

Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work

Insufficient care infrastructure pushes women to fill the gaps

The availability of high-quality, affordable care services has long been acknowledged as essential to enable people to reconcile paid work and care responsibilities. This is particularly true for women with children, who are still expected to shoulder a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work, including housework, care for children, and care for older people and people with disabilities (EIGE, 2019b).

While most EU Member States have achieved the Barcelona target of 90% of children between the age of 3 and compulsory school age attending formal childcare services, several Member States are still far from meeting the first Barcelona target of 33% of children under 3 years old attending such services^[1]. Furthermore, significant differences in enrolment rates persist between Member States, especially when looking at children under 3 years old (EIGE, 2020a). For many families, cost remains an important barrier to accessing the care services they need (EIGE, 2019b).

When it comes to long-term care services^[2], the level of availability of formal services is considered gravely insufficient to meet the rising needs of an ageing population (European Commission, 2014b; Spasova et al., 2018). In 2017, one in four people in the EU had a long-term disability^[3], and about 5% of families with children had a child with disabilities (EIGE, 2020e). As a result, long-term care in the EU is characterised by informality, with informal carers outnumbering formal caregivers by an estimated two-to-one ratio (European Commission, 2014b).

As a consequence, families often forgo adequate care entirely, relying instead on domestic workers in precarious working conditions or providing care themselves (EIGE, 2020e). Gaps in care services disproportionately affect women as care recipients, as more women than men are dependent on long-term care, and also as caregivers, with the vast majority of formal and informal carers being women^[4].

Across the Member States, women from migrant backgrounds employed as domestic workers are often employed in irregular jobs with no access to social protection or labour rights (ILO, 2018b; Spasova et al., 2018). The COVID-19 crisis, which has seen thousands of migrant care workers (mostly women) return to their home countries ahead of border closures, has highlighted the older EU countries' reliance on the work of women, usually from eastern European countries and deprived of proper work status (Zacharenko, 2020).

The effects of insufficient care coverage are significant and profoundly gendered. Eurostat data show that, in the EU, care responsibilities keep some 7.7 million women out of the labour market, compared with just 450 000 men^[5]. In addition, far more women than men work part-time (8.9 million versus 560 000) owing to their care responsibilities^[6]. Women are therefore more likely than men to report difficulties in combining paid work and care responsibilities^[7], which has clear consequences for their participation in the labour market.

At the societal level, the employment lost as a result of women's caring responsibilities leads to a loss of an estimated EUR 370 billion per year for Europe (European Commission, 2018a).

Footnotes

[1] In 2002, the Barcelona European Council set objectives for the availability of high-quality and affordable childcare facilities for pre-school children, through two targets, namely facilities accommodating 90 % of children from the age of 3 years until mandatory school age and 33 % of children under 3 years old. The Barcelona objectives (and the related targets) were restated in the European Pact for Gender Equality (2011–2020) and referred to in the Europe 2020 strategy.

[2] Long-term care is 'a range of services and assistance for people who, as a result of mental and/or physical frailty and/or disability over an extended period of time, depend on help with daily living activities and/or [are] in need of some permanent care' (European Commission, 2014b).

[3] Women (27 %) more than men (22 %). Eurostat, health variables, EU-SILC, 2017 (hlth_silc_06).

[4] More women (19.7 %) than men (14.9 %) provide care for older people and people with disabilities, particularly among the population aged 50–64

[5] Eurostat, EU-LFS (lfsa_igar), data for women aged 20–64.

[6] A further 15.1 % of women, compared with 8.0 % of men, work part-time because of other family or personal responsibilities, widening this gap further.

[7] Based on data from the 2016 European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS).