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« Le Descartes »
29, promenade Michel Simon
93166 Noisy-le-Grand CEDEX

ceet.cnam.fr

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MARIA KARAMESSINI

mkarames@panteion.gr

Université Panteion de Sciences Sociales et Politiques
Athènes, Grèce

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DE LA POLITIQUE DE CONCILIATION TRAVAIL-VIE À LA STRATÉGIE EUROPÉENNE DU SOIN : L'INTÉGRATION DU CARE ET DU GENRE DANS L'AGENDA POLITIQUE DE L'UNION EUROPÉENNE

MARIA KARAMESSINI

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RÉSUMÉ

La politique d'équilibre ou de conciliation entre travail et vie privée est devenue un domaine distinct de la politique sociale de l'Union Européenne (UE) en 1997, lorsqu'elle a été intégrée dans la stratégie européenne pour l'emploi sous le pilier de l'égalité des chances afin d'augmenter l'activité et les taux d'emploi des femmes. Elle a pris de l'importance avec la stratégie de Lisbonne et les objectifs de Barcelone en matière de garde d'enfants, mais est repassée à l'arrière-plan pendant la Grande Récession. Sa renaissance coïncide avec le socle européen des droits sociaux (EPSR) et sa première directive de mise en œuvre sur la conciliation du travail et de la vie familiale. La plupart des universitaires et militantes féministes ont critiqué cette politique pour ne s'adresser implicitement qu'aux mères qui travaillent et ignorer la répartition inégale du travail de soin (*care*) non rémunéré entre les femmes et les hommes. L'EPSR représente un tournant sur cette question suivi par l'actuelle stratégie européenne pour l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes, adoptée en mars 2020, qui fait de la réduction de l'écart entre les sexes en matière de soins (non rémunérés) l'un de ses objectifs. La pandémie de Covid-19 a sensibilisé la société au caractère central des soins pour la perpétuation de la société et a permis l'adoption d'une stratégie européenne du soin, qui s'inspire de la proposition féministe d'investissement social de masse dans une "économie du care" basée sur la reconnaissance, la revalorisation et la redistribution du travail de care entre les femmes et les hommes ainsi qu'une rémunération juste et la représentation des travailleurs. La stratégie européenne du soin est clairement une avancée du point de vue de l'égalité entre femmes et hommes et de la politique sociale de l'UE. Cependant, elle reste en deçà d'une initiative plus ambitieuse d'un "Care Deal pour l'Europe" à côté du "Green Deal européen", alors que sa mise en œuvre serait entravée par un retour aux politiques d'austérité au niveau des États membres dans les années à venir.

Mots-clefs : politique de conciliation entre vie professionnelle et vie privée, politique d'égalité des sexes de l'UE, politique de l'emploi de l'UE, politique sociale de l'UE, travail de care non rémunéré, droit aux soins, économie du care.

From Work-life Balance Policy to the European Care Stategy: Mainstreaming Gender and Care in the EU Policy Agenda

Abstract

Work-life balance/reconciliation policy emerged as a separate area of EU social policy in 1997, when it was integrated into the European Employment Strategy under the equal opportunities pillar in order to increase female activity and employment rates. It gained prominence with the Lisbon Strategy and the Barcelona targets for childcare, but fell into the background during the Great Recession. Its revival coincides with the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its first implementation Directive on Reconciling Work and Family Life. Most feminist scholars and activists have criticised this policy for implicitly addressing only working mothers and ignoring the unequal division of unpaid care work between women and men. The EPSR represents a turning point on this issue, while the current European Gender Equality Strategy, adopted in March 2020, sets the closing of the gender (unpaid) care gap as one of its objectives. The Covid-19 pandemic raised social awareness of the centrality of care to social reproduction and triggered in its aftermath the adoption of a European Care Strategy, which has been inspired by the feminist economic proposal for mass social investment in a "care economy" based on the recognition, revaluation and redistribution of care work among women and men and the adequate remuneration and representation of care workers. The European Care Strategy is clearly an advancement from an EU gender equality and social policy perspective. However, it falls short of a more ambitious initiative for a "Care Deal for Europe" next to the "European Green Deal", while its implementation would be hampered by a return to austerity policies at the Member-State level in the coming years.

***Key words**: Work-life balance, reconciliation policy, EU gender equality policy, EU employment policy, EU social policy, unpaid care work, right to care, care economy, sustainable and inclusive growth*

Introduction

'Work–life balance' is a gender-neutral term used to define the ability of workers to devote the desired amount of time and effort to work and to personal life outside work. It has displaced earlier conceptualizations such as 'reconciliation of work and family life', in order to recognize that all workers, and not only parents and carers, have legitimate interests outside of the workplace. Even so, the emphasis in analysis and policy has focused on how people, and especially women, manage the tension between paid work and caring (Perrons, 2017).

Work-life balance/ work-family-life reconciliation policy is a relatively new policy field which originated in Sweden in the early 1970s and includes measures enabling working carers to combine work with family responsibilities and private life: leave, reduced working hours, flexible working arrangements, and publicly funded care services and benefits. It sits at the intersection of employment, family, and gender equality policies and can serve broader economic, social, and demographic policy goals. In the EU, it became a social policy field in its own right in 1997, when it was integrated into the European Employment Strategy under the equal opportunities pillar, which aimed to increase female activity and employment rates.

After falling into obsolescence with the 2008 global financial crisis, work-life balance policy came back to the EU social policy agenda with the European Pillar of Social Rights and its first implementation Directive, which has significantly improved the right to care of working carers and fostered greater equality in the access to and use of care leaves between women and men. Three years after its adoption by the relevant EU bodies, the Work and Life Balance Directive entered into application in all EU Member States in August 2022. Alongside the European Care Strategy, which was adopted by the European Council in December 2022, they have brought the coverage of care deficits and the promotion of gender equality among the priorities of the EU social policy agenda.

The issue of care has always been at the centre of feminist research and agendas. The unequal division of unpaid care work between women and men has been the starting point for all analyses of gender discrimination and women's subordinate position in the labour market, while the relationship between family policy and the gender division of labour has influenced feminist proposals for the expansion of state and publicly-funded care services.

Consequently, and unsurprisingly, feminist scholars and activists have been critical of the terms "work-life balance" and "reconciliation of work and family life" from their first appearance in the political debate, as their use leaves unchallenged the traditional gendered division of unpaid care work. Since then, they have put unrelenting pressure on policymakers in governments and international institutions to ensure that reconciliation policies include measures encouraging men to share unpaid care work and responsibilities equally with women. Their efforts have begun to bear fruit due to broader developments linked with the consecutive and multiple global crises and the acknowledgment by policy-makers of the existing huge care deficits in Western societies due to their pervasive aging. Even more importantly, the Great Recession of 2007-8 and the Covid-19 crisis, which revealed the social and environmental damage caused by neoliberal globalised financial capitalism worldwide and the immense value of caring for the preservation of life and social reproduction, have changed the feminist agenda. Feminist economists have been impelled to develop alternatives to the dominant economic model in favour of a gender-egalitarian society with the "care economy" as its linchpin.

