



Confédération des Organisations Familiales de l'Union européenne  
Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union

**COFACE Position on  
reconciling family life, private life and professional life  
to prevent poverty and social exclusion**

*Adopted by the Administrative Council of COFACE  
on 15-16 December 2008*

**Executive summary**

- **There is a clear and direct link between difficulties in combining family life, private life and professional life, and poverty and social exclusion. Reconciliation policies are key to any wider policy to tackle and prevent poverty and social exclusion**
- **Quality employment (decent wage, job security, working conditions respectful of family life) is a precondition to any reconciliation measures. Active inclusion strategies must take into account this qualitative dimension of work and ensure that reconciliation opportunities do exist.**
- **The value of activities pursued during family, private and social times must be given social recognition through the integration of these times in working time and societal time. To this effect:**
  - **leave schemes meeting the variety of family needs must be enshrined into legislation for all categories of workers irrespective of their professional status or activity, and these schemes must encompass security aspects (job protection, adequate pay, continuity of social security/employment rights) and flexibility;**
  - **part-time work must be upgraded (pay, social rights, status on the labour market, rules for the calculation and payment of overtime hours brought in line with full-time work, etc.);**
  - **flexible working time arrangements must be further promoted, with a strict protection of employment and social security rights;**
  - **public times must be coordinated;**

- **gender equality must be furthered, including in terms of gender equality in employment and changing role models of women and men.**

**- Families must be offered access to a wide array of services meeting the variety of families' needs, and in particular diversified childcare services and services for other dependant persons. If these services are to deliver their full potential in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, they must be:**

- **provided in sufficient quantity, with ambitious objectives set at EU level;**
- **be open to all without discrimination against, in particular, migrants, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities;**
- **tailored to meet the specific needs of the most disadvantaged groups;**
- **tailored to be immediately available when unemployed parents are offered a training or a job;**
- **be affordable for all thanks to public and private financial support and adequate means-testing taking into account for each family the number of children in childcare;**
- **quality services, offering quality jobs to their staff;**

**and the implementation of those principles must be effective.**

**- Reconciliation of family life , private life and professional life be mainstreamed across all relevant policies (employment, social services, social security, education, etc.) at EU and national level. At the local level, alliances for families must be created to involve all stakeholders in the design of family-friendly policies, and in particular work-life balance oriented policies.**

## **I. How difficulties in combining work, family life, and private life play into family poverty**

The EU Member States with the best record on tackling family and child poverty are those that have a policy of financial support to families and also offer parents ways of balancing family life, private life and professional life. Services for families in particular are key instruments. They have positive impact on men's involvement in family work and they participate in gender mainstreaming EU and national policies. Besides, early childhood quality care services have proven to be a key positive factor for the social inclusion of all children irrespective of their background<sup>1</sup>.

There is a clear and direct link between difficulties in combining family life, private life and professional life, and poverty and social exclusion. Where the need to care for a child or a dependant family member cannot be reconciled with the demands of work, many people - mostly women – are forced to stop work temporarily or altogether, or go part-time. Having no adequate monthly income and no adequate social security coverage in case of divorce, separation or death of the partner, such people are left vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. Ones must not forget several other negative consequences in terms of access to employment, status of employment, reduced social rights , slower (or even stopped) career and pay progression, and,

<sup>1</sup> The recent UNICEF report « The child care transition » demonstrates that, if during the first year the child might develop better under parental care, in the next stages child care services have enormous potential for giving children the best possible start in life, including for limiting the early establishment of disadvantage, provided that they are high quality services:  
[http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc8\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc8_eng.pdf)

thus, reduced pensions. Work-life balance is even more crucial to lone-parent families trapped between the need to work (only one income to provide for the family's needs) and the need to stay at home to look after the children (no – or no affordable - childcare provision). Similarly, large families face a higher risk of poverty: the task of juggling work with family life is so difficult that one of the parents is often obliged to stop working. This has a very negative impact as children living in a family with a single bread-winner face a higher risk of poverty. For vulnerable families, the time dedicated to children's education is even more sacred as this time has to be instrumental in stopping intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Beyond family responsibilities, the possibility of combining private life and professional life is an important factor of well-being as well as of inclusion and participation in society, including through volunteering activities during free time. For families experiencing extreme poverty, time is also needed to meet basic needs and to deal with support services, without impinging on the time spent for the education of children.

