

# Advancing work–life balance with the EU Funds <sup>(1)</sup>

Gender equality is one of the European Union's core values, enshrined in its [treaties](#) and the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#). It is critical for the achievement of the EU's renewed policy objectives under the future EU Funds' common provisions regulation:

- a smarter Europe – innovative and smart economic transformation;
- a greener, low-carbon Europe;
- a more connected Europe – mobility and regional information and communications technology connectivity;
- a more social Europe – implementing the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#);
- a Europe closer to its citizens – the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas through local initiatives.

Yet inequalities persist across the EU. Women are under-represented in the labour market and in management positions, while men are under-represented in unpaid care work. Almost every woman in the EU engages in cooking and housework every day, in comparison with every third man. While there has been progress for women in the labour market, there has been almost no improvement regarding gender equality in the sphere of unpaid care responsibilities over the past 10 years <sup>(2)</sup>.

The promotion of better work–life balance for women and men is at the heart of EU policies, including the new [gender equality strategy 2020–2025](#). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has looked at how the EU Funds are being used and what they can do to advance work–life balance.



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It is difficult to discuss work–life balance without discussing care and the value we ascribe to it. But what is care? Care is a concept that encompasses the processes of creating, sustaining and reproducing people, selves and social relationships on three levels: (a) caring for the self, (b) caring for others and (c) caring for the world <sup>(3)</sup>.

Care tends to be presented as something only required by a discrete group of the 'needy' – children, the ill, older people and/or persons living with disabilities <sup>(4)</sup>. Yet everyone will require care at some stage of their lives. Care is fundamental for our survival and sustainability.

## What is work–life balance and why does it matter?

Work–life balance is about striking a balance between 'work' and 'life'. Here, 'work' means paid work and 'life' means everything else – including, but not limited to, unpaid work, domestic work (cleaning, cooking, washing, etc.), care work (taking care of children, older people, people who are ill, persons living with disabilities, as well as oneself), leisure time and social activities.

## Who stays at home taking care of our children and older relatives?

Data from [EIGE's Gender Equality Index](#) reveal that far fewer women than men participate in paid work, far more women than men work part-time, and women perform most of the care and domestic work across the EU. It is worth noting that a high number of women migrants work in the EU's informal care sector, looking after children, older people, people who are ill and persons living with disabilities <sup>(5)</sup>.

<sup>(1)</sup> The EU Funds are the EU's main investment policy tools. The seven funds under the Commission's proposal for the common provisions regulations for 2021–2027 are: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, the Asylum and Migration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Border Management and Visa Instrument. EIGE has developed a toolkit for gender mainstreaming and budgeting in the entire cycle of EU Funds, available on EIGE's website: <https://eige.europa.eu/>

<sup>(2)</sup> EIGE (2017), *Gender Equality Index 2017*.

<sup>(3)</sup> Tronto, J. C. (2013), *Caring Democracy – Markets, Equality, and Justice*, New York University Press, New York.

<sup>(4)</sup> Nguyen, M T. N., Zavoretti, R. and Tronto, J. (2017). 'Beyond the global care chain – boundaries, institutions and ethics of care', *Ethics and Social Welfare*, Vol. 11, No 3, pp. 199–212.

<sup>(5)</sup> Orozco, A. (2010). *Global care chains – Toward a rights-based global care regime?* United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, Santo Domingo. Available at: <https://trainingcentre.unwomen.org/instraw-library/2010-R-MIG-GLO-GLO-EN.pdf>; Nguyen, Zavoretti and Tronto, 2017.

## What is being done to improve work-life balance in the EU?

The [Barcelona targets](#), introduced in 2002, set targets for participation in formal childcare. This is a specific measure to remove disincentives to women's labour market participation by addressing the under-provision of childcare facilities. Member States agreed, by 2010, to provide childcare for at least 90 % of children between the ages of three and the mandatory school age, and for at least 33 % of children under three. Although Member States have advanced towards these targets, there are significant variations between them. While statistics may show great progress, they do not consider the quality of care, which is a fundamental aspect

that also needs to be taken into account.

The [European Pillar for Social Rights](#) includes the 'New Start' initiative to address challenges faced by working parents and carers. Work-life balance is one of the 20 principles enshrined in the pillar.

In June 2018, the EU issued a [directive on work-life balance](#) to challenge traditional gender roles in caring. The directive is a call for legislative and non-legislative measures to tackle women's under-representation in the labour market and their over-representation in unpaid care work.

## Why work-life balance and the EU Funds?

Three sets of measures – legal, policy and financial – are essential for effective [gender mainstreaming](#). They are equally essential for the formulation, implementation and evaluation of measures to promote work-life balance as part of an integrated strategy to advance gender equality.

As part of the [Commission's initiative to support work-life balance](#), the Commission will 'ensure, together with Member States, that the European Social Fund and other structural and Investment Funds are supporting adequately work-life balance measures' (p. 12). This means that the EU Funds, especially the European Social Fund (ESF) and ERDF, are key investment instruments for supporting EU policy priorities, including work-life balance.

However, [evidence to date](#) on the current operation of the funds reveals that neither of these key strategic in-

vestment levers (ESF and ERDF) is being used to its full potential to promote gender equality. Although gender equality is included in the objectives of both funds, research shows that the opportunities for relevant actions to address work-life balance and gender equality do not tend to feature prominently in national and sub-national programmes.

Measures related to work-life balance focus in particular on improving women's position in the labour market by providing guidance and support for companies and workers on maternity, paternity or parental leave.