This working paper provides a historical overview of the combination and integration of care and gender in the main EU policy agenda through work-life balance/reconciliation policy, which has been a key component of EU gender equality policy since the 1990s, and discusses the new impetus created by the recent adoption of the European Care Strategy. Its goal is to

associate these developments with the feminist debates and policy literature which have often clashed with the dominant conceptualizations of work-life balance and EU policy goals but have also contributed to the shaping of more progressive policies at the EU and national levels. For the needs of this paper, we have consulted all the important official EU policy documents as well as an extensive literature in the field.

In the paper we maintain that the feminist proposal for a "care economy" as a way out of the deep, structural, and multidimensional crisis of neoliberal capitalism represents a leap forward in the feminist agenda for gender equality in work and care for two reasons. First, it is complementary to work-life balance policy while, at the same time, it constitutes a novel strategy for gender equality. Second, by linking gender equality to the coverage of the growing care deficits in Western societies as well as to other social goals, such as growth, job creation and the green transition, the social alliance for progressive reform towards a more just and gender-equal society is broadened. The recent European Care Strategy has endorsed the principles and rationale of this proposal even though the funding of large social investment in care – a prerequisite for its implementation – will be difficult in the coming years if the looming return to fiscal discipline EU-wide is confirmed. Together with the new Work-Life Balance Directive they constitute important tools of EU gender equality and social policy and for the advancement of gender equality in work and care at the national level throughout the EU.

The working paper is structured as follows. It starts by providing a brief historical overview of the origins of work-life balance policy (section 2), before explaining the reasons and describing the process of its integration in the EU policy agenda, in close relationship to EU gender equality policy, in the 1990s and first half of the 2000s (section 3). The paper then goes on to examine policy developments during the Great Recession and its aftermath, a period marked by the vanishing of work-life balance policy from the EU policy agenda and the emergence of a feminist contribution to the debate on alternative growth/development models to neoliberal capitalism based on the social recognition, revaluation, and redistribution of care work (Section 4). Section 5 is devoted to the revival of EU work-life balance policy with the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights, while Section 6 to the Covid-19 pandemic, the impetus it triggered for investing in a "care economy" and its culmination with the adoption of the European Care Strategy. We conclude with discussing the prospects of implementation of the latter by EU Member States in the current juncture of cost-of-living crisis.

Work-family life balance policy: the origins

Work-family life balance/reconciliation was "invented" as a policy area in Sweden in the late 1960s, when the dual-earner family was declared the desired norm for long-term change by the social democratic government of the time and its allies: the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the Women's Movement. It was the outcome of the marriage of family with employment policy and its primary aim was to encourage the massive engagement of married women and mothers in paid work in a context of a general lack of workforce (Letablier, 2003).

Swedish work-family life balance policy was introduced in the first half of the 1970s also as a key element of gender equality policy under the new "social gender contract," the "equality contract" between women and the state (Hirdman, 1998). Working mothers were offered day care centres, insured parental leave, and individual taxation as compensation for their "double role" as workers and carers, since the increase in women's employment had to be achieved by

avoiding a child care deficit and a fertility decline followed by a severe child care and demographic crisis; though men's role in the domestic division of labour remained untouched.

The other Nordic welfare states quickly followed the Swedish course. In the early 1990s, female labour force participation converged with that of men in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and labour force participation rates for mothers with preschool-age children ranged from 84% in Denmark to 75% (Leira, 2000). These processes were not unique to the Nordic countries. In France, female labour force participation benefited largely from a long anticlerical tradition in education policy dating back to the 19th century, which explains the rapid expansion of public preschool education (écoles maternelles) after World War II and the full coverage of children by the early 1980s (Morgan, 2006). Of course, the expansion has also served more concrete objectives such as the improvement of children's education and health as well as the availability of women for paid work.

During the 1980s and 1990s, maternal and female employment rates increased in all developed economies (Table 1), but in most countries the rise had preceded welfare state reform (Leira 1992), while the US never developed a work-life balance policy, although female employment rates in that country had been constantly rising since the 1960s (Orloff, 2006). The huge increase in female and maternal employment led to a general transition from the male breadwinner to the dual-earner family model, which eventually became dominant in the 1990s. This change in the family model is often seen as the reason why the welfare state has to intervene to "harmonise" work and family responsibilities.

Table 1: Employment rates (%) of women aged 20-64 years

	1983	1990	2000	2008	2013	2021
Australia	46.9	58.5	62.5	68.3	68.4	73.2
Canada	55.2	64.3	68.0	71.7	71.9	72.6
Japan	57.1	60.8	60.6	63.3	66.3	75.4
New Zealand	..	59.7	65.3	71.5	71.6	77.6
Norway	66.0	70.3	76.1	78.6	77.1	77.5
Switzerland	..	..	71.2	76.0	75.3	77.8
United Kingdom	..	63.0	66.6	68.3	68.7	74.4
United States	58.0	66.0	69.9	68.4	65.4	67.4
European Union	**44.8**	**49.7**	**56.2**	**61.8**	**61.5**	**67.7**
Austria	..	..	62.1	67.6	70.0	71.3
Belgium	39.9	44.7	56.0	61.3	62.1	66.8
Croatia	..	..	..	57.0	52.8	62.9
Cyprus	..	..	58.5	68.2	62.2	70.0
Czech Republic	..	..	61.9	62.5	63.8	72.1
Denmark	68.7	72.4	73.0	74.8	71.2	75.7
Estonia	..	76.7	62.7	72.9	70.0	77.5
Finland	73.3	74.9	68.5	73.2	72.0	75.9
France	55.9	57.6	61.5	65.0	64.9	70.2
Germany	48.7	53.8	60.9	67.8	72.5	75.9
Greece	36.8	40.8	45.5	52.6	43.3	52.7
Hungary	..	..	53.9	54.8	56.9	73.5
Iceland	..	..	83.4	79.3	78.1	77.5
Ireland	34.0	39.7	58.2	65.6	61.3	70.6
Italy	36.4	39.8	42.2	50.6	49.9	53.2
Latvia	..	..	59.4	71.9	67.7	72.9
Lithuania	..	..	63.8	68.7	68.6	76.7
Luxembourg	38.5	44.1	53.8	60.1	63.9	70.3
Malta	..	..	33.5	39.4	51.7	69.6
Netherlands	28.9	49.0	63.5	69.6	70.6	77.5
Poland	..	..	54.2	57.3	57.6	68.4
Portugal	51.3	56.8	65.2	67.1	60.5	73.1
Romania	..	..	63.0	57.3	56.5	56.9
Slovak Republic	..	..	57.2	60.3	57.8	70.4
Slovenia	..	..	63.6	68.5	63.0	72.6
Spain	28.1	33.4	44.4	58.9	53.8	62.4
Sweden	78.1	83.8	75.4	77.2	77.2	78.0

Source: Data extracted on 2 January 2023 from OECD.Stat.

