

REGAL: researching Work-Life-Balance for vulnerable groups



EU synthesis paper



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1. REGAL: introduction to the project

For vulnerable women, work-life balance is a different kind of problem than for ordinary women. Although Europe is indisputably one of the world's leaders when it comes to women's rights and gender equality, the vacuums for underrepresented groups are still there in the current work-life balance legislation. The European Pillar of Social rights however, assures that equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered. This implies the need for a target group policy on EU level. We define vulnerability as a lack of resources within a specific context that places individuals or groups at risk for experiencing negative consequences across their life course.

Seizing this EU aspiration, REGAL aims to emphasize the need for action towards vulnerable women, already struggling to even get access to the labour market. Once they succeed their entrance into the labour market, their working conditions tend to be often vulnerable and discriminatory practices due to parenthood or pregnancy are often witnessed.

This project goes beyond the general nature of the work-life balance package and tries to overcome the vacuums for the underrepresented groups in the current legislation. REGAL aims to link its objective with the European Pillar of Social Rights that states that equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered and that secure and adaptable employment shall be guaranteed and employment relationships into vulnerable working conditions shall be prevented.

Vulnerable women face manifold barriers within their work-life conditions, often characterised by discriminatory and low quality. Becoming pregnant or having young children rises even more these barriers and often leads to (indirect) dismissals and an even more difficult re-entrance to the labour market. Until now only general answers in this matter are provided in EU and national legislation without taking into account the specific situation of vulnerable women.

Through awareness raising instruments, with at the same time an analytical, problem solution as well as policy recommendation nature, REGAL strives for a better enforcement of EU law on work-life balance for vulnerable women.

With that particular scope, REGAL opens the door for ways to reduce the number of working poor (women) and bridges different related EU social policies and objectives. This project aims to raise the awareness for a more specific work-life approach for vulnerable women and will at the same time develop creative approaches to overcome the work-life barriers. This through an empowering participatory approach in collaboration with the vulnerable women themselves. 'To have a right' to a genuine work-life balance is not enough. Rights need to be realized. Realisation needs the capacity to aspire (Arjun Appadurai-the capacity to aspire: culture and the term of recognition, Stanford Univ. Press, 2004). The capacity to aspire is a navigational capacity. With this capacity you use the norms and axioms that exist in your society to explore the future frequently and realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another to build a common future. But this capacity is unequally divided among the population; the poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity (in turn because their situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures), have a more brittle horizon of aspirations.

The main innovative aspect of REGAL lies within its positive constructive nature: through an empowering participatory methodology rebuilding aspirations of vulnerable women in the area of work-life and inspiring with these aspirations employers, trade unions and policy makers, resulting in applicable good practices and policy recommendations.



2. Work-life balance and vulnerable people in the 5 participating countries of REGAL: state of affairs

2.1 Romania

The context of the Romanian case study

The call for enrolling into our project was made at community level. The group was formed voluntarily with women who were able to attend all Focus Groups (in the entire project timeline), and who had an interest with the “Work-Life Balance” concept. All 12 women active into our project are “active women” from a rural area (aged between 16-65 years old) responsible of their household (with family/children). The women in our target group live and work in the rural area, are working active people (18-65 years old), have a household, children, an extended family. All women participating in the focus groups realized in the REGAL project have a elementary or medium education. They have financial difficulties; despite the fact that they work with a working contract. They went through an emigration situations (personally or their partner) trying to find options for a better family income. Finally, they went through hard family situations or personal crisis in which WLB was totally non-existent, an imbalance that they developed in their personal stories made within this project.

The precarious situation of women from rural areas Case study Moldovița, Romania

Economical - Cultural - Educational - Medical Services deprivation

The women from Moldovița (with a general extend to entire Romanian territory) experience economic isolation:

- generated by their location in rural area (Moldovița commune is a location in which the main road is having an end, is closing/forest border with Ukraine). Isolation from modernized roads – significantly reduces access to services such as goods delivery, healthcare and education services (specialized staff refuse to go to remote places);
- generated by the labour market characteristics: lack of jobs; jobs underpaid; jobs paid into the black market (no taxes, no insurances); seasonal jobs - as a result of the geographical structure (mountain zone with a very long cold season from September until May).
- many women do not have a stable and safe income source such as a wage or a pension. This makes (or could make) them dependent on the breadwinner of the family or on social security services (total under the EU standards of living). The level of women’s income is lower than men’s for almost all income categories, because of their lower qualifications and lower occupational status.

