

New Action Plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights

EIGE's Contribution to the Call for Evidence

The European Institute for Gender Equality (hereafter referred to as 'EIGE'¹) is a decentralised agency of the European Union, established to contribute to and strengthen the promotion of gender equality, including gender mainstreaming in EU policies and the resulting national policies by providing technical assistance to EU institutions, in particular the European Commission, and the authorities of the Member States². The Agency also aims to raise EU citizens' awareness of gender equality. EIGE has become the knowledge centre and the primary source for information on gender equality in the European Union.

EIGE contributes to making the European Union become a Union of Equality, where women and men, girls and boys in all their diversity are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in and lead our societies.

As the EU agency for gender equality, we welcome the European Commission's initiative to establish a new Action Plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and provide evidence to feed into that process based on EIGE's research. As this Action Plan is developed alongside new strategies and roadmaps – in particular the Roadmap for Women's Rights, the Gender Equality Strategy, the Quality Jobs Roadmap and the Anti-Poverty Strategy – EIGE strongly recommends close coordination to ensure policy coherence and the effective mainstreaming of gender equality. EIGE has contributed to these consultations by answering the calls for evidence, which are available on [Our expert view: Informing key EU policies | European Institute for Gender Equality](#).

¹ Established by the European Parliament and of the Council Regulation (EC) No 1922/2006 of 20 December 2006 (OJ L 403/9 of 30.12.2006).

² Article 2, Idem 2



Tackling the challenges

Addressing horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the labour market is crucial for both women and men to benefit fully from the digital and green transitions

As the green and digital transitions advance, the demand for skilled workers, in sectors such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), ICT (Information and Communication Technology), energy and transport, is expected to grow (CEDEFOP, 2023). In particular, the sectors expected to see the largest employment gains are utilities (through increased recycling activities), electricity supply (through increased demand for renewable energy), manufacturing of appliances/electrical equipment (e.g. for the renewable electricity generation sector, or more-energy efficient appliances), construction, and the sectors that link to these via supply chains (CEDEFOP, 2021). However, these sectors already face skills shortages, which are likely to be exacerbated by the increasing demand (CEDEFOP, 2023). At the same time, these fields are marked by structural gender segregation, with men making up the majority of the workforce. This imbalance means that women may not benefit fully from the opportunities emerging in these industries.

Gender stereotypes, shaped and reinforced by family, culture and institutions, exacerbate gender segregation in those sectors. Alongside gender stereotypes, the ‘leaky pipeline’ phenomenon further contributes to gender occupational segregation (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This refers to the gradual loss of women from certain fields as they face challenges that make it difficult to remain and advance in their careers (Berry et al., 2022). Despite earning degrees in STEM, only 23 % of women transition into technology roles, compared to 44 % of their male counterparts (McKinsey, 2022). Women in ICT jobs leave the sector at higher rates than men due to the gender pay gap. Gender stereotypes about men’s ‘better suitability’ at STEM jobs remain characterised by long working hours and a family-unfriendly culture, a lack of women in leadership roles and slower career advancement in an industry dominated by men (EIGE, 2023a). The burden of unpaid care work³ also limits women’s access to upskilling and retraining opportunities necessary to adapt to automation and emerging job markets. Consequently, there remains a largely untapped pool of female talent.

The new Action Plan should be developed in close alignment with the **Jobs Quality Roadmap**, ensuring that both initiatives reinforce one another. It should also build on two key legislative pillars:

- The **Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158)** which sets minimum standards for family leave and flexible working arrangements, promoting a more equal sharing of

³ For better understanding on gender gaps regarding gender attitudes and roles, unpaid work, and related topics, see EIGE’s Gender Statistics Database on the “Survey of gender gaps in unpaid care, individual and social activities”: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/browse/eige/eige_gap

care responsibilities. This is crucial to support women's sustained participation and career progression, especially in sectors shaped by the digital and green transitions.

- The **Pay Transparency Directive (2023/970)**, which introduces binding measures on pay reporting, pay assessments, and the right to information, with the aim of closing the gender pay gap. By ensuring fair and transparent pay systems, it helps reduce vertical segregation and improve women's access to better-paid positions.

Implementation should also be guided by the **EU Social Scoreboard**, ensuring coherence with broader social and employment objectives. This joint approach should enable this new Action Plan to actively promote labour market gender-responsive policies that tackle occupational segregation, and support inclusive access to STEM and ICT training and employment.

