



How can work-life balance (WLB) policies improve social citizenship of vulnerable persons in Europe?

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INTRODUCTION

The EUROSHIP project (2020-2023) aims to provide an original and gender-sensitive assessment of the current gaps in social protection against poverty and social exclusion in Europe. Through the involvement of national and European stakeholders, EUROSHIP develops policy recommendations on how to strengthen social citizenship at the national and EU levels. The research results will support the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

European countries present different welfare and employment systems, but Work Life Balance (WLB) measures and initiatives are increasingly oriented towards the consolidation of a dual earner model. Ongoing policy reforms are challenging former static visions of distinct welfare regimes. The EU has also become a major convergence force in this regard. WLB balance has gained political salience as a main element of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The EU 2019/1158 Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers introduces new legislation to support parents and carers with the specific aim of reaching an equal sharing of caring responsibilities between men and women.

However, when we pay attention to the situation of low-paid workers and low-income unemployed persons, progress in WLB is often overwhelmed by the inequality generating trends of labour market policies and dynamics. One of the most revelatory pieces of evidence of this situation is the increasing presence of low-paid long-hours single mothers with dependent children and with almost no margin of WLB choice.

Our research on WLB possibilities and constraints of vulnerable persons across Europe, as detailed in several EUROSHIP working papers (No. 2, 5, 7, 22, 29)¹ and forthcoming publications, has produced several key findings:

Our selected countries (Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom) represent different welfare and employment systems. Also, their traditions, recent history and present policies differ in main areas. But most are making efforts to increase publicly funded early childhood education and care (ECEC), introduce fathers-only paid leave, reduce the gender gaps, and facilitate parental flexible working-time arrangements. This has translated into important cross-country advances that include increases in female labour force participation, unequal and bumpy progress in reducing gender occupational and salary gaps, access to ECEC, and a gaining weight of the dual earner model as a political reference. Besides, easier access to ECEC and means-tested child and family benefits, have improved the bottom line of protection for the most vulnerable children.

Despite these cross-country advances, progress in WLB has to a certain extent been hindered by the inequality generating trends of the labour market over the last two decades. This affects the precariousness of low-paid workers and low-income persons in all EUROSHIP countries. This is consistent with the evidence of stagnating or increasing in the 'at risk of poverty and social exclusion' and the 'in-work at-risk-of-poverty' rates for most household types. We find a growing presence of dual-low-paid-long-hours-earners households and low-paid long-hours single mothers with dependent children in most of the countries.

Our analysis of microdata from the European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) on employment precariousness and WLB needs in the 28 EU member states and Norway, shows that different WLB arrangements have risen throughout Europe alongside increasing employment rates. However, we find parallel increases in employment precariousness, reflected for instance in involuntary part-time and in-work poverty. This urges us to question the effectiveness of existing reach of existing WLB arrangements. Our main findings show that access to non-family childcare has improved in almost all groups and countries. Still, beyond childcare, it is difficult to make specific claims about possible improvements in WLB, and for non-family childcare, as access grows, the need to focus on quality of provision and observe processes of social segmentation becomes more and more evident. Our results also show considerable regional and intersectional disparities.

Moreover, drawing on 210 life-course interviews in the seven EUROSHIP countries, we found that most persons living through difficult intersectional situations receive insufficient social protection to avoid poverty, even if in many cases, receiving benefits and services is crucial in mitigating extreme hardship. For a few interviewees, paid work is or could be the main factor in improving their lives. For a larger group, however, their participation in employment is so patchy and unstable that, on its own, it cannot be expected to guarantee a decent standard of living. There are also people that because of disabilities, old age or gaps in social or human capital, have very little chance of participating in ordinary employment.

¹ <https://euroship-research.eu/publications/>

We also adopted an intersectional lens to pay attention to the interplay of more socio-demographic variables than just class and gender, and to bring other sources of inequality into the analysis. WLB struggles are more pronounced for mothers with ethnic minority and migratory backgrounds, for whom the combination of long periods in precarious employment, the high costs of housing, increased likelihood of being single mothers, and the restricted access to public-sector and family supports, can make their lives very hard.

We identified three main salient themes in the relationship between WLB and intersectional inequalities: (i) the struggles of vulnerable ethnic minority migrant mothers, especially single mothers, for exiting precarious employment or even participating in any formal employment; (ii) the lack of time and resources of most low-paid mothers to participate in any activities not related to work or family care; and (iii) the extent to which public-sector and non-public-sector forms of support mitigate severe deprivation but do not provide sufficient support to overcome poverty.

A minority of interviewees, including some migrant single mothers, found themselves benefiting from *virtuous circles of support*. This often meant a combination of several of the following aspects: access to cheap or free accommodation (whether through family or social housing), significant minimum income (or disability) benefits, access to 0-3 childcare, proactive employment opportunities such as on-the-job upskilling, personal support from a significant other who provides individually tailored support over a sustained period of time, access to public facilities (libraries, sports and leisure centres), NGOs or social service jobs.