A gender equal policy for combining family life, private life and work is therefore key to a policy to tackle and prevent poverty and social exclusion, especially given the rising concern about work-life balance with the rise in the ageing population. Any policy for combining family life, private life and work must aimed at intergenerational solidarity.

To be effective, any work/life balance policy must focus not only on work itself, but also transition periods (education, unemployment).

COFACE has set about identifying the measures in terms of time and services that are relevant to combining work and a family, and preventing poverty and social exclusion, with proper regard to gender equality, the interests of the child and the dignity of dependant persons, and with quality employment as a precondition.

Policies on time and services must be combined to give families a free choice between putting their family responsibilities first in conditions that provide financial security and make it easy to return to work, staying at work, or combining the two. These work/family life balance measures must be also flanked by measures that promote equal opportunities and men's role in the family, so that the balancing act is not just left to women<sup>2</sup>.

## **II. Ensuring quality employment**

Quality employment is a precondition to any successful policy for combining family life, private life and work.

Quality employment means that workers must earn decent wages enabling them to make work pay, despite for instance the costs of childcare services or of services for other dependent persons. Generally speaking, systems of financial incentives must be implemented in order for workers to receive a better net income while working than while unemployed. Beyond this, a decent wage must enable workers to support their families in a dignified life. Decent wages for positions held mostly by women will also help tackling the gender pay gap and desegregating the labour market.

Quality employment also means that working conditions must be respectful of family life and private life, with a limitation of non-standard working hours and precarious employment relationship. People experiencing poverty increasingly have to accept low quality jobs that take no account of the family dimension and stop them meeting the demands of their personal life properly. Part-time workers whose planning change on a weekly basis are not in a position to implement in a satisfactory way a strategy for reconciliation of their family life, private life and professional life. In

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed recommendations on this topic, please see COFACE's brochure 'Men and Families' (2006): <http://coface-eu.org/en/upload/docs/PERES/brochureEN.pdf>

particular, leaves are measures which remains applicable in practice only with stable and secure jobs and decent wages.

Finally, quality employment means legalizing illegal workers in so far as possible. Some migrant families do not benefit from existing national legislation on reconciliation because their members have informal jobs.

Policies implemented to promote the return to the labour market, such active inclusion strategies, must fully take into account this qualitative dimension of work and ensure that reconciliation opportunities do exist. For example, activation measures must recognize these needs and not penalize a refusal to take a job which is objectively justified by childcare problems, as long as not adequate policy has been implemented this field.

### **III. Including family, private and social times in the organization of working time and societal time**

Recent years have seen advances in measures to give workers more time to attend to their family responsibilities and meet the needs of their private life, not least through the European directive on maternity leave. But the gender-based hierarchy in employed and family work means that reconciliation measures are still mainly addressed to women. By reducing social inclusion simply to labour force participation and disregarding family and social responsibilities, social inclusion policies arguably make the problem worse.

COFACE wants the value of family work and of private life activities (whether meeting basic needs – eg. ensuring that the power is not cut because of payment delay – or volunteering work - e.g. participation in social support network in the community) to be given social recognition. This must be done by integrating family and private times in the organization of working time, and more generally in the societal organization of time. This social recognition must also be translates into social inclusion policies.

In this respect, both leave and flexible working time arrangements must be promoted as part of schemes to further the social inclusion of beneficiaries. Public time must also be adjusted. More also needs to be done on gender equality in employment and gender equality generally, so that leave and flexible working time arrangements for family reasons do not automatically mean a drop in employment status. Reciprocally, in order to reduce the gap between men's and women's careers, clear and volunteer incentives must be implemented to foster men's take up of leave and flexible working time arrangements.