Since its "invention", the main goal of work-family life balance/ reconciliation policy has been to increase women's labour force participation and thereby reduce gender gaps in the availability for and access to paid work. However, in different national contexts and time periods, this kind of policy can (also) serve multiple economic and social policy goals: Enabling economic growth and improving competitiveness, preserving family functioning, achieving gender equality, stemming fertility decline, strengthening children's educational

attainment, addressing child poverty. It is therefore understandable that while reconciliation policies can be an important tool of gender equality policy, they can also lead to tensions with it. This is all the truer, because in the vast majority of EU member states gender equality was either a secondary goal or not an explicit goal of reconciliation policy at all (Lewis, 2009, p. 3).

Equal sharing of paid and unpaid work between women and men was at the forefront of the demands of the second wave of the feminist movement for gender equality in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, however, equal sharing of unpaid work is a goal of reconciliation policies in only a minority of countries. The Nordic countries broke new ground in the 1990s by introducing several reforms to encourage working fathers to take leave and to change the model of fatherhood. In addition, the particular mix of work-family balance policies is associated with different notions of equality, leading to different family models. For example, state-subsidised child care promotes dual-earner but not the dual-carer family; part-time work and long parental leaves predominantly taken by mothers, hinder women's earnings and careers and reproduce the one-and-a-half-earner family model; in contrast, fully paid parental leaves, fatherhood quotas, and long paternity leaves promote the dual-earner/dual-carer family model (Leira, 2000).

Work-life balance/reconciliation and gender equality under the European Employment Strategy and Lisbon Strategy

Work-family life balance/reconciliation policy found its way unobtrusively into EU equality policy in the late 1980s and 1990s. Ross (2001) and Stratigaki (2004) have shown how the bodies involved in shaping social policy at the EU level worked with very different meanings of "reconciliation" in relation to work and family policies, and how the Parental Leave Directive 96/34/EC was achieved. Although the minimum guaranteed parental leave as individual right was unpaid and limited to three months, the Directive undoubtedly broke new ground, since family policy along with social policy in general were the prerogative of Member States.

Four years earlier, in 1992, the Directive 92/85/EC on the Safety and Health at work of Pregnant Workers and women who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding had established, for the first time at EU level, the right of female workers to a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave compensated at least at the national sick pay level and time off, without loss of pay, for ante-natal examinations. In the same year, the Council Recommendation on child care provided the first 'definition' of work-life balance/reconciliation policy as all the initiatives taken by Member *States 'to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children'* (Council of the European Communities, 1992). The Recommendation suggested initiatives in four areas: provision of care services, entitlement to a special care leave for employed parents, changes in work environment, structure and organisation and the sharing of occupational, family and care responsibilities between women and men.

Dauphin and Letablier (2013) have argued that through the 'reconciliation angle' the EU has modernized and europeanised the family policies of Member States. In our view, it has done something more. By 'inventing' a new policy field and placing it in the central policy agenda, it has subordinated family to employment policy.

In fact, work-life balance/reconciliation policy became part of the EU's central policy agenda when it was integrated into the European Employment Strategy (EES), which itself was

introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam that came into force in October 1997. By becoming one of the twenty-eight guidelines of the EES for the national employment policies of the EU Member States under the fourth pillar of the strategy, encompassing the measures promoting equal opportunities between women and men, reconciliation policy was recognised as a fundamental component of the EU's employment and gender equality policies.

Stratigaki (2004) has argued that work-life balance is an example of the cooptation of gender equality concepts when they become part of the main EU policy agenda. It originally emerged in EU gender equality policy as a concept linked to the feminist goal of sharing family responsibilities between women and men, but its meaning shifted when it was incorporated into the EES to the market-oriented goal of promoting flexible forms of employment.

However, the goal was much broader than providing a flexible female workforce for businesses. According to Alan Larsson, the then Swedish Commissioner of Employment and Social Affairs, the EU was facing a long-term trend of population ageing leading to a decline in the working-age population, which could result in a shortage of human resources in the economy (Larsson, 1998, p. 405). To compensate for the decline in the working-age population, the employment rate should be increased and this inevitably meant bringing more women into the labour force (*ibid.*). By enabling women to enter and remain in the labour force, reconciliation policies were seen as an indispensable tool to increase the overall employment rate. Moreover, the full exploitation of the female labour reserve and its growth potential was expected to ease the burden on public finances and social security systems and reduce the tax pressure on companies and individuals (*ibid.*, p. 406).

The 1998 guideline entitled "Reconciling Work and Family Life" recommended a wide range of measures to EU member states. It stated that *"policies on career breaks, parental leave and part-time work are of particular importance to women and men. Implementation of the various directives and social-partner agreements in this area should be accelerated and monitored regularly. There must be an adequate provision of good quality care for children and other dependants in order to support women's and men's entry and continued participation in the labour market; Member States will strive to raise levels of access to care services where some needs are not met"*.[1]

The call to Member States in the Reconciliation Guideline was to increase part-time employment opportunities on the one hand, and to expand parental leave and childcare services on the other. This broad range of measures allowed Member States to follow their own national path, i.e., to opt for either the one-and-a-half or the two-full-time earner variant of the dual-earner family model.

[1] Extraordinary European Council Meeting on Employment, Luxembourg, 20 and 21 November 1997, Presidency Conclusions. www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/00300.htm

Table 2: Female part-time rates (% of dependent female workers aged 15-64)

Country	1983	1990	2000	2019
Canada	26,0	25,3	25,8	23,0
United Kingdom	39,1	38,8	39,4	33,2
United States	22,2	19,4	17,2	15,7
New Zealand	..	33,0	34,2	25,8
Switzerland	..	..	40,8	42,6
Norway	..	39,7	33,2	27,7
OECD countries	25,3	23,7	22,3	21,4
Austria	..	..	24,8	33,9
Belgium	24,2	32,6	37,4	29,1
Czech Republic	..	..	5,0	6,4
Denmark	38,0	29,6	22,4	23,8
Estonia	..	..	8,5	11,4
Finland	..	9,4	13,6	16,7
France	20,0	22,8	24,7	19,9
Germany	30,6	29,5	34,0	35,7
Greece	15,5	12,8	10,5	17,9
Hungary	..	..	4,3	5,2
Ireland	15,7	20,2	31,8	31,7
Italy	17,5	19,7	24,3	33,5
Cyprus	..	..	7,0	9,4
Latvia	..	..	8,7	7,0
Lithuania	..	..	12,0	6,1
Luxembourg	19,4	19,2	29,7	19,9
Netherlands	44,3	50,6	57,3	57,8
Poland	..	..	14,4	7,4
Portugal	..	12,9	9,3	8,0
Romania	..	..	1,6	0,8
Slovak Republic	..	..	2,8	6,4
Slovenia	..	..	4,4	9,5
Spain	..	10,8	16,2	22,0
Sweden	..	26,8	21,3	15,2
European Union 27	25,3	24,6	23,3	23,8

Note: The figures of the table are based on the OECD common definition of part-time workers as those those performing up to 30 usual weekly hours of work in the main job.