The presence of any of these supportive factors always attenuates poverty. In the few cases in which several positive factors (access to resources) coincide, it was possible for a minority of interviewees to pursue *transformative life-course trajectories*, with long-term objectives and wider margins of choice in how to participate in paid employment, care and other non-employment and non-care activities they have reasons to value.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of our main findings is that paid work has different meanings and implications for different groups of people struggling to make ends meet. Following this, we formulate the following recommendations:

For persons in poverty for whom employment could be the main factor in improving their lives, the strengthening of mainstream WLB and employment policies remains a crucial objective. This includes the extension of high-quality and flexible ECEC, higher wage floors, and employee-oriented working-time flexibility (such as quality part-time). Besides, working mothers in low-paid positions may benefit at some point from policies directed to overcoming “glass ceiling” barriers, but what they urgently need is support to move away from the “sticky floors” of long-hours low-paid jobs. Many suffer from a troubled entry into the labour market linked to inter-generational transmission of disadvantage -as is the case of many migrant mothers. As they have to combine work and care responsibilities, they need clear-cut policies that go beyond formal training programs and facilitate access to better jobs. For example, the promotion of occupational upgrading as alternative ways to the traditional long years in full-time post-compulsory education and full-time entry jobs. These alternative paths involve measures such as on-the-job-training, fast-track courses with essential job-

specific skills that provide quicker access to better entry positions, and flexible learning routes that accredit and validate different non-formal and informal ways of acquiring knowledge that lead to better jobs.

We find other groups of persons living in AROPE situations for whom conventional employment-centred WLB policies may not be a viable or realistic strategy to avoid poverty. They include those whose participation in employment is so patchy and unstable that, on its own, it cannot be expected to guarantee a steady decent standard of living; and those who because of disabilities, old age or gaps in social or human capital, have very little chance of participating in satisfactory paid work. As these persons suffer the negative and excluding side of existing labour market dynamics, they may need a completely different WLB approach, one that is not so employment-centred. They need income-support mechanisms that may include some kind of conditionality, but not necessarily linked to mainstream labour market participation. They may benefit from engaging in activities where the borders between paid/unpaid work, care, social participation and leisure, are far more blurred than in standard employment contracts, and where the rationalization and occupational logics of the labour market are more diffused (activities such as cooking, hospitality, caring, self-building, gardening, growing an orchard, handicraft, sports, arts or political participation). Across Europe, third sector organisations show a wide range of best practices of these activities and jobs.

A small minority of the interviewees we talked to were involved in **transformative practices** (employment or non-employment oriented). Many in this minority had benefited from some kind of **virtuous circles of support**. These fortuitous constellations of support gave them material security and made their lives easier in various ways. In policy terms, the efforts to achieve these virtuous circles of support in deliberate rather than spontaneous ways may require attention to concepts such as policy bundles (Cantillon 2022) or policy cocktails (Jackson 2021) that look for the synergy potential of dealing with different needs at the same time (e.g.: vulnerable young people involved in building social housing that they may benefit from; employment programs in ECEC and long-term care that include good employment conditions and career prospects; non-employment social activities linked to ecological transformation).

In all cases, from persons with more employment possibilities to those with less, capacity-building welfare states need to go beyond facilitating that persons in difficulties get specific or one-off supports, to build up enabling contexts where citizens are exposed to, become familiar with, and proactively participate in finding better WLB alternatives. They need information and resources, but they also need social settings (private, public and third sector) where they see how these alternatives are explored, put into practice, and convince themselves that other ways of doing things are accessible to them.

Finally, and in line with these ideas of virtuous circles of support and “bundle” or “cocktail” policies, there are also structural and transversal policies that facilitate WLB in general but especially among groups in marginalized positions:

- Linking the ECEC debate on access and coverage with issues of quality and social cohesion, as in the other educational stages of universal access. This includes focusing on the impacts of ECEC on children’s wellbeing, and not only in its work-care reconciliation function.
- Positive activation measures within a WLB framework in which caring for young children (0-14) gives access to a constellation of supports (minimum income support, ECEC, cheaper housing, employee-oriented working-time flexibility) that keeps or even

increases the actual autonomy of mothers to decide what to do with their time, be it time for training or other activities. This is in line with approaches that prioritise human resource development over work-first goals.

- Good quality part-time jobs (20-29 hours, pro-rata, organized in the non-dispersed arrangements usually preferred by employees: three consecutive days of eight working hours each per week, 5 half working days per week...). This may help to counterbalance the increasing number of waged working hours per household, and the stagnation in the historical trend of working-time reductions per worker.
- Access to combinations of working-time, caring-time and training-time arrangements that challenge full-time all-or-nothing logics.
- Favouring public facilities (libraries, sports, parks and leisure centres) at walking distance from schools that are child-and-old-age friendly and encourage autonomy and social participation from an early age.
- Access to post-compulsory education adapted to mothers of young children who need to combine work, care, and upskilling or reskilling: fast-track courses, on-the-job-training, validation, and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Main WLB agendas have been concerned with facilitating the combination of maternity with a full-time career job. However, for a mother with difficulties to make ends meet, more so if she is a single mother, even if she benefits from generous maternity leaves and has access to complete 0-6 ECEC, she still may have to dedicate more than thirty hours a week to domestic and care activities. In the best of cases, she is left with around 40 hours per week for other types of activities that are not care or household chores. Devoting those 40 hours to an unskilled, low-paid job with hardly any positive impact on her human capital, just because she needs the money to survive, does not look like such a desirable alternative from a capabilities' perspective. Besides, and what has serious macro-social consequences such as below replacement fertility rates, if having children is seen as a risk of impoverishing oneself and spiralling downwards into long-term struggles with hardly any autonomous time, it is not surprising that many young women and men think twice before deciding to become parents.

However, if, thanks to a combination of key supports, being a mother becomes more compatible with having access to more enriching activities, be they training, education, civic participation, or jobs with better prospects; it is more likely that motherhood is seen less as an impoverishing risk and more as an option that can also open life-course possibilities. In the best capacitating welfare state scenarios (good quality ECEC, paternity leaves, generous child and family benefits, and human capital improving practices), maternity could even be seen as an opportunity that includes alternatives for requalification or for engaging in other personal and social transformative activities.

PROJECT INFORMATION

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