEI (Ireland)
Family Solidarity (Ireland)
Federación Española de Familias Numerosas (Spain)
Fédération Nationale de la Médaille de la Famille Française (France)
FERT (Spain)
Föreningen för Familjen (Sweden)
Forum delle Famiglie (Italy)
Gausiu Seimu Asociacija (Lithuania)
Gesellschaft für Familienorientierung Gfo (Austria)
Ģimenes Atbalsta Biedriba (Latvia)
Groot Gezin (Netherlands)
Human Dignity Center (Hungary)
Hungarian Catholic Family Association (Hungary)
IFFD Finland (Finland)
Institut de la Famille Asbl (Belgium)
Institut für Elternbildung E V - IEB (Germany)
Institut pour l'Education dans la Famille - IPE (France)

Instituto de Iniciativas de Orientación Familiar (Spain)
Instituut Van De Familie – Vzw (Belgium)
In the Name of the Family (Croatia)
IROF (Spain)
Jeden Z Nas Foundation (Poland)
Klub Mnohodetných Rodin (Slovakia)
Large Families Club (Slovakia)
Lastovicka - Zdruzenie Mnohodetných Rodin (Slovakia)
Latvijas Daudzbernu Gimenu Biedribu Apvieniba (Latvia)
Life Network (Malta)
Nagycsaládosok Országos Egyesülete (Hungary)
Obitelji 3plus (Croatia)
Obiteljsko Obogacivanje (Croatia)
PREF (Spain)
Profamilia (O.S. (Czech Republic)
Seimu Universitetas (Lithuania)
Smile - Szabadkai Nagycsaládos Egyesület (Serbia)
Stichting Family Enrichment Nederland (Netherlands)
Stowarzyszenie Akademia Familijna (Poland)
Supreme Confederation of Multi-Child Parents (Greece)
Verband kinderreicher Familien Deutschland e. V. (Germany)
Verein Kinderreich (Austria)
YMCA Zivá Rodina (Czech Republic)
Zdruzenie Mnohodetných Rodin (Slovakia)
Združenie Pre Rozvoj Rodiny (Slovakia)
Związek Dużych Rodzin “Trzy Plus” (Poland)

[1] Mission letter of the President-elect of the European Commission to the Vice-President-designate for Democracy and Demography, 10 September 2019.

- [2] Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on *Work-life balance for parents and carers* and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (COM(2017)0253).
- [3] United Nations General Assembly, Resolution on the Follow-up to the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond, A/RES/73/144, 17 December 2018.
- [4] UNICEF, *Redesigning the Workplace: Public-Private Sector Initiative on Family-Friendly Policies*, 2019.
- [5] The Boston Consulting Group, *Why Paid Family Leave is Good Business* (2017).
- [6] UNICEF, *Key Findings on Families, Family Policy and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2019.
- [7] International Labour Organization, *Women at Work: Trends*, 2016.
- [8] World Economic Forum, *Youth unemployment challenge and solutions*, 2012.
- [9] International Labour Organization, *World Employment and Social Outlook for Youth*, 2016.
- [10] Concept Note on *Is Target 5.4 a Utopia*, United Nations Commission for Social Development, 2019.
- [11] Cf. UNICEF, *Redesigning the Workplace: Public-Private Sector Initiative on Family-Friendly Policies*, 2019.
- [12] The ILO Maternity Protection Convention (1919) specifically states that women need to be protected against discrimination and dismissal in relation to maternity leave, and have a right to return to work after taking leave.
- [13] Noor N.M., Mahudin N.D.M. (2016) *Work, Family and Women's Well-Being in Malaysia*. In: Connerley M., Wu J. (eds) *Handbook on Well-Being of Working Women*. International Handbooks of Quality-of-Life. Springer, Dordrecht.
- [14] Nomaguchie, Kei and Milkie, Melissa A, *Sociological Perspectives on Parenting Stress: How Social Structure and Culture Shape Parental Strain and the Well-Being of Parents and Children*, May, 2017.
- [15] Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on *Work-life balance for parents and carers* and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (COM(2017)0253).
- [16] Cf. UNICEF, *Are the world's richest countries family friendly? Policy in the OECD and EU*, 2019.