Source: Data extracted on 2 January 2023 from OECD.Stat.

According to OECD harmonized historical data on the incidence of part-time work among female dependent workers, the massive integration of women as employees into part-time jobs and the steep rise in female part-time rates in developed economies had already taken place in the 1970s and 1980s in a considerable number of OECD countries, mainly in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and all Scandinavian countries except Finland (Table 2). In France and the United States, expansion had been substantial but on a smaller scale. The group of EU countries that followed the trend in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s includes only Italy, Ireland, Austria, Spain, and Greece. The figures are somewhat different when part-time rates are estimated among all employed women, not only employees, and when the Eurostat definition is used, but the trends are similar (Table 3). As for investments in social care services, the precursors were the Nordic and

Benelux countries and France in the 1970s and 1980s. More European countries followed in the 1990s.

Table 3: Female part-time rates (% of all employed women aged 15-64)

	2000	2008	2019
EU- 27 (from 2020)	:	28,6	29,9
EU - 15 (1995-2004)	33,3	36,0	36,9
Belgium	39,8	40,8	41,0
Bulgaria	:	2,4	2,1
Czechia	8,9	7,8	10,6
Denmark	34,9	35,0	33,9
Germany	37,7	45,2	46,7
Estonia	9,3	9,4	15,9
Ireland	30,7	31,8	30,6
Greece	7,7	9,8	13,5
Spain	17,0	21,9	23,7
France	30,9	29,4	28,0
Croatia	:	8,4	6,7
Italy	17,3	27,7	32,9
Cyprus	13,3	10,8	14,6
Latvia	11,6	7,6	10,9
Lithuania	10,1	8,3	8,0
Luxembourg	25,8	38,2	30,4
Hungary	5,0	5,9	6,8
Malta	13,3	25,1	21,4
Netherlands	70,5	74,7	75,2
Austria	32,9	41,2	47,1
Poland	12,1	10,9	9,3
Portugal	13,8	14,1	10,9
Romania	16,0	9,3	6,2
Slovenia	6,9	10,4	12,7
Slovakia	2,9	4,1	6,5
Finland	16,7	17,8	21,3
Sweden	35,7	40,9	32,5
United Kingdom	43,8	40,9	39,4

Note: The figures of the table are based on the EU Labour Force Survey definition of part-time work, which is based on a spontaneous response by the respondent in almost all EU countries. The main exceptions are the Netherlands where a 35 hours threshold is applied and Sweden where a threshold is applied to the self-employed.

Source: Eurostat online database (accessed on 9.2.2023).

With the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, the EU fully endorsed the 'active social policy approach' to modernize the employment and social policies of Member States and gradually extended to the national social policies of the latter the Open Method of Coordination which was already being applied to national employment policies. This method consisted in setting common EU targets and policy guidelines, monitoring progress at the national level, and disseminating good policy practices among Member States. According to the active social policy approach, social policies should give a high priority to employment and deal with social problems chiefly by promoting the labour force participation of disadvantaged groups. Active social policies included labour market policies facilitating the (re)entry of the unemployed in employment, investment in the human capital of disadvantaged groups and work-life balance policies enabling female employment (Bonoli, 2013).

Regarding work-family life balance policy, the Barcelona European Council which took place in March 2002 set ambitious targets for the provision of formal childcare by 2010: 33% of children aged 0-3 and 90% of children aged 3 to compulsory school age. The targets were ambitious and reflected the success of the social investment approach to the activation of social policy and the modernization of European welfare states (Esping-Andersen et *al.*, 2002) in influencing a progressive political majority in EU institutions. Social investment in childcare services increased in all EU countries in the 2000s. However, due to the great heterogeneity of European care systems, the national starting points were very different. In 2016, each of the Barcelona targets had been met by twelve of the twenty-eight Member States (European Commission, 2018). The Great Recession had stalled progress for a while.

We now turn to the relationship between work-family life balance and equality policies in the EES, which was short-lived. In the original 1998 Employment Policy Guidelines, the "Reconciliation of Work and Family Life" guideline literally stated that policies at the national level should address both women and men. However, by ignoring women's and men's unequal use of leave and part-time work, as well as the gender gap in unpaid care, the guideline conveyed the message to policymakers at the national level that the need for reconciliation only affected working women and not working men. By addressing only equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market, but not at home, and access to employment, but not job quality, the guideline promoted a restricted approach to gender equality.

Thanks to protests by feminist academics who participated in official European Commission expert groups, and to a favourable balance of political power in the Council, the 2003 revision of the EES and the Barcelona targets included the “reconciliation of work and private life” under the new guideline on "gender equality," which replaced the "equal opportunities" pillar of the original EES.

Two positive developments relative to the policy approach were reflected in the new guideline. First, the replacement of ‘family life’ by ‘private life’ in the wording denotes a recognition that all workers, not only parents and carers, have legitimate interests outside of the workplace, while other interests and activities beyond work and caring are equally valuable for a balanced and fulfilling life. Second, under the new guideline, work-life balance policy was given a comprehensive gender equality dimension by including in its tools the measures promoting the sharing of family and work responsibilities between women and men, which were previously missing. Conversely, the part-time work was removed from the list of tools.

Two years later, in 2005, a backlash took place with the second revision of the EES. The gender equality guideline was removed from the revised 2005-2008 employment policy guidelines, and work-life balance was recycled in a new guideline entitled "A Lifecycle Approach to Work". The link between reconciliation and gender equality policies, which dated from 1997 was broken, at least on paper.

Theorising developments in EU gender equality policy prior to the 2008 crisis, Lewis and Giullari (2005), Lewis (2006; 2009), and Jenson (2009) have rightly noted that gender equality was instrumentalized in EU economic and social policy. Gender inequalities in unpaid work and women's very different perceptions and choices about whether or not to engage in unpaid work were completely ignored as irrelevant. The de-familialization of care work through public investment in the care and early education of children, which was the main proposal of the dominant social investment approach to the redesign of European welfare states, was founded on the argument that high female employment rates were indispensable for the well-being of EU economies and the EU social model (Esping Andersen et *al.*, 2002). As shown above, this approach summarizes the rationale of work-life balance policies in the Nordic countries in the

1970s and 1980s and accounts for the integration of the "reconciliation guideline" in the equal opportunities pillar of the EES.