Fair working conditions in the care sector is key to a strong economy and to achieving gender equality

The vast majority of healthcare workers and personal care workers in health services in the EU are women, representing 76 % and 86 % of these groups respectively⁴. Overall, women make up 90 % of the care workforce, often in precarious jobs (European Commission, 2022). Although care workers were applauded and acknowledged as 'essential' during the COVID-19 pandemic, their work remains among the most underpaid and undervalued professions in the EU (EIGE, 2022). The pandemic also exposed and aggravated many of the structural shortcomings of the sector.

Ensuring good working conditions in the care sector is therefore vital to its resilience and long-term attractiveness. This need will become even more pressing in the coming decades, as demographic changes put additional pressure on the sector (European Commission, 2020). Yet attracting new workers to the profession remains a challenge, mainly due to poor working conditions such as heavy workloads and low pay (OECD, 2020). In response, many European countries have addressed these concerns by employing a high share of migrant and foreign-born workers (OECD, 2016). This reliance, however, comes with vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic made them visible: when borders began to close, thousands of migrant care workers returned to their countries of origin. Their absence revealed how dependent European care systems are on this labour and how fragile the arrangements can be. It also shed light on the structural inequalities behind this model: many migrant women, particularly from Eastern Europe, are recruited into low-paid roles, often without adequate contracts, social protection, or pathways to professional recognition. As a result, they face both economic exploitation and precarious living conditions, while their labour remains essential to sustaining national care systems (Zacharenko, 2020).

⁴ Data referenced under EIGE Gender Statistics Database (available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs>).

Men's under-representation in the care sector directly affects its social and economic recognition (ILO, 2017; Tijdens et al., 2013). The lack of male role models among childcare workers also reinforces outdated gender stereotypes — namely that care is a woman's job (Fagan and Norman, 2013). More male role models could help men internalise caring values and increase their interest in female-dominated fields. Such cultural change is crucial to overcoming horizontal segregation and achieving gender equality in both care and pay. However, the working conditions in care jobs remain unattractive to men. At the same time, men are over-represented in supervisory roles in female-dominated sectors. Vertical segregation in healthcare is much higher than in the wider economy, with the few men in the sector concentrated at the top of the hierarchy (EIGE, 2019). Williams (1992) coined the term 'glass escalator' to describe how men entering female-dominated spaces are often fast-tracked into authority positions to which women rarely have access.

The **European Care Strategy** recognises the need for fair working conditions in the care sector. It promotes collective bargaining and social dialogue to improve wages and working conditions, ensuring the highest occupational health and safety standards, designing continuous education and training for care workers and tackling gender stereotypes surrounding care (European Commission, 2022). Fair working conditions in the care sector are not only a matter of fairness but also vital for Europe's economic resilience and demographic sustainability. Building on the European Care Strategy, the new Action Plan should not only improve care workforce conditions, but also actively address the under-representation of men in the sector, as this is key to challenging stereotypes, reducing segregation, and ensuring a sustainable care workforce.

Building equality through social protection: tackling unpaid work and enhancing social services as pillars of inclusion

Recognising and redistributing unpaid work

Across the EU, gender inequalities in unpaid work⁵ are striking. Women, regardless of whether they are employed, take on most housework and care responsibilities (Eurofound, 2025). The upcoming 2024 CARE survey results show that 67% of women do housework every day, compared to 46% of men. In terms of caring responsibilities, 43% of women spend more than five hours per day caring for children below 12, compared to 20% of men (EIGE, 2025a).

Unequal care responsibilities push women into part-time or precarious work and career breaks (ILO, 2019). Notably, 29% of women in part-time employment indicated that unpaid care was their main reason for working part-time, whereas only 6% of men gave the same reason (EIGE, 2021a). The over-representation of women in part-time jobs has detrimental effects on both the gender earnings gap and the pension gap. This is not only because part-time employment reduces actual earnings and future pensions, but also because the hourly

⁵ EIGE defines "unpaid work" as work that produces goods and services, but which carries no direct remuneration or other form of payment like housework and care work (See [EIGE's glossary](#)).

pay for part-time work is often lower than that for full-time work (Eurostat, 2019), a disparity known as the 'part-time penalty' (Manning and Petrongolo, 2005). Even more, 19% of women and 3% of men are unable to seek employment because they are caring for adults with disabilities or children. This gap is particularly large among older people (39%) reflecting a gender unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work (EIGE, 2024a).