Despite the fact that the incidence (numbers) of social insurance pensions is high in rural area, a crucial negative element is the low level (usually pensions for agricultural activities amount is less than 80-100 EUR per month).

a lack of educational and cultural alternatives (only one Highschool with technical profile in the area/no institutions of child care for children until 3 years old, no theatre, opera, concert hall).

a lack of medical services: no hospital in area (the closest one is at 40 km in conditions in which mostly women do not have a driving licence or they cannot afford a car because of poverty or lack of education- no driving licence).

Our mentioned project target group is particularly a vulnerable group also because of gender imbalances - generated by old mentalities, traditions, customs, and family education.

Women and WLB measures in Romania: an overview of the facilities and regulations to create a Work-Life Balance

Considering the target group that we proposed within the REGAL project in Romania, we can consider the following facilities and parts of the Romanian legislation in order to have a clear view on WLB understanding:

Child raising allowance (which can provide the necessary financial support during the child raising period and less financial stress in order to have a better WLB);

- according to the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 111/2010, both parents have equal rights, to leave and to benefit of the allowance for raising a child up to two years old (three years, in the case of a disabled child);
- it is necessary (in the last 2 years prior to the date of birth of the child) to have earned income from salaries (incomes) for at least 12 months (not necessary consecutive/it is also considered available if the mother/father requested in the 12 months: unemployment, medical leave, disability pension or unpaid leave);
- the calculation of the allowance is established, according to the GEO, in the amount of 85% of the average net income achieved in the last 12 months, from the last two years prior to the date of birth of the child;
- the individual employment contract of the employee on parental leave will be suspended for the entire duration of the leave;
- the period of parental leave is considered work period and represents a pension contribution period, according to GEO no. 124/2011, which entered into force on January 1, 2012.

Survivor's pension Law 263/2010 (providing financial support for a dignified life)

- the survivor's pension is due to the children and the surviving spouse, if the deceased supporter was retired or met the conditions for obtaining a pension;
- this law provides articles and possibilities for women whose husband died before retirement (before fulfilling the minimum retirement conditions).

Recognition of women's domestic work as equivalent for retirement financial aid - in Romania the legislation does not provide anything in this regard;

- the only law existing in this sense is Law no. 127/2019 of July 8, 2019/ART. 56 (1) by which women who have completed the minimum contribution period and who have given birth to 3 children and raised them up to the age of 16 benefit upon request from the 6-year reduction of the retirement age.

The right to an early child education - possibility to reduce the stress on the woman with a child 0-3 years old (a better WLB);

- there are a number of laws and regulations for the protection of the rights of children under 3 years (all related to child care, health, nutrition and special protection);
- many Government Decisions are particularly concerned with the protection of children at risk and the rights of the child, but there is no specific law for early child education in general.

the right to "equal pay for equal work"

- according to Eurostat in 2016, the lowest wage differences between women and men are found in Romania (5.2%), Italy (5.3%), Luxembourg (5.5%), Belgium (6.1%), Poland (7.2%), Slovenia (7.8%) and Croatia (8.7%).

Which of these measures contributes to a real WLB for Moldovița women? Do Moldovița women benefit from these legislative measures? Do women in rural Romania benefit from this legislation that would contribute to a work-life balance?

What women in the REGAL project from Moldovița say about their work-life balance?

The women in our target group live and work in the rural area, are working active people (18-65 years old), have a household, children, an extended family.

All women participating in the focus groups realized in the REGAL project have a elementary or medium education, they have financial difficulties (despite the fact that they work with a working contract); they went through an emigration situations (personal or their partner) trying options for a better family income; they went through hard family situations or personal crisis in which WLB was totally non-existent (imbalance that they developed in their personal stories made within this project).

Given the legislative possibilities and discussing the implementation of these measures that would give them a better WLB, we drew together the following conclusions while working in focus groups:

- none of the 12 participants benefit from the child raising allowance because none did have 12 months of contribution (salary) two years before the birth of the children (undeclared work; hourly payment without contributions paid to the state of the employer);
- none of the 12 participants receive the survivor's pension because they have not yet reached retirement age;
- none of the 12 participants will be able to benefit from the reduction of the working period by 6 years (although they gave birth and raised 3 children or more) because they did not have the possibility of a declared contribution (the minimum contribution period);
- no woman could give her child to an early education program because in Moldovița with the fall of communism all the nurseries were closed.

Conclusion

The women from Moldovița group are active now because of our project REGAL - in a women organization (ADAM Moldovița - member in TON), an "escape" from their daily routine, a better integration into social life, a space for giving and receiving help, support and information.

We really believe that a "social dialog" is complementary if we want to "change the world of work" (Chapter 6/"Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2018"-EU publication) and the WLB.

Legislative transformations in Romania must continue in favour of a real WLB and a national awareness campaign must reach women from rural areas but also those who can develop legislative policies in this regard.

A national awareness campaign on WLB term has to take into account that:

- less paid jobs, or "black market" jobs in rural area does not allowed women to have a normal safety life and a real WLB;
- recognition of domestic work in the household is a necessity in Romania (for a security income/renting income);
- the concept of WLB must be part of employability Romanian policies to make employers aware of its (WLB) importance in employee's life, the smooth running of the company and the development of Romania.

2.2 France

The context of the French case study

The question of work-life balance is not experienced the same way by all social groups. Improvements of European policies are palpable. But, as we notice in many European countries, notably in France, vulnerable groups, women above all, have difficulties in widening their view and go beyond self-limitation related to gender, economic status, assignment to domestic chores and to children education.

In this context, it's difficult for them to explore the opportunities of a better coordination of family life in order to expand their employability within the framework of a better family life – working life balance; knowing that laws don't allow enough consideration to the characteristics of these vulnerable groups.

Public policy encourage women employability and there is a whole system of social protection and a type of care that enables women to harmonize work life and private life. However it appears that it's, above all, wealthy social categories and middle class that benefit more from the opportunities provide by public policy.

In this global context, the question is to know whether these measures meet the concerns and expectations of migrant women or not.

The socio-economic position of the women

The situation of migrant women in the labour market, in social and cultural life and within urban spaces show a contrasting growth of women rights. The constraints related to sex relations and to migration influence the employability of migrant women and make that the balance between family life and work life is more difficult there than the average within native French women. This situation can't exclusively be explained by the impact of the community of origin nor by a patriarchal family system whereby domestic chores are on the shoulders of women. It's the result of that economic vulnerability that leads women to build survival strategies in order to meet critical needs. In this context many hindrances to a better reconciliation of work life and family life have been identified:

Deskilling and concentration in services to individuals

In their countries of origin, many graduated women are obliged to choose jobs like childcare and services to the individuals for survival. Here, deskilling concerns more particularly graduated women that face difficulties to validate the credentials achieved in the country of origin and that are obliged to accept unskilled or relatively unskilled jobs.

Cumulated discriminations

An action-oriented research of Grdr conducted in 2012 in African families of Île-de-France shows that 37% of these women work in the household and maintenance sector¹. Women suffered from cumulated discriminations as women, migrants, living in poor areas. Access to employment is complicated for these women due to their scarcity and to their « migrant women » oriented aspect, especially towards household jobs, without any concerns regarding their professional paths or their degrees.

1. Grdr (Migration, citoyenneté, développement). Etude « Scolarisation des enfants de migrants d'origine subsaharienne en France ». DAIC, 2012

The(no) access to common law

Migrant women and migrant people generally have difficulties in relying on common law. More often isolated, living out of any social circuit, weakened by a socio-economic precariousness, compelled to manage a variety of administrative difficulties, and sometimes in a situation of administrative dependence on French, dependence on their husbands, sometimes on their children, some of them have a poor knowledge of common law, of their rights and opportunities.

The situation of migrant women in France is at the crossroads of public policies involving different ministries. And the challenges of the work-life balance for migrant women must be analyzed taking into account this intersection point. It's therefore important to mention that the policies around the situation of migrant in France has only being seen for long from the male standpoint.

We can indeed notice a late positioning of decision-makers on the challenges of migrant women in the policies of integration and employment. This situation can be explained by the fact that during many years, women arrived here for family reunion. The evolution of the migration project of women and their important number (more than 50 % of migrant) has lead public authorities and associative actors to take position on the integration of women. However, as the question of work-life balance is in the field of common law, it was not the core concern of public policies regarding migrants. As from 2014, a report of the ministry of women rights prescribed strong measures to encourage the integration of women. It underlines the types of care as an important issue for professional activities of women and the need to better equip the accompanying persons and to include in the estates general of social work in 2014 the issue of a better inclusion of equality between women and men. The discussions with our different partners like territorial units shows that numbers of councils are sensitive to the question of work-life balance, notably to how to put in place a system of child care in order to create the conditions for the employability of women. Pôle Emploi has designed activities to facilitate the employability of women with a child care device or financial help. There are assistance for companies that recruit vulnerable people in order to train and employ them. Some enterprises don't have information about these supports. Some issues of Pôle Emploi are empowered to others partner organization.