Knijn and Smit (2009) have also supported the idea of instrumentalization of the gender equality agenda under the Lisbon Strategy in favour of creating competitive knowledge-based economies in the EU. But their research also detected a greater variety in EU discourses on reconciliation of work and family life policy in the 2000s based on three distinct paradigms making different proposals for the resolution of the tensions in the relationship between work and family life: the social investment approach, the transitional labour market theory and the individual life-course model. The mixing of elements between these paradigms at the national level had led to ambivalent reconciliation policies. Interestingly, the researchers have also found that in spite of EU reconciliation policy moving away from the concern with gender equality, many member states remained deeply preoccupied with the issue and continued investing in social care during the second half of the 2000s.

Given the variety of work-life balance policies, the instrumentalization of gender equality policy and the lack of attention to gender inequalities in unpaid work, it is not surprising that a study of Western European countries based on data from the European Social Survey found that in the mid-2000s, outside the Nordic countries, there was still little evidence of convergence toward a family model with two full-time earners, although the ratio of hours devoted to paid work by men and women was becoming less unequal (Lewis et al., 2008). Similarly, after having examined the national combinations of times for work and family and work-life balance policies in Europe in the late 2000s, Silvera (2010) concluded that in spite of the great influence of EU work-life balance and gender equality policies had had on several Member States, great national differences remained regarding the level of female employment rates and social investment in care services in the late 2000s.

The Great Recession, austerity, and the search for policy alternatives: The feminist proposal for a care-based economic recovery and growth

The global financial crisis of 2008, referred to as the "Great Recession," negatively impacted work-life balance policies at the national level due to the coordinated austerity policies imposed on Member States in 2010-2013, while at the EU level it was responsible for nearly a decade of policy gridlock in this policy area. The Great Recession is also a period when gender equality policy faced a perfect storm at both the EU and Member State levels. Its visibility diminished in 'Europe 2020', after the first erosion of its position in the EES in 2005-2008 (Villa and Smith, 2014).

After the outbreak of the Greek sovereign debt crisis, which led in 2010 to the bailout of the country by eurozone partners and the IMF and the implementation of an economic adjustment programme based on fiscal consolidation and neoliberal structural reforms under the supervision of the Troika (European Commission, ECB, IMF), the EU imposed coordinated austerity policies on Member States and changed the process of their economic surveillance (Six Pack, European Semester). Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus followed the path of bailouts and related programmes shortly after Greece, while the EU-wide coordinated austerity policies in 2010-2013 led to a "second recession" and cuts in social spending and investment, halting or even reversing the progress made in the 2000s in the provision of care services and social benefits to working parents. The hardest hit countries were those that implemented the harsher austerity measures (Karamessini and Rubery, 2014).

Apart from the required restrictions to public spending, Member States had also to consider in social policy-making during the austerity period the Country Specific Recommendations under the European Semester[2]. After having analysed all the social policy CSRs in the years 2011-2015, Copeland and Daly (2018) have argued that EU social policy during that period was more oriented to supporting market making/development (41%) than to correcting for market failures (7%), although the majority of CSRs were of a mixed character (52%).

Notwithstanding country differences, official statistics show that the provision of formal childcare services was not seriously affected by budgetary cuts during the Great Recession in the EU on average (Table 4). Coverage of children declined only slightly between 2010 and 2013 and then recovered and followed an upward trend until the pandemic crisis. It should be noted that during the austerity period, the European Structural and Investment Funds continued to finance the provision of formal childcare services by Member States that requested assistance. Ironically, Greece improved coverage between 2010 and 2019, in spite of implementing the harshest and longest austerity measures in the EU (Karamessini and Rubery, 2020).

Table 4: Children in formal childcare, EU 27 (coverage rate %)

AGE	Less than 3 years	From 3 years to minimum compulsory school age
2007	25	81
2010	28	84
2011	29	83
2012	27	83
2013	28	82
2014	29	83
2015	30	83
2016	33	86
2017	34	85
2018	35	87
2019	36	88
2020	32	82
2021	36	83

Source: EU-SILC survey data extracted on 2 January 2023 from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat

Concerning EU policy, the years 2008-2015 are characterised by the reluctance of the European Commission to take initiatives in the area of reconciliation policy, reflecting the skepticism of national governments and EU institutions towards imposing costs on companies and national budgets, as well as changes in their policy agenda/priorities at a time of deep

[2] The Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) of the European Council to EU Member States are issued annually and are targeted to areas of perceived policy weakness. Although social policy is a national prerogative, the CSRs are a key part of the European Semester and the strongest mechanism available to EU institutions to influence social policy at the national level.

crisis, great uncertainty and turbulence due to the Eurozone crisis, the Brexit referendum, etc. The main policy developments during this period at the EU level are the following:

- The adoption in 2010 of the Parental Leave Directive 2010/18/EU, revising the previous 1996 Directive and increasing the length of unpaid parental leave to which working parents are entitled from three to four months. The process had begun before the 2008 crisis.
- The withdrawal in 2015 of the Commission's proposal for a revision of the Maternity Leave and Protection Directive published in 2008.
- The adoption in 2010 of the new EU strategy replacing the Lisbon Strategy. The first of the four "Europe 2020" guidelines for national employment policies recommended to EU Member States the development of work-life balance policies geared to raising employment rates, particularly among young people, older workers and women.

Important developments took place in other areas during the same period. First, the global financial crisis sparked an intense international debate among progressive academics who criticised globalised neoliberal financial capitalism, the enormous economic and social inequalities created by the concentration of wealth and power in an economic oligarchy, the Washington Consensus, trickle-down economics, and the prevailing doctrine of "expansionary austerity" as the universal recipe for overcoming the 2008 crisis. In search of alternatives, a group of economists in the United Kingdom developed a feminist strategy for economic recovery known as "Plan F" (Pearson and Elson, 2015). The core proposal of this plan was to increase public investment in social infrastructure (health, education, child and life care, and social housing) based on a vision of a caring, gendered, and socially just economy. Similarly, other feminist economists have conducted applied research in search of alternatives and based on the idea of the untapped growth potential of unpaid care, showing that investing in care in the midst of a crisis is an effective strategy for job creation and that a care-led recovery can be an effective alternative to austerity (Antonopoulos et *al.*, 2014; Illkarakan, 2017; De Henau and Himmelweit, 2021).