Time poverty is defined as the lack of available time after accounting for paid employment, unpaid work, study and other basic life necessities (EIGE, 2025b). Only 29% of working women and 34% of working men are engaged in sport, cultural or leisure activities several times a week (EIGE, 2023b).

Finally, since unpaid work such as caring for others is not recognised towards fulfilling social, health, and accident insurance requirements, unpaid carers – in particular women – face a heightened risk of losing their social protection entitlements. This loss represents a significant hidden cost, particularly in terms of reduced pension rights and lack of access to health or accident insurance (Eurofound, 2025).

The **Work-Life Balance Directive** (Directive (EU) 2019/1158, 2019) establishes minimum standards for parental leave, paternity leave, carer's leave, and flexible working arrangements for workers in EU Member States. These are essential to promote shared care responsibilities and an improved work-life balance. The full implementation of the directive can help to shift workplace cultures and address the unequal burden of care. Nevertheless, it is estimated that 10% of women and 12% of men in employment in the EU are not eligible for parental leave (EIGE, 2020a). Countries with higher eligibility for parental leave also tend to have smaller gender gaps in unpaid care for both women and men. Similarly, compensation for paternity and parental leave is key to stimulating uptake among fathers (EIGE, 2021b). Even if progress has been observed in several aspects with most of the EU Members States implementing minimum standards for family and paternity leaves, family leaves policies are still marked by gender norms associating women with caring duties. While the full transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive is necessary, it should also be considered to go beyond the minimum standards set in the directive (EIGE, 2024b).

Considering these far-reaching consequences, the new EPSR Action Plan must formally recognise unpaid care work fully. The formal recognition would help reducing gender gaps especially in regards of earning and income. It would also help closing the gender pension gap and remove disincentives for carers to work. The new EPSR Action Plan must also **explicitly address the unequal distribution of unpaid work between women and men**. Strengthening social protection is key to tackling this imbalance and ensure that care responsibilities are shared more fairly, women's labour market participation is facilitated, and ultimately the gender pension gaps are reduced. By **promoting positive gender norms**, the new EPSR Action Plan would recognise the effects of unpaid care work on gender

inequalities and foster a more equal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between men and women.

Investing in quality social protection and care services

Despite encouraging developments in recent years, the EU faces significant shortfalls in its provision of gender-responsive social protection and services. Many struggle to access timely, good-quality and affordable healthcare, especially women living rurally. Sexual and reproductive health and rights are patchy across Member States, while receiving comprehensive sex education is far from guaranteed, depending on the political and educational landscapes of each Member State. Safe, legal and affordable abortion is unattainable for many, and precarious for many others (EIGE, 2025c). Additionally, an ageing Europe, a growing demand for care and an overall decrease in funding to the care sector have resulted in a bottleneck in the availability of high-quality, affordable early childhood and long-term care services (EIGE, 2021).

Underscoring all these issues is the enduring prevalence of poverty and social exclusion, to which some sub-groups of the EU's population are especially vulnerable. The worsening housing crisis has disproportionate and specific impacts on lone parents, older women, and Roma women. Members of the LGBTIQ community and those at risk of gender-based violence in the home are also affected (EIGE, 2024c). Over a quarter of young adults live in overcrowded households, while rent and house price increases significantly outpace inflation and average wage growth. Energy poverty is also on the rise, with rising oil and gas prices disproportionately affecting low-income households. Lone-parent households, most of which are headed by women, are particularly vulnerable, further compounding their risk of poverty. People with disabilities often face significant barriers in accessing social protection systems, including restrictive eligibility criteria, lack of disability-specific provisions, and inadequate support for their unique needs (EIGE, 2020b). These barriers disproportionately affect women with disabilities, who may also be dealing with gender-based discrimination and additional caregiving roles (EIGE, 2018).

The new Action Plan must be developed in close cooperation with the **Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion and participation**, and the upcoming **EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, Affordable Housing Plan, Anti-racism Strategy** and **LGBTIQ Equality Strategy** to ensure a coherent approach towards ending poverty and social exclusion.