#### **A. Leave**

Periods of leave are key to combining family life, private life and professional life. Changing sets of family circumstances in a lifetime - motherhood, fatherhood, looking after a small child or adolescent, caring for an ill or disabled child or adult, or caring for an elderly relative - may mean having to pay more time to family responsibilities, and stopping their activity for a while, partly or altogether.

Spells completely or partly out of employed work for family or private reasons must be treated as normal parts of the career path. Anyone stopping their activity, whatever it may be (employment, self-employment) must qualify for leave arrangements.

Students and job seekers must benefit from similar schemes when, just as workers, they must put aside their studies or their job search to dedicate themselves to their family responsibilities.

If they are to help prevent poverty and social exclusion, leave schemes must meet the following conditions:

- a range of leave schemes that address families' needs (maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, adoption leave, care leave). Leave schemes should encompass:
  - employment protection for a given period before and after the leave period(s);
  - right to return to the same or an equivalent job;
  - preservation of training and promotion entitlements;
  - continuity of social rights (social security, pension);
  - a facilitated return to employment with entitlement to a range of measures like assisted job search, training, vocational guidance and work induction measures. These measures must be flanked by childcare provision so that children can be looked after during training and counselling time;
- flexible take-up arrangements. Beneficiaries should be able to split the leave, and to take it on a full time or part time basis with the possibility to:
  - change from part time to full time and the other way round;
  - to resume work earlier;
  - to go on leave at any moment in their career, without notice period, in case of emergency;in order to better address families' needs and to limit the duration of period outside work (fully or partially) as such periods act against participation in the labour market and career prospects;
- an individual, non-transferable right, in order to foster men's involvement in family and household work;
- an adjustment to new family realities (the new partner in blended families to qualify for the leave; adjustment of leave for shared residency of a child);
- extended parental leave possibilities up to the child's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, as from the first child, so that protected career breaks are available to address the whole range of problems that parents can face (e.g., adolescence);
- no eligibility conditions so that they are available to all workers categories, irrespective of their professional status (employees or self-employed or assisting partners) and of their activity status (unemployed, contingent workers). Students must also be eligible, through specific measures;
- a sufficiently substantial payment to make leave accessible to all families, especially lone-parent families, and to make them appealing to men. Pay must be adequate, in prorata of the salary for employed workers, with a minimum bottom level to be attractive to people on a low wage, and possibly with a ceiling for high income<sup>3</sup>;
- replacement services during the period of leave for self-employed workers, as an alternative to pay;
- a sufficiently long period of leave to address families' needs without jeopardizing the leave-taker's return to work<sup>4</sup>. The duration of leave must be adapted to meet specific needs (e.g. in case of multiple birth for the maternity leave and paternity leave, in case of long-term illness for family care leave);

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<sup>3</sup> For COFACE's detailed recommendations on leave payment, please see COFACE's response to the European Commission's consultation on reconciliation of professional, private and family life: <http://coface-eu.org/en/upload/Re-COFACE-Leave-EN.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> For COFACE's detailed recommendations on leave duration, please see COFACE's response to the European Commission's consultation on reconciliation of professional, private and family life: <http://coface-eu.org/en/upload/Re-COFACE-Leave-EN.pdf>

Systems whereby companies top up the legal allowance in order to reach a remuneration equal to 100% of the salary should be promoted,

### B. Quality part-time work

Even though, in some case, part-time work has been imposed on workers (mainly women) without second thought for family needs, the growth of part-time work has given access to the job market for people, especially mothers, who without the opportunity to go part-time would have stopped working altogether or never started.

But it is very often social inclusion on the cheap, because, in practice, part-time means disproportionately lower social protection and pay than for full-time work, and slower career development. In many Member States, it is also apt to be relegated to low-skilled jobs and in some cases coupled to non-standard working hours which cancel out the potential value of part-time for combining work, family and private life.