Second, following the work of feminist economists (Folbre 2006; Elson 2008), the United Nations has recognised the economic value and importance of unpaid care work to the economy and the key role that the unequal distribution of this work between women and men plays in gender inequalities in paid work. In 2008, the UN National Accounts System included the product of unpaid labour, whether household or voluntary, in the concept of production, paving the way for its value to be officially estimated and included in GDP (ILO, 2018: pp. 8-10). In 2013, the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, convened by the ILO, recognised unpaid domestic work as productive and included it in the official definition of labour (ILO, 2013). In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted at UN. Its fifth goal on gender equality was influenced by Elson's "three Rs strategy" for achieving gender equality in unpaid work, which is to recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid work from women to men and from households to the state (Elson, 2008). The third target of the 5th objective (5.3) states that: "recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection measures, and the promotion of shared household and family responsibilities, as appropriate at the national level" (UN General Assembly, 2015). At the same time, the full integration of the existing ILO Decent Work Agenda into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development created a "5Rs Framework for Decent Care Work" (Recognition, Reduction, Redistribution, Reward, Representation). The "three Rs" strategy for unpaid care was reinforced with two additional recommendations for paid care workers, namely their adequate remuneration and representation through social dialogue and collective bargaining. The 5R policy framework

aims to promote the adoption of a model of quality care work linked to gender equality (ILO, 2018: Figure 6.1, p.289).

Although the EU had participated in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals and endorsed them in 2015, it decided to integrate them into EU policies and processes much later, under the von der Leyen Commission and starting with the European Semester and its 2020 cycle (European Commission, 2019). The EU institutions first had to rethink the role of EU social policy in the new post-crisis context, after austerity and internal devaluation policies had severely affected EU cohesion and the living standards and working conditions of the European population, especially in the eurozone's periphery.

A revival of EU social policy between the two crises: The Work-Life Balance Directive and Gender Equality Policy

The years 2016-2020 are a time of resurgence for EU social policy, including reconciliation and gender equality policies. There are reasons for this revival. When Juncker was appointed President of the European Commission, sluggish economic growth and the negative consequences of austerity policies had led to a crisis of legitimacy for the EU (Vesan et *al.*, 2021). After the threat of Grexit in 2015, the majority vote for Brexit in the UK referendum, and the rapid spread of populist and far-right anti-EU movements across the EU, Juncker was convinced that social Europe needed to be revitalised to avert the risk of EU disintegration by restoring the trust of the European people.

The Juncker Commission's major initiative is the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which was adopted in November 2017 by a joint proclamation of the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. The EPSR summarises all EU social policy objectives in one document and in the form of 20 principles/citizens' rights to be implemented through policy initiatives (EU, 2017).

The ninth principle of the EPSR is dedicated to work-life balance, which is also linked to the promotion of gender equality in the take up of leaves: *"Parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services. Women and men shall have equal access to special leaves of absence in order to fulfil their caring responsibilities and be encouraged to use them in a balanced way."* However, there is no mention to promoting an equal sharing of unpaid care work. The 11th and 18th principles are also relevant to work-life balance. The first refers to children who have "*the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality*" and the second to people in need of long-term care who have "*the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home care and community-based services*".

The endorsement of the EPSR was accompanied by a package of implementation initiatives. The first was the Directive on "Reconciling Work and Family Life for Parents and Carers"; it was launched in April 2017 and adopted in July 2019 (EU, 2019). Two months earlier, the Council had adopted a Recommendation on "High-quality early childhood education and care systems." The Directive has a strong gender equality dimension, as it aims not only to address the underrepresentation of women in the labour market, but also to achieve a more balanced distribution of parental leave between men and women. The main innovation is the introduction of new rights: a paternity leave of at least ten working days that must be compensated at least at the level of sick pay; the guarantee that at least two of the four months of parental leave are non-transferable between parents and compensated at a level set by the Member States; a care leave of at least five working days per year for workers who provide

personal care or support to a relative; and finally, the right of all working parents of children up to eight years of age and of all carers to request flexible working arrangements in the form of reduced working hours, flexible working hours and flexibility in the place of work.

The impetus for gender equality in caregiving provided by the Reconciliation Directive has been continued by the Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (European Commission, 2020), published in March 2020. By defining the equal sharing of domestic care responsibilities and closing the gender care gap as a key policy priority for achieving a gender-equal economy, the strategy brought the comprehensive feminist approach to gender equality in working life back into EU gender equality policy. However, it did not endorse the European Women's Lobby's proposal for a "Care Deal for Europe" alongside the "European Green Deal".

In the European Women's Lobby proposal, the Care Deal is part of the Purple Pact for a Caring Economy, which refers to a social alliance for a feminist project to organize the economy around care activities and gender equality principles (EWL, 2019). The proposal is based on two main arguments: a) care is the backbone of society; caring for others and being cared at different stages of life are two of the central emotional experiences of our common humanity, while care work is key to the process of social reproduction (*ibid:* p.21); b) the "care economy" has the potential to become an engine of growth and jobs, the core of a sustainable and inclusive growth model, and a promoter of gender equality and social justice.

The care economy consists of paid and unpaid labour, as well as services and social transfers that support care in all its forms. It can be defined by principles, rights, and goals (Ilkkaracan, 2018; Jenson 2020) as:

- An economy that guarantees access to quality care at all ages as a universal social right rather than a market good or private family responsibility, which is provided in a stable and respectful manner;
- An economy that implements the universal right to care as a right to be cared and a right to care;[3]
- An economy that advocates for a holistic approach to care that applies not only to children, the elderly and the disabled, but to all who need care at any stage of their lives;
- An economy that values the production of care and care work, which means recognising and measuring the economic value of unpaid care work and appropriately rewarding paid care work in terms of wages, employment status, and career opportunities.
- An economy that recognises that care work traditionally reproduces gender inequalities; therefore, public policies are needed to promote an equal sharing of paid and unpaid work between women and men[4] and to ensure that the choice to care for others is a real choice.[5]

Policies that opt for a care economy would require large social investments in health and social care services, as well as measures to (a) promote the use of parental leave by fathers and the equal sharing of unpaid domestic and care work between men and women, and (b) raise the relative wages of care occupations and address the undeclared work of domestic workers.

In our view, the proposal for valuing care and care work in society and massively investing in a "care economy" represents a leap forward in the feminist agenda to promote gender equality in work and care. First, it is complementary to work-life balance policy while, at the same time,

[3] Lewis (2009) has argued that if to be cared by others is a universal human need as posited by Nussbaum, then it should be possible for anyone to choose to care for others.

[4] Following Fraser (2016), the authors of the "Purple Pact" maintain that they envisage a society in which women's current life-patterns are the norm for everyone (EWL 2019, p.21).

