

EIGE-2021 Gender Equality Index 2021 Report: Health

Domain of time

How individuals spend their time is a fundamental aspect of gender equality. The amount of time spent in paid work, rest and recreation, or caring for others has knock-on effects on many other aspects of a person's life. This includes their health. The burden of unpaid care is increasingly regarded as a determinant of health. Policies promoting women's participation in the labour force and easing their burden of care – such as policies to improve public services or to increase fathers' access and take-up of parental leave entitlements – link to lower levels of gender inequality in health (Palència et al., 2017). As discussed in Section 9.1., work–life conflicts affect mental health.

Although more women than ever before are now actively part of the labour force, unequal gender roles persist at home. Even in dual-earning households, it is mostly women who provide direct care and do housework (ILO, 2018; Kan et al., 2011). When high-quality, affordable care services are limited, women are still expected to assume a greater share of unpaid care of children, older people and people with disabilities (EIGE, 2019c). With this workload exploding at home, in hospitals and in care homes during the pandemic, the crisis has underlined the importance of both paid and unpaid care work for societies and economies to function well. However, resistance to change in gendered social norms, especially men's involvement in care duties, remains the chief obstacle to a fairer distribution of unpaid work.

Various EU initiatives aim to change the status quo. The EU 2020–2025 gender equality strategy identifies closing gender gaps in caring roles as a priority (European Commission, 2020b). The Council conclusions, approved under the German Presidency in December 2020, called for efforts to reduce gender gaps in care work to be stepped up (European Commission, 2021a). The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan includes a call for Member States to complete the transposition of the Work–life Balance Directive^[1] by August 2022 (European Commission, 2021d). The directive includes new labour rights, such as parental and carers’ leave, and aims to ease inherent tensions in combining paid work with caring responsibilities (EIGE, 2021d). It also recommends revising the Barcelona targets and increasing formal early childhood education and care provision^[2].

Footnotes

[1] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158>.

[2] 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: 90 % of children from age 3 years until mandatory school age and 33 % of children younger than 3 years. The Barcelona objectives (and their related targets) were restated in the European pact for gender equality (2011–2020) and referred to in the Europe 2020 strategy. While these high-level commitments have been translated into concrete progress in recent decades, childcare service provision remains very inconsistent between countries with several falling short of the Barcelona targets, especially for children younger than 3 years (EIGE, 2021d).