



Contribution to the EESC Opinion on Teleworking and Gender Equality

Social scientists have long recognized that access to flexible work arrangements is a major contributor to gender equality¹, and telework is a way to provide the flexibility needed by parents, provided concurrent gender discrimination causes are prevented, as defined by the European Framework Agreement.²

We have seen telework unexpectedly increased by the pandemic in the past months. As of 2019, only 5.4% of employed in the EU-27 usually worked from home – a share that remained rather constant since 2009. Estimates from Eurofound suggest that close to 40% of those working in the EU began to telework fulltime as a result of COVID-19.³ This trend will most probably stay in the future, even if not in such great numbers.

Consequently, the negative impact of some aspects of telework have also grown, particularly some forms of discrimination for women (and, indirectly, for their children). They should be confronted and compensated, to avoid the pandemic and its aftermath bring more gender inequality to vast sectors of society.

As a Federation of more than 250 Family Enrichment Centers that operates in 70 countries and benefits over 90,000 people annually, we confirm the urgent need of advocating for it, according to the following guidelines:

1. Work arrangements

Eurostat data shows that the gender pay gap in the EU stands at 14% and has only changed minimally over the last decade. It means that women earn 14% on average less per hour than men.⁴

In response to COVID-19, a number of countries have adopted far-reaching measures to contain losses in jobs and income.⁵ Those gains shouldn't be reversed after the pandemic – on the contrary, they should be consolidated and further developed.

2. Access

Access to the Internet is needed for telework, but it is no longer just a yes/no question. The quality of families' connections, and the kinds and capabilities of devices they can access, have considerable consequences for parents and children alike.

Cost remains the primary explanation for why families are less connected than they would like to be – or why they are not connected at all. But it is also important to explore why families with limited discretionary income prioritize purchasing digital devices. We find that many lower-income families are making the most of whatever forms of connectivity they can afford.⁶

Workers should not incur additional costs when performing their work from their homes. They are also entitled to obtain equipment and tools from their employer that allow them to work as if they were at their regular workplace, without negative consequences on their performance, effectiveness, and wellbeing. Therefore, in order to achieve a similar level of productivity as in the office, the employer needs to ensure that teleworkers have access to the technology and tools that they would otherwise be using if they were at the workplace. A continuous dialogue between the employer and the employees is vital to detect any difficulties with the tools and for the workers to come forward with their specific needs, in terms of ICT equipment and software as well as related training.⁷

¹ Goldin C, How to Achieve Gender Equality, Milken Institute Review, 2015.

² "Telework, is a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis" (Article 2).

³ Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.

⁴ Eurostat, Gender Statistics Database, 2019.

⁵ Cf. ILO brief, The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work, 2020.

⁶ ILO, Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, 2020.

⁷ ILO, Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, 2020.

3. Housework

The UN Sustainable Development Agenda promotes to “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.”⁸

Evidence shows that care jobs are often characterized by temporary or zero-hours contracts, low salaries, work overload and long hours. The care pay penalty is more pronounced for women, in particular in the occupations in which they predominate, such as nursing.⁹ Lower pay also undermines the capacity of care workers to obtain care for their family members, thus adding to their overall care responsibilities.

Women are generally more involved in these activities. On average, Eurfound reports them spending 35 hours per week caring for children or grandchildren (compared to 25 hours per week for men) and 18 hours per week doing housework (12 hours per week for men). The difference between men and women in terms of participation in childcare and housework increases even more among those who have children aged under 12. On average, women spent 62 hours per week caring for children (compared to 36 hours for men) and 23 hours per week doing housework (15 hours for men). Single parents, both male and female, spent longer hours than average on childcare and female single parents with children under 12 spent the longest hours of all groups (77 hours per week).¹⁰

4. Children

The Council of the European Union has recently agreed that “public policies should be designed in order to create the conditions, inter-alia the economic environment, enabling individuals and families to have the children they wish and to enjoy a better quality of life, live in safety and achieve balance between work, family and caring responsibilities.”¹¹

The main differences between those with and without small children are in relation to concentration levels and juggling time between work and family. According to Eurofound, 34% of those with children under 12 feel that their job prevents them giving time to the family. Regarding employment status, working women with children under 12 in the household spent 54 hours per week on childcare, compared with 32 hours for men). In terms of housework, women spent more time than men on this, both when they were in employment (16 hours compared to 11 hours), or when they were unemployed or inactive (20 hours compared to 12 hours for men).¹²

To compensate for these differences, comprehensive well-resourced and flexible parental leave entitlements, part-time working arrangements according to parental choice by ensuring non-discriminatory practices towards parents should be established. Parental leaves should be preferred to paid leave for mothers, to avoid possible gender discrimination in the staff selection process, making sure its duration and remuneration are adequate.

Breastfeeding is another need for mothers that shouldn't be neglected. According to UNICEF, only 39 percent of businesses offer any support for breastfeeding, usually in the form of breaks, and more comprehensive programs to support lactating mothers are absent. UNICEF and the World Health Organization recommend exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months after childbirth.¹³

Business employers and labour unions should also work together with governments to ensure safe working conditions for pregnant women and their children, minimize shift work and long, unpredictable working hours of parents with young children, and introduce flexible work arrangements to enable parents to take care of their children.¹⁴

Ignacio Socias Piarnau
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⁸ Target 5.4.

⁹ ILO, Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture, 2018.

¹⁰ Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.

¹¹ Conclusions on Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead, 2020.

¹² Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.

¹³ UNICEF, Family-Friendly Policies - A Global Survey of Business Policy, 2020.

¹⁴ UNICEF, Business and Family-Friendly Policies - An Evidence Brief, 2019.