One could think that the question of the conciliation of family life and work doesn't have the same challenges for people in precarious situation, notably migrant women, because they emphasize their employability and their presence in public space. But this is nothing more than the tip of the Iceberg where hindrances to work-life balance are underlined. Today this issue of the conciliation family life / professional life of migrant women have gradually becoming a challenge for public policies. the REGAL project has permitted, by working with women, associations and institutions, to trigger constructive discussions and to show that the type of child care is only one of the aspects of the conciliation of professional life and family life. Many staff from associations are mobilizing capacities around the government to ease access of women to employment and their role in the public space as the place of men in family, in order to achieve a better management of the conciliation family/professional life.

The expectations of women compared to public policies: an overview of recommendations from experiences

We can focus on 3 great themes that are found in the expectations of women.

Social integration and employability

The social dimension of the path is often underlined by women in relation to their expectations. Indeed many of them talked about the need to dissociate the salary issue with the employment one. That's to say give financial means for a decent life condition while freeing time to devote to social involvement and mother life. We can cite the example of Martine who reminds us that: *«To improve the condition of single women with children, I propose that they have a specific remuneration that will enable them to get rid of daily stress. They would then have the possibility to think about the essential: to manage their children and follow up their career. »*

Concerning the questions related to employability, let's also get back to what could be linked to the concept of « glass ceiling ». Indeed, we have been able to deduce from the interviews and focus group with women important aspirations to carry out responsibilities functions, to be acknowledged through their technical skills in their professions, managerial skills, etc. This feeling to be reduced to underrated professions, without responsibilities often came back in the portraits of women, and this aspiration to break the famous « glass ceiling » is back in the project. This can be illustrated particularly by the words of Sitou that underlines that: *“At last, a Black woman, African in Europe must be able to occupy high positions in sectors for which they've graduated without any discrimination gender or race.”*

Professional integration and entrepreneurship

Concerning the question of professional integration, the main expectations of migrant women is in the possibility to combine professional trajectory with a mother trajectory and to have flexible frameworks in this logic of to/from. Today, the law which is normative and stiff permits on only partially to find solutions to the situations of migrant women, who sometimes work in on shifts, are engaged in their quarters, are on part-time jobs, are in a logic of going to and from pay job, associative commitment, and family life. As put by Adele: *« What European politician can do to help is to encourage enterprises to put in place special paths towards professional and long term integration for women in search of a job or already with a job and that wish to be available to their children. You might vote a law to safeguard women employment by forcing enterprises to take back women after maternity leave at a position at least equivalent to the one they held during the period of pregnancy and this for a period of at least 6 months...”*

Concerning professional integration, we see significantly the question of development and professionalization, in order to access comfortable conditions of life and more dignity. As « Anonymous » reminds us: *« “ May be there's something to do for migrant women mothers who are not alphabetized in French could in spite of all this take a training at their pace? Alternatively? Or in shortest terms? “ Or Francine : «Maybe Europe and companies interested in diversity in their recruitment processes could put in place training scholarships for women entrepreneurs that are both migrants and mothers which want to have a good professional career?”*

The question of skills and of ability to balance family life, professional and social life is also part of the challenges. Indeed we notice a tendency to confine migrant women to uniquely an educative role within the family, ignoring the social role around the living-together or the eco-

conomic role and without consideration of their informal and formal skills. Judith reminded us that: *“We, women from Africa, residing in France, being French citizens or not, want to have access to trainings. In our countries of origin, we have the reputation to achieve household duties, manage family economy, carry out businesses, and develop many activities.”*

The question of entrepreneurial capacities is also found in the word of Judith, which insists on the need to be able to live one’s commitment, to devote one’s skills and know-how to the service of living together, social link, and the improvement of life conditions: *«We want to be able to involve ourselves in entrepreneurship, to create enterprises in order to put our know-how and ambitions at the service of our quarter, city and society»*