Additionally, shifting policy priorities towards defence and security, especially since Russia's 2022 war of aggression against Ukraine, may result in decreased funding for social policies including social services. Increased defence spending may constrain national budgets for essential areas such as healthcare, education, care services, and social protection, which are already under pressure from demographic changes and economic uncertainty. **The new Action Plan must safeguard against this by imperatively ensuring the continuity of appropriate funding.**

The EU's budget and its investment programmes are the most direct way for EU resources to reach those who need them and to impact individual lives and well-being. The institutionalising of gender mainstreaming methods in the next long-term EU budget (MFF) would advance gender equality and ensure that all women and men benefit equally. To this end, EU institutions and Member States should fully utilise EIGE's tools and expertise. To cite one example, EIGE has proposed a model to advance gender equality in Member States by transforming roles and responsibilities in care work. The model supports innovative practice and gender analysis to realise the potential of the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund in the promotion of work–life balance in the EU, and therefore, helping Member States to achieve the goals set by the Pillar.

Recommendations

Strengthening job quality and career opportunities

- **Encourage the use of existing guidance and tools**, including the forthcoming updated **EU-wide guidance/step-by-step toolkit on gender-neutral job evaluation** and classification developed by EIGE. **Support equal pay for equal work** or work of equal value between women and men by assessing skills, effort, responsibility, and working conditions without gender bias in line with Directive (EU) 2023/970 on pay transparency.
- **Facilitate flexible and predictable working arrangements** to improve work-life balance and support gender equality.
- **Provide flexible, accessible upskilling, retraining and lifelong opportunities** that consider women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. Enable their participation in emerging green and digital job markets. Strengthen the retention of women in fields traditionally dominated by men.
- Implement initiatives to **counter unconscious biases and encourage men's involvement in caregiving roles**. Promote men's employment in the education, health and welfare sectors.
- **Promote women's entry into and retention in the labour market** requiring employers to address horizontal and vertical segregation, eliminate biases in recruitment and promotion practices, and close the gender pay gap.
- **Promote the effective implementation of Directive (EU) 2022/2381** by adopting appropriate standards and monitoring mechanisms to advance balanced gender representation on the boards of listed companies, drawing on EIGE's statistics

on women and men in decision-making in business and finance⁶ as well as methods and tools of gender mainstreaming⁷.

- **Encourage going beyond the full national-level transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive**, through higher levels of compensation for paternity, parental and carer's leave and longer periods of non-transferable parental leave for men encouraging them to share responsibility for the upbringing of children.

Tackling unpaid work

- **Recognise and compensate unpaid care work** and ensure pension schemes cover people who are self-employed or unemployed, as well as those in atypical employment.
- Explore individual taxation options to eliminate disincentives for secondary earners. **Address the pay and pension gaps associated with an unequal share of care accumulated over the life course.**
- **Formally recognise caregiving** by strengthening social protection for unpaid carers and **introducing targeted benefits**, such as pension credits or dedicated social security contributions.

Building gender-responsive social protection and investing in social services

- **Invest in gender-responsive social protection** for formal and informal caregivers.
- **Ensure that gender-responsive social protection** is systematically integrated into all EU-wide strategies, especially in **anti-poverty, affordable housing, and employment** policies.
- **Extend social protection systems** to support those engaged in unpaid caregiving.
- Create and promote **holistic support models** for paid and unpaid caregivers, particularly focusing on **caregivers** for disabled people. This could involve integrating **social protection, housing, and healthcare** policies to provide comprehensive support for both paid and unpaid caregivers.
- Invest in **universal and accessible family support services** that combine general provision (e.g. childcare, long-term care) with **targeted measures addressing diverse family needs** (e.g. specialised services for families of children with disabilities).

⁶ EIGE's regularly collects data on women and men in key decision-making positions, including in business and finance: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/browse/wmidm/wmidm_bus. Additionally, EIGE produces statistical note on gender balance on boards: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-balance-business-and-finance-0>

⁷ EIGE's gender mainstreaming toolkits and methods are available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits> and <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/tools-methods>

Building on existing tools and improving data collection

- **Utilise EIGE’s Gender Equality Index** – the key benchmark for gender equality in the EU – as well as **EIGE’s CARE survey data** on unpaid care, access to care services and work-life balance for the monitoring of the EPSR action plan.
- **Improve data collection** and metrics on gendered employment trends, especially in the green and energy sectors.
- **Ensure employment statistics consider parental leave** uniformly, including details on eligibility, duration, uptake and income replacement.
- **Collect comparable and sex-disaggregated data on levels of financial literacy** across the EU.
- **Invest in robust data collection and analysis** across **housing, anti-poverty, and social protection** sectors to create evidence-based strategies.

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