Very few initiatives focus on changing stereotypes in the labour market, by for example encouraging more men into unpaid and paid care work, and more women into better-paid male-dominated sectors.



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## Have European structural and investment funds interventions on work-life balance changed gender relations, roles and responsibilities for women and men in the EU?

This question remains unanswered. This is due to a lack of dedicated analysis on these topics and on the impact of gen-

der stereotypes on women and men's social and economic well-being.

## Integrated interventions can improve work–life balance: A case study from Estonia

Estonia is improving work–life balance through the joint planning of ESF and ERDF interventions on the provision of childcare services. The ESF budget allocation totals EUR 38.7 million for two open rounds of applications on ‘creating childcare services and support services for children with disabilities aged 0–7’ and ‘creating childcare services for children aged 0–7’. The ESF provision of childcare services was planned in conjunction with the ERDF intervention under ‘sustainable

urban development’, which, with a budget of EUR 34 million, supports the development of childcare and preschool education infrastructure in larger urban areas to reduce the need for transport, while supporting employment. This resulted in 708 new childcare places, shorter childcare waiting lists, the reintegration of carers and guardians into the labour market, and an improvement in the work–life balance of parents, according to Estonia’s Annual Implementation Report 2017.

## How can we advance work–life balance using the EU Funds?

In the 2021–2027 programming funding period, 143 measures are presented within the ESF+ and ERDF as possible interventions. While only one intervention focuses specifically on work–life balance, many measures overlap and can contribute to improving work–life balance if gender equality is properly mainstreamed. Gender equality therefore needs to be considered in each step of the funds’ programming cycle.

However, gender mainstreaming is often not well-understood or effectively implemented, especially in the sphere of budgeting and investments. When the gender dimensions are not properly analysed, explicitly included and mainstreamed in programmes, gender-related inequalities can be overlooked. For example, gender mainstreaming methods and tools may be considered unnecessary for measures on recycling and railway construction,

yet women’s disproportionate responsibility for unpaid household and care work and different travel patterns would make it vital to conduct a gender analysis and a gender impact assessment of such measures in order to promote work–life balance.

There is a need to reshape investments to achieve gender equality. Member States should make use of the EU Funds’ financing to ensure a focus on ‘investments for well-being’, which are key for individual well-being and gender-just and sustainable societies. This means recognising the various dimensions of inequalities that exist, such as socioeconomic background, poverty, age, race, ethnicity, location (rural/urban), disability, sexual orientation and religion, and how they intersect with gender<sup>(6)</sup>. It also means valuing care and acknowledging everyone’s right to care.

## Applying a gender perspective to physical infrastructure

Can building a road, establishing a recycling centre or expanding public transportation services promote gender equality? Yes, they can. Therefore, **a gender perspective needs to be considered in physical infrastructure.**

Living in an area with poor roads and limited public transport can have more of a negative effect on women and girls than on men and boys. This is due to their roles and responsibilities in society. Women can face safety issues when having to walk long distances to access public transport at night. The cost of commuting in the absence of efficient, safe and affordable public transport may prevent women from accessing the labour market, taking up better paid jobs or working at night.

Analysing how and why women and men use physical infrastructure, while bearing in mind gendered care norms, can inform vital change. Women in the EU are more likely to be employed part-time and perform the bulk of unpaid care work. Women also spend less time on leisure and sporting activities and are more likely to use public transport and care for young children.

Carers, who are predominantly women, would consequently benefit more from buses with a lowering platform and dedicated spaces for prams. Bus routes with stops close to schools, nurseries, workplaces and shops would also be a benefit. These adjustments can make life easier for users of public transport, particularly when travelling with children. This can increase mobility and decrease social isolation.

<sup>(6)</sup> Rodríguez Enríquez, C. R. (2015), ‘Economía feminista y economía del cuidado – aportes conceptuales para el estudio de la desigualdad’, *Nueva Sociedad*, Vol 256, pp. 30-44. Available at: [http://nuso.org/media/articles/downloads/4102\\_1.pdf](http://nuso.org/media/articles/downloads/4102_1.pdf)



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## A model for integrated gender-responsive interventions on work-life balance

EIGE's model for integrated gender-responsive interventions to advance work–life balance using the EU Funds supports innovative practices to realise the potential of the ESF+ and the ERDF to promote work–life balance in the EU.

The model outlines opportunities to ensure financing for gender equality through the practical application of gender-responsive work–life balance measures in the 2021–2027 funding period. It does this through presenting an expansive view of care and focusing on the transformation of roles and responsibilities in formal and informal care structures.

The model categorises proposed interventions according to objectives in proposed funds' regulations. It also adds a set of actions that are not explicitly mentioned in legislative acts. These would support work–life balance by:

- enhancing the quality and accessibility of care provision;
- supporting active ageing;

- strengthening integrated healthcare communication;
- advancing the integration of shared services;
- enhancing the integration of employability and care workforce expansion by improving the quality of care-related employment.

These actions are offered as a form of guidance exemplified for the ERDF and ESF+; they will help you think about possible interventions and components of project design.

The application of this model can help ensure EU Funds effectively address the work–life balance challenges faced by working parents and carers, in all their diversity, in today's EU.

The model, as well as other gender mainstreaming and budgeting tools for the EU Funds, is available on EIGE's website: <https://eige.europa.eu/>

### European Institute for Gender Equality

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is the EU knowledge centre on gender equality. EIGE supports policymakers and all relevant institutions in their efforts to make equality between women and men a reality for all Europeans by providing them with specific expertise and comparable and reliable data on gender equality in Europe.  
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