The work-life balance

This question of commitment and women initiatives is also found around the challenges of work-life balance. We notice through their words that women want generally not to be compelled to make a choice between their career, associative commitment or entrepreneurial project and their mother life devoted to the education of their children. More often we see this aspiration to be able to combine these three spheres. It can therefore be noted that the development of enterprises children care centers is a device that aimed at bringing a response to the wish to combine professional life and family life. But it seems necessary to pay attention to these expectations of migrant women taking into consideration their family, professional and personal situations. The words of Aïssata T. better explain this concern: *“To respect the choice of the woman which want to earn a living by entrepreneurship is to put in place structures of childcare before school with customized tariffs, fees and packages that match our economic reality, That’s to say without a pays lip the first year!”*

This challenge of combining family life and professional life is also found in the commitment of Aïssata T. which also stated that: *“ I dream of a co-working platform with a mode of care near, where one could go a visit one’s child and breed him, where awakening activities will be provided, a place where one could work as long as desired and where one could train and meet others entrepreneurs. »*

The work-life balance and the opportunity given to migrant women to undertake as many activities as they can become for some of them the objective of their commitment and aspiration. Indeed, having been confronted in their trajectories to difficulties in reconciling family life and professional life, they develop associative or professional projects with the mission to solve these challenges. It’s particularly the case of Hawa which precises that: *«I could therefore dedicated myself to support parenthood, moderate parents-child workshops, and could help parents to identify the best care modes for them.”*

These common aspirations have been consolidated through different meetings with technical partners, contact people, Member of Parliament, and institutional partners met during the process of REGAL project.

The interactions around the question of identity and place of origin with the CRAN and the political scientist Françoise Verges enable women to identify cultural and intercultural for a better reconciliation private life/ professional life.

The meetings with: 1) employment and integration actors like Pôle Emploi 2) the centers of advices in professional growth like the Cité des métiers de Paris la Villette et 3) training and qualification centers like Force Femmes and Esperem gave good indications on the challenges of professional training and solutions to facilitate women pathways.

Finally, the interactions with institutional partners of the government (Ministry of women rights and « Agence Nationale de la Cohésion des Territoires – ANCT ») and territorial collectivities (Cities of Grigny and Massy) gave the best elements to understand the institutional context a define recommendations in harmony with public policies orientation in France.

This is the summary of the women work group recommendations to improve the work-life balance around the 3 dimensions of private and family life, professional life and entrepreneurial or associative commitment.

Encourage social integration and employability

Remove cultural and intercultural barriers

- Go beyond linguistic barriers
By imagining innovative formats that enable non francophone women to access to good trainings, with short length alternatively and customized to match the capacity of each woman.
- Go beyond one's community that often infantilizes women and reduces them to minimal roles
By reinforcing the capacities of social centers and local houses that support professional integration of women in order to guide them towards their autonomy.
By ensuring the sustainability of structures like PMI that permits to mothers to get at their disposal listening centers guarantee of social emancipation.

Remove administrative barriers

- Encourage professional integration
By putting in place, at the European level, training scholarships for women, entrepreneurs, migrants and mothers which want to have a good career could encourage them to be more open to diversity and would help to solve the problem of unaffordable training fees.

By reducing restrictions for foreign students that want to work in France because during their studies they can only have access to precarious traineeships and contracts that do not give them the required experience to found a true job.

By authorizing the foreign partner that got his degree in the host country to stay with his pregnant partner.

Remove gendered barriers

- Maternity and career
By encouraging companies to favor special pathways of professional integration and maintaining the employment for mothers which are either looking for a job or which are professionally active and wish they would remain professionally active while being available for their children.

By protecting with a law women employability by obliging enterprises to take back women after their maternity leaves at a position at least equivalent to that they held before and this for a period of at least 6 months.

By encouraging flexibility of working hours of women with younger children or by enabling them to undertake teleworking once or twice a week if they want in order to reconcile harmoniously their mother role with their professional activities.

By Prolonging the length of maternity leave from 3 to 4months and half to enable them to regain back their physical aptitudes after birth.

To reinforce the sick leave of the child by customizing it (big family).

Encourage professional integration and entrepreneurship

Enterprise creation

- Help women to free time
By putting in place structures of care before school with tariffs and customized fees that match their economic reality that's to say without pays lip for the first year.