The status of part-time therefore needs to be upgraded:

- by doing away with the non-objective full-time / part time pay differential by making it depend only on hours worked;
- by likewise giving part-timers the same the social security/employment rights as full-timers to remove the non-objective differentials;
- by giving part-time workers the same training opportunities as full-time workers;
- through diversifying part-time work by extending the opportunity to all positions and occupations, for instance by promoting job-sharing, so as to improve its status and prevent labour market segregation;
- by introducing a right to change employment status during the working lifetime, and especially a right to return to full-time work for workers who have gone part-time to devote the occupational time saved to family work;
- by limiting irregular non-standard working hours that are harmful to family life;
- by providing for the payment of overtime hours as soon as the contractual number of hours has been exceeded;
- by informing workers on part-time work and its consequences.

Some countries like Austria and Belgium have statutory or collectively-negotiated part-time arrangements to enable family life and private life to be combined with professional life, with financial compensation and the right to return full-time. Such systems should be promoted within the European Union, with an adequate allowance with a minimum bottom level sufficient to make them available to low-income and lone-parent families, and to make them appealing to men. In this strict framework, employers could receive the financial support of public authorities, and a ceiling could possibly be laid down for high income.

### C. Flexible working time arrangements

As well as part-time, priority should be given to a more flexible approach to working time for the benefit of families, such as short-hours working to allow workers free time without endangering their career. Some or all of this could conceivably be made up later when the need to balance work/family are less important, with the calculation of hours worked on, at minimum, a yearly basis. There should also be strict limits on the amount of daily and weekly overtime). COFACE support the measures which some Members States (e.g. France) are implementing to ensure that rights vested with one employer, including in terms of time, can be transferred in case the worker is hired by a new employer.

Different schemes should be available, depending on needs:

- short-hours working (e.g., working hours adapted to school hours);

- non worked periods (e.g. during school holidays);
- flexitime.

The current revision of Working Time Directive 2003/88/CE must require Member States to take all necessary measures to guarantee that workers can ask to have their hours and pattern of work changed to accommodate the needs of their family life and that employers must give consideration to such requests.

Flexible working arrangements must include strict protection of employment and social security rights. They must not be restricted by an upper limit set on the child's age.

The measures to be taken under the European Commission's proposed active inclusion approach must include working time organized in an adapted and flexible manner to help marginalized individuals keep their jobs.

Teleworking, by contrast, is arguably a solution to be handled with care, because family life is affected by the removal of dividing lines between private life and professional life. The working hours and status of such work must be clearly delimited. Teleworking is also not an option for many types of job. Rather than a means of work/life balance, it must remain a transport solution to give families the benefit of extra time saved on commuting.

Finally, the right to breaks and arrangements for breast feeding (length/frequency of breaks, appropriate areas in the workplace) must be strengthened.

Generally speaking, initiatives aiming at promoting family-friendly companies (e.g. certification, charter, etc.) must be supported. It must be ensured that these policies are really matching the interests of workers.

For parents in education, higher and vocational education institutions must offer a more flexible organization of studies, such as increasing distance learning provision and systems of modules to enable students to spread their studies over a longer period of time. If family, private life and work responsibilities are to be combined, the different public times (work, school, the business hours of child care services, family care and help services, government agencies, public transport, etc.) have to be matched-up

#### D. Coordination of public times

To really promote work-life balance, it is necessary to look beyond leave arrangements and the reorganization of working time to give serious thought to public times. A closer matching up of work hours with school hours, child care service hours, and public transport timetables is important for all families, especially lone-parent families.

Orchestrating community life times could be taken in charge by a new institution to be established at regional or national level. These services should have the power to put forward solutions for synchronising times at the level of government (national or federal, regional or local) where decisions are taken in order to ensure consistency, and work out proposed official solutions where times cannot be made to match up.

Encouragement should be given to setting up time management offices, of the kind found in some towns in Italy and France especially, tasked with coordinating private time and public time. Invaluable as they may be, however, local time management offices are not enough to solve the daily time coordination problems faced by workers with parental or family responsibilities, as they often have no control over decisions relating to the organisation of social times.

#### Furthering gender equality

The legal and social frameworks given to family leave in particular has not been enough in most EU Member States to bring new social norms into being that would have legitimised and standardized them, especially where men are concerned. The result is that periods out of the job market and non-standard working hours arrangements bring about a reduced employment status and thus remain a form of social exclusion.

