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| **Work Life Balance: a gender issue**  **Work life balance** is about the **division of one's time and focus between work and family or leisure** **activities.** There are a number of public policies and legislation affecting work life balance for workers across Europe. These especially relate to birth, parental and carer’s **leave,** flexible **working hours** and **accommodation** of working hours and duties, **child care** and **tax benefit** systems.  Work life balance affects **gender equality** in many ways, and in particular when it comes to the role of parents. For example, if there is no accessible child care or working hours are rigid, one of the parents might find it necessary to work part time or not work at all to take care of home and children.  Work life balance measures also affect **religious** **employees or employees with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities**, because they may be in particular need of flexibility and accommodation in their work situation. Furthermore, employees with **responsibility for elderly family members** or others in need of care can also benefit from good work life balance policies.  Due to **traditional gender norms, caring responsibilities are very often taken up by women**. This impacts on their access to the labour market and paid employment, career progression, economic independence, equal pay and equal participation in decision-making and society at large. |

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| **Figures**   * In 2015, in the EU, every day **37,5% of women** and 24,7% of men care for and educate their children or grandchildren, elderly or people with disabilities[[1]](#footnote-1). * Mothers are **8 times more likely to work part time than fathers[[2]](#footnote-2)**. * **Caring responsibilities** explain inactivity in the labour market for almost 20% of inactive women, while this is only the case for less than 2% of men[[3]](#footnote-3). |

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| **Disparities in Europe[[4]](#footnote-4)**   * **Maternity Leave, granted to mothers after giving birth: ranging** from 14 weeks (Germany) – 58 weeks (Bulgaria) * **Paternity Leave, granted to fathers after childbirth:** 7 countries do not have paternity leave provisions (AT, HR, CY, CZ, DE, LU, SK). Ranging from 1 day (Malta) – 9 weeks (Finland) * **Parental Leave, granted to both parents after childbirth, useable for a longer period of time:** All EU Member States have a minimum of 4 months parental leave in line with the 2010 Parental Leave Directive. Not all of them have a period of leave that cannot be transferred. |

**Equality Bodies promoting a better Work Life Balance for all**

*Reconciliation of work and family life and work life balance are issues of concern to many equality bodies and have been a focus for important initiatives by a number of them. The 2013 Equinet Perspective “Equality Bodies promoting a better Work Life Balance for all” gives an overview of the work of and challenges encountered by equality bodies in this area.*

Work on this issue has involved a particular focus on **eliminating discrimination where women have been denied access to the workplace** or returned to poorer **working conditions** on foot of their pregnancy or after taking up maternity leave.

* Equality bodies work on **combating gender stereotypes** that assign particular roles to men and women.
* They **raise awareness** on the different experiences and situations of women and men in the design and provision of statutory leave arrangements.
* Equality bodies **support access** by men to flexible working arrangements and statutory leave provisions.
* They **advance equality** for women by supporting workplace flexibilities that enable women to remain in or return to the workplace while having care responsibilities.

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| **Discrimination: What do equality bodies see on the ground?**   * High levels of pregnancy related discrimination. * Discrimination in connection with taking up leave arrangements. * Denial of rights in access to statutory leave arrangements. * Discrimination in access to flexible working arrangements. |

**What do equality bodies do to promote work life balance?**

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| Casework | Support good practice | Research | Awareness Raising | Communication | Policy work |

**Challenges**

* Under-reporting due to fear of victimisation.
* Lack of human and financial resources of equality bodies.
* In a context of high levels of unemployment, some social partner organisations and individual employers can be disinterested in taking action on reconciliation of work and family life and work life balance issues.
* Fiscal consolidation measures have impacted negatively on the supply of public sector care services.
* The arena of private or family life can be seen as beyond the mandate of the equality body or any statutory intervention.