To support them to make business plan, finalize market research tools, to be able to discuss the feasibility of their projects, structure my global procedure in a context of financial urgency

- To Help women entrepreneurs by bringing to them financial guarantee
By ensuring to women entrepreneur a better social and sickness protection so that they could also have children in the best conditions of healthcare possible
- To help women entrepreneur also means
To offered to them platforms of work and customized support integrating near care solution (breeding, social link).

Improve the conditions of care modes

Reconcile professional life /personal life

It's perhaps necessary to create additional pay to help single parent's families.

Necessity to have priority places in children care centers, structures of replacement, maternal assistants pole, stop-children care, and places with more customized working hours.

To reinforce devices of customized support in a case of chronic or serious illness.

To improve the harmonization of medical care and activity and a transition period for a smooth coming back and that this period doesn't match a drastic period of resources reduction.

2.3 Belgium

The context of the Belgian case study

The REGAL project focuses on a specific target group presented under the current WLB measures, in particular vulnerable women who are in a precarious situation. The vulnerable situation is an additional threshold to find suitable work, to carry it out and to achieve a balanced Work-Life-Balance. A precarious situation is determined, among other things, by less good working conditions (irregular work, little or no flexibility), by little career advancement opportunities, by a poor housing situation, by a poor financial situation. All these elements can be an obstacle in finding a good WLB.

REGAL is investigating how measures can be taken within the WLB to guarantee a better balance for these vulnerable families and to give them an incentive to (continue to) work.

In Flanders, we take the undervalued group of maintenance personnel as a target group demonstrating different precarious risks. The vulnerability in this group is mainly caused by their low level of schooling and, as a result, few opportunities on the labour market. Shortskill can also be caused by the non-recognition of diplomas acquired abroad. Language requirements also result in a very high threshold, which in turn limits opportunities on the labour market. As a result, their vulnerability is particularly high, their chances on the labour market low. Low opportunities translate into precarious working conditions, which makes the WLB particularly difficult for these individuals.

The socio-economic position of women in Flanders

Belgium's culture is like other European countries based on the male breadwinner model. Women work less and care more. 2 out of 5 women work part-time. Part-time work is slowly changing: Saturday and Sunday work are on the rise: 1 in 5 women work on Saturdays, 1 in 7 on Sundays. Part-time work can be an answer to the demand for a good WLB within a family. For families, however, weekend work can be a hindrance to a good WLB.

The unemployment rate for women is much higher than for men. And especially short-skilled women are more likely to get into unemployment. Although there are also jobs for the short-skilled, these are tough or unattractive jobs or jobs that require little knowledge. Cleaning is such a job: anyone can clean without training. The working hours are to blame for this: early or late hours, for example, are the rule.

Such jobs are also low-paid jobs. The higher poverty rates among women are linked to higher unemployment rates on the one hand and these low-paid jobs on the other.

The current situation can be summarised as follows: reconciling work and family life often involves either adapting the professional role to the situation in the family or adapting the family role to the requirements of the profession. The more financial opportunities women have, e.g. by being highly educated, the easier it is for them to adapt their professional role. Short-skilled women have far fewer opportunities to do so.

Women and WLB measures

Flanders and Belgium have installed many measures to help families with a good WLB. In this way, Flanders and Belgium are complying with the European directive on a better "work-life balance".

There are a lot of possibilities to reduce the number of working hours for reasons of care. Public and private sector workers have the possibility to temporarily interrupt their careers or reduce their working hours. These measures are mainly taken up by women if they under 50. In addition to these time credit system, there are some special leave arrangements. Employees can use parental leave to temporarily interrupt their careers or reduce their working hours. This is possible for every child until it reaches the age of 12. Employees with a care responsibility for a seriously ill family member up to the 2nd degree are entitled to leave for medical assistance. If your family member turns out to be incurably ill and is in a terminal phase, you are eligible for palliative leave. Also here women use more than men these measures (4/5 of the users are women, especially when they are young.

Maternity leave for employees amounts to fifteen weeks, which are theoretically divided into six weeks of prenatal rest and nine weeks of post-natal rest. A similar picture: almost 2/3 of the users are women. The same for the measure, leave for medical assistance: 4/5 is taken up by women.

Flanders has invested heavily in the care of babies and toddlers, including after-school care. In addition to time credit, this type of care offers the possibility of having a good WLB. It is important that the child care is also open to weaker groups. Initially, this care goes to children of working parents, but families with a very low income who are unemployed can also make use of this care to find work. There are also forms of inclusive care for children with disabilities.