Notable among the explanations for this are the persistent inequalities between women and men on the labour market and in the family, and entrenched stereotypes of maleness and femaleness.

Progress must therefore be sought at EU level in terms of<sup>5</sup>:

- equality in working life (equal pay, equal employment status, equal employment conditions, compliance-auditing of equality in practice in the workplace; introducing the right to respect for private and family life in labour law; desegregation of the labour market);
- education and training (including gender equality lessons in pre-school and school curriculum; training for health workers and educators; advisory and training services for men);
- information (company and public information campaigns; workplace or community information units).

All these areas of work must be fully included in the implementation of the Roadmap for equality between women and men adopted by the European Commission for the period 2006-2010.

## **Service provision that addresses families' needs**

### **A. A wide array of services**

Families need services in order to combine family life and private life with working life. This includes all the services that are essential to enable workers to fulfil their work obligations while discharging their parental and family responsibilities:

These essential services are, for children:

- pre-school childcare provision
- out-of-school childcare provision, including in school holidays, or outside normal working hours;
- childcare while a parent is in hospital;
- short-term sick child sitter services, including emergency services;
- emergency or immediate childcare services in case of entry into the labour market;
- home care services;
- school meals.
- ...

Public policies must go beyond the 2002 Barcelona objectives laid down for pre-school childcare provision, as these only go part way to addressing the needs of workers with family responsibilities. Specifically, there must be continuity of provision for the different age groups to avoid breaches of continuity in parents' careers. Ambitious objectives must also be set for out-of-school childcare provision, including during school holidays, for at the minimum children aged 6-12: in many countries, school times are not interoperable with standard working hours, consequently many parents (in practice, mothers) are obliged to stay at home or to work part-time. These services also act as an educational support for vulnerable families.

Establishing an enforceable right to childcare such as already exists in Finland would be a way of really enabling parents to decide freely, in the best conditions, whether to stop working to take care

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed recommendations on this topic, please see COFACE's brochure 'Men and Families' (2006): <http://coface-eu.org/en/upload/docs/PERES/brochureEN.pdf>

of their children or to keep working. Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires from Member States to take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible. To enhance the social inclusion of the persons who left the labour market to care for their children (or for other dependent members), they must automatically benefit from these services for an easier return to the labour market.

Public policies must pay special heed to addressing the particular needs of parents of disabled, or seriously, chronically or incurably ill children, by developing a network of services appropriate to their health condition, bearing in mind these parents' wishes to have their children in mainstream provision wherever possible, conditions permitting. This will require appropriate adjustments to mainstream provision.

The essential services are, for dependant persons:

- intake, accommodation and short or long-term, every day, alternating days or on-demand (respite) care provision for dependent persons;
- emergency/crisis intake services;
- day/night intake services;
- home care services;
- outside help;
- ...

European objectives must also be set for services for elderly and other dependant persons, be it reception, care or respite provision.

These various essential services must be tailored to meet the specific needs of the most vulnerable groups, such as migrants and people with disabilities. Poor families tend to be suspicious towards formal systems of childcare (i.e. all forms of childcare provision organized or controlled by a public or private body), and therefore use more informal ones: informal childcare should receive a stronger support, provided that they receive appropriate and paid training. Similarly, sick child sitter services are key for workers and measures aiming at developing such services must be promoted (e.g. pools of childminders intervening on request at home). Thought should also be given to developing childcare provision in higher and vocational education institutions to help student parents combine education with family responsibilities.

Alongside these essential services, families also need to be able to call on outside help to perform household chores. Such outside help would enable them to free up time.

Encouragement must be given to employers who develop family-friendly services meeting real needs and respectful of workers' family life, e.g., via tax benefits. For instance, measures aiming at creating centralised services on an industrial area (e.g. chemists' shop, laundry) to ease reconciliation of private life and professional life should be promote. Given the problems involved in workplace childcare (parents' work patterns and travel imposed on the children, employee's dependence on the employer, problems if made unemployed) they should only be provided in the strict interest of the child and parents (e.g., for hospital staff) and should be open to the local community. A system of collective funding of childcare through employers' contribution is a better option.