**Equality Bodies’ practices**

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| **Equality and Human Rights Commission, UK Great Britain**  **Research on pregnancy and maternity discrimination**  In 2016, the British equality body published [research](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace) on pregnancy and maternity discrimination at the workplace.  The main findings of the study show that 84% of employers believe that supporting women in the workplace is an asset and that female employees are committed workers. However, the research also revealed that 77% of UK mothers reported negative experiences and possible discrimination. Drawing from the information collected, the EHRC proposed six recommendations:   1. Government shows leadership for change. 2. Employers offer more family friendly workplaces and open communication. 3. There is better access to information and advice for women and employers. 4. Health and safety risks are better managed by employers. 5. Access to justice is improved for women bringing claims. 6. Progress towards a fairer workplace is tracked.   Outcomes of the project also include an [employer toolkit](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/employer-toolkit). |
| **Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, UK Northern Ireland**  **Investigation into pregnancy and maternity at work**  Half of the women who responded to a 2015 Equality Commission investigation into the employment experiences of pregnant workers and mothers in Northern Ireland believe that their career opportunities have been negatively affected by their pregnancy or maternity leave. That is one of the findings of ‘Expecting Equality: a Formal Investigation under the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976’.  Nevertheless, around half of the women believed they were supported by their employer during their pregnancy. Women identified supportive employers as those who:   * implemented policies and practices to effectively manage pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work, * were prepared to consider adjustment to work load and work environment during pregnancy, * maintained reasonable contact during maternity leave, * provided a family friendly work environment for mothers on return to work, * communicated with employees in order to promote understanding of the needs and expectations of both parties.   More information is available [here](http://www.equineteurope.org/Northern-Ireland-Investigation-into-pregnancy-and-maternity-at-work). |
| **Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment, Portugal**  **Time to Have Time campaign**  The campaign aims to raise awareness about simple tools to ensure work life balance. It provides advice and examples of good practices on reconciliation of professional and family life, such as organising the work schedule, parenthood protection and family assistance, and social benefits and financial assistance to workers and their families. The main instruments for reconciling professional and family life provided by the labour code are also highlighted.  More information is available [here](http://cite.gov.pt/en/campaigns.html). |

**Taking action at EU level  
2017 Work Life Balance Package**

Alongside the launch of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en) in April 2017, the European Commission presented its Work Life Balance Package including **both legislative and non-legislative measures**[[5]](#footnote-5)**.** The package does not address the question of maternity leave.

**Work Life Balance Directive**

Of particular interest is the proposed **Directive on Work Life Balance** which sets a number of **minimum standards for parental, paternity and carer’s leave.** The proposal is an ambitious step towards equal sharing of caring responsibilities, better participation of men and improved protection against discrimination of workers who have taken paternity, parental or carers’ leave.

**Main measures:**

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| 10 working days of **paternity leave** | Up to minimum 4 months of **parental leave,** which cannot be transferred between parents. It can be taken until the child is 12 years old | | Workers will have the right to take up to 5 days **of carers’ leave** per year |
| Paternity, parental and carers’ leave should be compensated at least at the level of sick leave | Working parents of children up to 12 and carers will have the right to request defined flexible working arrangements | |  |
| Member States should also ensure the **prohibition of less favourable treatment** of workers who applied or have taken paternity, parental or carers’ leave, or who have exercised their right to flexible working arrangements. | | The Directive extends the mandate of equality bodies competent for Directive 2006/54/EC (Gender Recast Directive) to issues covered by the proposal. | |

**Equinet and equality bodies strongly welcome this proposal, and suggest the European Parliament and Council of the EU to keep its level of ambition throughout the negotiations.**

Equinet would also welcome additional reference to the necessity for Member States to take all measures to ensure the body or bodies are independent and allocated adequate powers, functions and resources to implement their mandate within the scope of this Directive.The clarification of this article is necessary to ensure equality bodies have a broad mandate to promote and support the achievement of full equality in practice.

**Communication: An initiative to support work life balance for working parents and carers**

In addition to the proposed Directive, the European Commission also released a Communication outlining non-legislative measures it will undertake in the coming years in the area of work life balance. The Communication aims to complement the proposed Directive.

Its priority areas for action include:

* Improving the design and gender-balanced take-up of family-related leaves and flexible working arrangements,
* Improving the quality, affordability and access to childcare and long-term care
* Addressing economic disincentives for parents and carers to work.

Importantly, the Communication commits EU funds to achieve progress in all these areas for actions.

The Communication also foresees the organisation of a seminar, in cooperation with Equinet, on capacity building activities for equality bodies and other respective labour market supervisory bodies (Network of Labor Inspectorates, SLIC) in Member States, with a focus on dismissal protection. The Seminar will be organised around mid-October 2018. It would aim for participants to:

* Familiarize themselves with a range of issues arising in the context of discriminatory dismissal and discrimination in access to statutory rights and challenges in tackling these;
* Exchange good practices between equality bodies and labour inspectorates;
* Exchange on strategies for handling discrimination and dismissal in the workplace;
* Strengthen networking and cooperation between Equinet and SLIC and their members where it already exist and initiation of possible new cooperation.

Equinet is the European Network of Equality Bodies, gathering 46 equality bodies in 34 European countries. Equality bodies are independent public institutions with a mandate to promote equality and tackle discrimination on grounds of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, religion and belief, disability and other grounds. According to EU legislation, each EU Member States have to set up one or several equality bodies with a mandate to address discrimination on the ground of gender equality. Equality bodies are also instrumental in ensuring access to justice to victims of discrimination in the European Union. More information about Equinet is available [here](http://www.equineteurope.org).

1. [EIGE Gender Equality Index 2017](http://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eurostat 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. European Commission [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. European Parliament – [Briefing : Maternity, paternity and parental leave in the EU (March 2017)](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599323/EPRS_BRI(2017)599323_EN.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?&catId=1311&langId=en [↑](#footnote-ref-5)