These facilities are just area-covering. In addition to young children's care, there is also after-school care up to the age of 12. There is a non-income-related childcare next to a limited number of places that are income-related. After-school care is very important for working families. This offers them the opportunity to take on a full-fledged job.

In Flanders and Belgium, there are many measures to ensure that families can realise their WLB. This enables women (or men) to better combine work and family life. Especially the women are using these measures to care for children or to take care for family. The "caring for" fits with the male bread winner model, confirming this model and putting obstacles for women in their working life (i.e. the so called glass ceiling, the lower remuneration, the lower years of working, the lower pension, ...)

The question is whether these measures answer now the concerns and expectations of the women interviewed in this project. Are they taking up these measures, or are these WLB measures useful for them? And are these measures incentives for the women?

What women in the REGAL project say about their work-life balance

The 12 women in the REGAL project work as a cleaning lady or maintenance lady in a large office building, in the kitchen of the company restaurant or as a family carer. 11 women in our focus group work for the same company. 4 of the women interviewed are of foreign origin, 6 are Dutch-speaking, 6 are French-speaking. All the women are married or live together. 3 women have no children. The age category of the interviewed women varied from 21 to 52 years.

The interviews provide a picture of how women and their families try to build a 'good life'. The search for a WLB within their 'good life' is an ongoing task.

All women have a lower education. As a result, almost all the women interviewed had few opportunities. On top of that, for some of them there was a family history that also limited their possibilities. Sometimes, however, a low level of education does not limit people: three

stories show that women here show ambition and want to go further. But they also come up against various obstacles. For many of the women interviewed, cleaning or maintenance is the only way to earn an income. Their income is really needed. A number of women also provide the main income.

Good working conditions, even if it is not a dream job, create a sense of well-being. Their choice for this job is strongly influenced by these circumstances: the wages are good compared to other cleaning companies; the hours ensure that they still have time in the afternoon;

...

Working conditions are therefore vital and offer these women and families the chance to live 'well'. Living 'well' is for them, being able to put something aside some money at the end of the month. Less good working conditions (lower wages in other sectors or companies) imply that some women are not looking for another job. In other words, equal and good working conditions are essential to give women (and men) the opportunity to change, to find a job that suits them better.

Caring for the children is a tangle and an ongoing search for a suitable way. Because of the working conditions, finding care is almost impossible: night care or very early care is not (always) available. All have thus to appeal to mothers, fathers, even neighbours. They look also for solutions outside the 'normal' situations: the man searches for another job, a woman works at night, children are left alone at home, ... If you have a handicapped child, it is twice as hard. Adapted care is not always available. Those who could not find a solution had to stop working, with all its financial consequences.

The stories show that the combination of income and care is for them tricky. Going to work to pay for family care is not a meaningful barter for them. Because of the financial consequences they do not use the parental leave measures. They need the income. Childcare and parental leave are necessary measures for a WLB. But only one woman makes use of these measures. Others do not have the possibility, either the childcare is not accessible or non-existent at the necessary hours, or it is too expensive. The family is therefore essential for all these women. Without this network, they cannot go to work, they have no extra income, they cannot take care of.

Education, language, social/political context, family history (moving to Belgium, the need to provide an income), working conditions, ... these are the important factors that determine their possibilities for a 'good life'.

The gaps between the real and the legislative world

The interviews showed the importance of the terms and conditions of employment and their context of living.

The positive aspects of the job (hours, wages, colleagues) are partly nullified by, among other things, the working conditions, less good public transport, living far away, ... The physical heaviness of the job is also an obstacle to a "good life".

WLB therefore has a different meaning for these women. With a higher family income, they might have stayed at home for the children. For them, working less and working on other conditions are the meaning of the 'good life' and the meaning of a good WLB.

The interviews give us thus a different picture of what a good WLB is. It is not an average picture of WLB. For people in similar situations, people on low incomes and outside normal hours (sooner or later, weekend work), other measures are needed.

For a good WLB, their possibilities need to be broadened: good employment conditions, higher wages, training possibilities adapted to the working conditions, care service that is affordable, the ability to invest in networks, language conditions, good public transport, ... All these elements contribute to a good WLB.