Specialist job search services must also be developed. The development of online services must be encouraged, while preserving physical employment agencies, because by no means all of the least well-off families have access to the Internet and the digital skills required to use it.

## B. Accessible and quality services

All services of whatever kind should be provided in sufficient quantity, be geographically accessible and affordable to all, and meet quality criteria.

These services must be approached as a right of families, and specific attention must be paid to the fight against discrimination in access to services, especially for migrant, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. Emphasis must also be put on effective implementation of this right of families. Information measures regarding available services must be implemented. Outreach programmes must be directed at vulnerable families (e.g. home visits) to raise their awareness of these services and their usefulness. A specific effort must be made to reach migrant families (information in a language they can understand, community mediator with the same migration background).

Local access must be promoted with the development of community-based services, for instance with the creation of community centres responsible for the integrated provision of a comprehensive range of services for families (health services, support services, services for disabled persons, employment services, etc.), for instance building on the UK “Sure Start” model.

A special focus is needed on rural areas and big towns and cities, where provision of childcare services and of services for dependent persons is in acutely short supply. Innovative solutions to accessibility in rural areas must be developed, like childminder networks (with due attention to employment quality and equality with other workers), micro-crèches, multipurpose community centres and mobile childcare services, while keeping up service quality standards. In conurbations, creation of collective childcare services in deprived areas must be fostered.

There is a direct link between the female participation rate and the adequacy of childcare provision, and access to family services is an area where social inequalities are particularly marked. The high costs of childcare services have a negative impact on the employment of parents with two-plus children, low-earners, lone parents, and the unemployed. Policy therefore needs to go towards free or means-tested paying care provision because tax deductibility of childcare costs does not benefit the families that most need it. The calculation of the amount due by each family must absolutely take into account the number of children in childcare. Otherwise, the costs of childcare for families with several young children can get extortionate and lead to the withdrawal of the parent with the lowest wage from the labour market. Individual childcare provision (e.g., childminders) must get the same public support as community provision, such as by a State financial contribution to the pay and social security contributions of properly contracted employees. An increase of the financial support for parents working non-standard hours would also be a very useful measure: cost of childcare during non-standard working hours, often at home, is more expensive.

Services must be accessible to all children, not just those of working parents, but also those of job-seekers and parents in training. Lone-parent families with a low income in particular need childcare provision even more than other families in order to be able to work, look for work, or undergo training. Priority allocation of places as part of a quota system could benefit these families. As long as the supply of childcare does not meet the demand of families, though must be given to transitional measures such as priority allocation of places in childcare services to single parents with a low income.

The quality aspects to be considered are staff training, the numbers cared for by individual carers, and where childcare is concerned, educational responsibilities and working hours appropriate to the children’s welfare. Still on childcare, a special focus is needed on migrant children, including through support in learning the host country’s language for children and their parents, and other measures fostering dialogue between parents and professionals. This means training professionals in how to take better account of multiculturalism.

The family support services sector, often home-based, must lead to the creation of proper quality jobs, encompassing among other things the legalisation of the employment relationship, decent wage and working conditions, the quality of the services which are provided and staff training. The working hours of these services should not be too deregulated so as to preserve the children's welfare and not penalize the staff's own work-life balance.

## **V. Conclusion: an integrated approach to reconciling family life and professional life**

The complexity of the issues and wide range of policies involved requires an integrated approach to combining family life, private life and professional life. Thus far, the approach taken has mainly been work-focused. It is time that more emphasis was put on the family and private life angle.

The key aspects of reconciliation - leave, flexible working time arrangements and services - should be addressed through a framework directive at EU level. It must also be "mainstreamed" across all employment-, social security- and, social services- and education-related policies, at EU and national level.

At local level, local alliances for families could be created building on the German model, to involve all stakeholders (local authorities, companies, social services, etc.) in the design of family-friendly policies, and in particular work-life balance oriented policies.

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