[5] On the proposal for public intervention to ensure to everybody a 'real choice' between work and care, as an alternative to the universal adult worker/carer model, see Lewis (2006; 2009).

it constitutes a novel strategy for gender equality. In work-life balance policy the objective is how to make women as much available as men for (paid) work by enabling them to cope with their caring duties and to encourage men to equally share the latter. In the "care economy" proposal policy intervention seeks to make care available to whoever needs it in a gender equal way i.e., by valuing paid and unpaid care work and equally sharing it between women and men. A great advantage of the "care economy" proposal is that, by looking at care holistically and by linking gender equality to other social goals, such as catering the needs of the elderly and the disabled, promoting growth and job creation, enabling the green transition, fostering social inclusiveness and resilience etc., the social alliance for progressive reform towards a more just and gender-equal society can be broadened. A "Care Deal for Europe", as proposed by the European Women's Lobby, could forge such an alliance.

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis as an opportunity: recognising and revaluating care

The feminist economic proposal in favour of a "care economy" has influenced public debate about the role of care in society and the value of care work during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has shaken the world population and the world economy in an unprecedented way and intensity. The pandemic triggered an unparalleled severe, state-induced global recession due to the forced shutdown of large portions of economies, the restriction of international passenger travel, and the disruption of global supply chains.

The Covid-19 crisis was also unprecedented in terms of its gendered impact. Rubery and Tavora (2021) have described the specificity of the Covid-19 crisis from a gender perspective as follows, focusing on the initial foreclosure phase. "With the closing of schools and childcare facilities, the confining of people to their immediate households and the widespread adoption of teleworking, suddenly the home arena has moved centre stage. While in most crises the spotlight tends to be on the economy and paid employment, in this crisis the unpaid care work done in the home has gained unprecedented visibility, particularly as it is being done alongside wage work and other commitments... The dark side to this centrality of the home is the increased risk that women face from domestic violence" (p. 71).

Today, three years after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, surveys and studies of its social and gender impacts cover only the first year of the pandemic and mostly to the initial lockdown phase, with rare exceptions.

With respect to caregiving and its interface with work and the gender division of labor, the existing literature has shown that (a) much of the additional unpaid care work was required because of the lockdown and the closure of schools and nurseries, and (b) work-life conflicts were exacerbated because of the long hours and stress on workers in services and the large expansion of telework.

Rubery and Tavora (2021), Frey and Alajääskö (2021), and Yavorsky et *al.* (2021) summarized the results of available country-specific studies from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Spain, showing that mothers provided a greater share of the additional unpaid care work required during the initial closure, although men also provided more paternal care and sharing. Pailhé et *al.* (2022) have used the data from a big longitudinal survey in France to study socio-economic and gender inequalities in housework and parenting during the lockdowns. They have found that of 51% women against of 28% men spent more than two hours a day in housework during the first lockdown (April 2020); the respective figures for the second lockdown were 44% and 23% (November 2020). With respect to parenting, 42% of

mothers and 28% of fathers of at least one minor child spent more than six hours a day in childcare during the first lockdown; the respective figures for the second lockdown were 31% and 17%.

A recent paper has tried to draw some general conclusions on the evolution of the gender care gap during the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe, by reviewing fifteen studies from six EU Member States plus the UK (Joint Research Centre, 2022). The findings can be summarized in the following way. Women spent during the lockdowns an average of 27-72 hours a week on childcare and an average of 15-27 hours a week on housework. Men spent 15-56 and 9-10 hours respectively. Moreover, although men took fewer additional hours of unpaid work than women and, as a result, the absolute gender gaps increased, the relative increase in unpaid work during the lockdowns compared to the pre-lockdown phases was greater for men than for women, as men originally did fewer hours of unpaid work in the home than their female partners. For instance, men increased their parenting hours by 30-91% while women by 23-56%, which means that the relative care gap decreased.

All three rounds of the Eurofound Living, Working and Covid-19 electronic survey-April and July 2020, March 2021-confirm that women have shouldered the greatest share of the additional workload at home during the lockdowns and also show a general deterioration in work-life balance among EU workers, with more women and men reporting work-life conflicts (Eurofound 2020a; 2020b; 2021). The survey also showed that a slightly higher proportion of female than male workers (39% vs. 35%) started teleworking during the initial closures, but a much higher proportion of mothers with children under 12 (46%). Finally, a higher proportion of teleworking mothers than fathers indicated that they had reported time restrictions and inability to concentrate on their paid work because of their caring duties.

Blum and Dobrotić (2021) have studied in particular the childcare-policy responses during the Covid-19 pandemic in 28 European countries and found striking cross-country differences especially in the reopening phase after the first lockdown. They have argued that the specific responses resulted from country-specific combinations of a pandemic prevention strategy and childcare-related policy concerns. They have also distinguished four types of responses according to their rationale/goal: public-health, education, social-inequality and work-family-reconciliation focused.

To protect parents, especially mothers, from job and income losses due to additional care obligations, 20 of the 27 EU Member States have introduced special parental leave schemes, but with significant differences in the type of payment, the need for employer approval, and job protection (Rubery and Tavora, 2021). It is mothers of young children, who were frontline employees in female-dominated essential services[6] and who could not choose to telework, who have faced the greatest work-life balance challenges as a result of the confinement measures and closures. In most, but not all, EU countries, these workers were guaranteed child care (*ibid.*).

Notwithstanding special leaves, teleworking options and childcare support to essential workers in many countries, additional requirements for unpaid care work have not prevented job loss among mothers. Using data from the OECD's Risks that Matter 2020 survey of 25 OECD countries, Frey and Alajääskö (2021) have shown that women's job losses between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the third quarter of 2020 are primarily due to outcomes for mothers with children under 12, and argued that Covid-19's "shecession" should be called "momcession."

[6] Those sustaining life and providing security to their communities: health and social care, production and supply of food and drugs, utilities, defense, public administration etc.

On the other hand, by bringing the issues of public health and social care and the home into focus, the Covid-19 crisis has acted as a driver and accelerator of social awareness on a range of issues:

- The centrality of care-giving/work to sustaining life, the key role of the welfare state in public health and in universally meeting the basic care needs of the population, and the invaluable contribution of women as unpaid and paid carers to social reproduction.
- The scope and continuity of care and its gendered nature; it includes not only social and personal care for children, the elderly, and the disabled, but also early childhood education, health care, and long-term care-all female-dominated sectors-and the provision of assistance to all persons and groups in a state of dependency;
- the large gender inequalities in unpaid care and domestic work, the need for its more equal sharing between women and men, and the important role of the welfare state in de-familializing care work as a prerequisite for gender equality in paid work.
- The undervaluation of care work, predominantly female, as reflected in the low pay, poor working conditions, and low status of care workers; these also experience a wage penalty relative to other essential workers with comparable personal and work characteristics (Folbre et *al.*, 2021)
- The contribution that many women with precarious immigration status and intersectional disadvantage make to basic and frontline services.
- The large social inequalities in access to adequate care stemming from large deficits in care among large populations: poor elderly and people with disabilities, people living in remote areas where there are insufficient health, child, and elderly care facilities or who suffer from staff shortages and lack of protective equipment, homeless people, refugees, etc.

Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, many feminist scholars had used the term "care crisis" to refer to the large care deficits in capitalist societies. Folbre (2016) had argued that large unmet care needs are expressions of a broader crisis of social reproduction in contemporary financialized capitalism that squeezes" a key set of social capacities: available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally" (p.99).

The Covid-19 pandemic is often described as a "triple crisis": a health and an economic crisis set against the backdrop of a climate crisis. However, the pandemic has inadvertently brought to the front stage the underlying "care crisis" in all the gendered and ageing Western capitalist societies characterised by a two-earner family model, a growing proportion of single-parent households and insufficient investment in social care relative to social needs. This is also the case for European societies in spite of their significant efforts to upgrade provision in the last decades. A recent report by the European Commission (2021) has highlighted in particular the major deficits in care for the elderly and disabled in the EU, the negative impact of long-term care on work-life balance, and the serious labour shortages in the care sector, especially in long-term care, due to low wages and unsatisfactory working conditions (p.35). Additionally, a series of EIGE surveys and reports (EIGE 2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2022) have adequately documented the profound gendered impact of Covid-19, on top of long-standing gender inequalities in informal caregiving and paid care work, with women having shouldered the brunt of unpaid care, incurred the greatest work-life balance pressures and been the bulk of the overworked and overexposed to the virus labour in the essential services during the lockdowns.

From a political/policy perspective, the extraordinary conditions produced by the Covid-19 pandemic have created new challenges for EU institutions and triggered political activity at the

EU level in the fields of childcare, long-term care and gender equality[7] which culminated to the endorsement by the European Commission of the *European Care Strategy* published in September 2022. The Strategy consists of

(a) A Communication by the European Commission setting out the vision for how care should be provided in Europe, the proposals for action to Member States and supportive actions at the EU level (European Commission, 2022);
(b) Two Council Recommendations one on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care and another, on access to affordable high-quality long-term care (Council of the European Union 2022a; 2022b).

The European Care Strategy sets an agenda to cater the growing unmet care needs of ageing European societies with affordable, high-quality, accessible and inclusive care services, and improve working conditions and work-life balance for carers. It uses as a vision and makes explicit reference to the universal rights of *"children to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality"* and of *"everyone to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home-care and community-based services"* proclaimed by the European Pillar of Social Rights and declares its ambition to help make them a reality.

Moreover, the European Care Strategy acknowledges that the inadequacy of the formal care systems does not only create unmet needs and care deficits but is also harmful for women's labour market participation and economic independence and for gender equality and undermines the care sector's potential for job creation[8]. In this respect, it declares its intention to contribute to achieving the headline targets on employment and poverty reduction for 2030 across the EU, welcome by EU leaders at the Porto Summit in May 2021 and endorsed by the European Council. Finally, the European Care Strategy recognizes that good working conditions and career progression in the care sector, in which women make up 90% of workers, are vital not only for gender equality but also to attract and retain personnel, give carers the respect they deserve and provide high quality care services to the care recipients.

As for the Council Recommendations, the one on Early Childhood Education and Care has raised Barcelona targets for 2030 from 33% to 55% for children up to 3-years old and from 90% to 96% for children from the age of 3 to compulsory school age. Conversely, the Council Recommendation on Long-Term Care has not set any targets but Members States are instead invited to nominate national long-term care coordinators and to establish action plans.

[7] The political activity consists in the following initiatives. The first was the official conclusions on long-term care of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union issued in June 2020, which called for improvements in the provision of quality long-term care services and in working conditions in the care sector. The conclusions were later included in the European Commission's Green Paper on Ageing, adopted in January 2021. Regarding childcare, the Council conclusions adopted under the German Presidency in December 2020, and supported by the EIGE research report on gender inequalities in care and pay, called for stepping up efforts to reduce gender gaps in unpaid care work. Finally, the EPSR Action Plan, published in March 2021, announced the revision of Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care in 2022.

[8] Reference is made in the Strategy to a recent ILO report that has estimated that an annual investment of 1.1% of GDP in early childhood education and care and an investment of 1.8% of GDP in long-term care could create an additional 26.7 million jobs in the EU by 2030 (ILO, 2022).

Epilogue – What future for the European Care Strategy?

The European Care Strategy is an important political document that represents an advancement towards tackling the care deficits and promoting the defamilialisation of care and gender equality in paid and unpaid work. It endorses the principles and rationale of the feminist proposal for a 'care economy' fostering growth, jobs and gender equality while at the same time it revisits the familiar since the Lisbon Strategy 'social investment approach' to the modernization of the welfare state, which favoured work-life balance and public investment in social care. At the same time, it is a rights-based Strategy sited on the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Strategy has not gone so far as to advocate a universal right to care, but is urging EU Member States to boost social investment in care and join the pre-2008 trend.

The reservations that can be formulated about the Strategy mainly concern the process and conditions for progress towards its goals. First, the lack of quantitative targets for monitoring progress at the national level in coverage by long-term care services of the frail elderly and disabled people in need allows national governments to avoid commitments. Second, given that a crucial prerequisite of progress in covering unmet needs is adequate social spending for the provision of care services, this requires the mobilization of considerable funds.

The current energy and cost-of-living crisis and the rise in sovereign indebtedness in the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic do not leave much room for optimism with respect to the funding capacity of EU Member States. The monetary austerity pursued by the ECB and the rise in interest rates globally have made the (re)financing of states and sovereign debts from the international financial markets very costly. This makes NextGenerationEU funding all the more important for boosting the 'care economy'. However, the National Recovery and Resilience Plans were drafted and approved well before the European Care Strategy and, in the best scenario, EU Member States have paid unequal attention to public investment in social care. At the same time, looming stagflation and repeated calls for a return to austerity policies in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis are major obstacles to upgrading care services. In the current juncture, even the revised Barcelona targets for childcare seem ambitious.

Last but not least, the European Care Strategy has failed to grasp that care is part of the transition to a green economy, given that caring for the planet and caring for each other go hand in hand. As stated by the European Women's Lobby "*We need a Care Deal to put this continuum on a level playing field with the Green Deal, which equally requires robust measures including earmarked EU funds to invest in this sector"*. The European Care Strategy may thus constitute a stepping stone for such a more politically ambitious initiative in the coming years. Until then, it can be considered as a very important tool of EU gender equality policy and a significant advancement towards Social Europe in the post-pandemic era.

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