The existing WLB measures are not really the answer for these women. Encouraging people to stay working through the mainstream WLB measures are not the solutions for these women. In this sense there is a real gap between the real and the legislative world.

2.4 Ireland

The context of the Irish case study

The REGAL Project in Ireland works with women who have been or currently are homeless. The project is led by Focus Ireland, which is a national housing and homeless NGO working to prevent individuals, young people and families from becoming homeless and support them out of homelessness. We worked with a core group of 16 women who we conducted 12 focus groups with between November 2019 and March 2020 before public health restrictions came into effect and we were forced to postpone remaining sessions. REGAL in Ireland has produced the character 'Faith', who is representative of the women's experiences, feelings and aspirations. Faith had a physical presence in all of the focus groups through the form of a letter box. Through this, the women could speak directly to her through letter-writing.

The socio-economic position of women in Ireland

Ireland has a long history of legislation and policy that reinforced the Irish woman's place in society as being in the home. In terms of labour market participation, although male and female employment rates in Ireland had reached the EU average by 2018, examining employment rates by sex and parental status reveals the extent to which a) there is a labour market penalty to being a parent, but b) it is a penalty exclusively borne by mothers. Mothers who are part of couples have an employment rate that is twenty percentage points lower than fathers in couples. Despite significant reforms to social protection supports for lone parents in relation to labour market participation lone mothers have the lowest employment rate of all, at just over six in ten lone mothers. Between 2005 and 2014 in Ireland, persistent poverty rate was found to be 20% for lone parents and 13% for working age adults with a disability and a transitional poverty rate of 19% for persistent poverty and transition poverty (EU-SILC).

The precarious situation of women and single women with children

Historically, Ireland has strongly associated the work of unpaid care with women. Ireland developed a welfare state which both relied heavily on the unpaid caring work of women, and which saw earning and caring as belonging to separate realms. Ireland's social protection system has been characterised by a 'strong male breadwinner' model, with entitlements accrued by workers; while welfare payments were related to the family whom the worker was supporting. Ireland has some of the most expensive childcare in the developed world, and this is widely recognised as a significant constraint on the labour market participation of mothers. Perhaps this issue around childcare unaffordability plays a significant part in why women in Ireland are far more likely to work part-time hours than their male counterparts (74.4% of men work for 35 hours or more compared to 52.3% of women according to national census data).

An overview of the facilities and regulations to create a work-life balance

The reliance on the unpaid work of 'women in the home' and the comparatively low participation of women in the labour market meant that historically, while there was a social insurance payment available for part of the period of maternity leave, paternity and parental leave was unpaid. Employers are not required to pay employees taking care-related leave; some employers 'top up' employee's social insurance entitlements on a discretionary basis. There is also provision for employees taking such leave to have social insurance contributions credited to their record, which can be particularly important when it comes to pensions.

While Maternity Benefit has been available in Ireland for some time, paid Paternity Benefit was first introduced in 2016, and a new Parental Benefit came into place in November of last year; initially for two weeks, but the intention is to extend this to seven weeks over a three year period¹. Social insurance entitlements for people taking leave to provide care are generally paid at a higher rate than for other working age payments. Rates of payment are pay related in that part-time workers receive reduced rates. There are a number of issues that should be considered in relation to providing paid leave via the social insurance system, and how this impacts on low income women with experience of homelessness. The association between homelessness and joblessness means that many parents who have been affected by homelessness will not have sufficient social insurance contributions to qualify for paid leave.

What women in the REGAL project say about their work-life balance REGAL

Ireland has worked with women who have experienced housing insecurity or homelessness. We worked with a core group of 16 women, of which 11 were not in employment, education or training (NEET). At the time of the focus groups, 4 of the women were engaged with Focus Ireland's PETE (Preparation for Education, Training and Employment) Service, meaning they were actively trying to get back into training or the labour market.

Childcare

All of the women were caring for children and the cost of childcare in Ireland came up consistently from the women as being a major barrier to getting back to the labour market. Some of the women who were NEET at the time of the focus groups spoke about the cost of childcare being so high that they felt they were only working to pay for the childcare.

The women spoke about being completely devoted to their children and having little or no time for self-care. The group spoke about spending almost all of their time caring for other people, but having nobody who cared for them. This feeling was shared by both the women who were parenting alone and the women in couples. This led to them feeling stressed, exhausted and *"like a gerbil on a wheel"* and feeling like they were *"never in the clear"*. The women spoke of wanting the best for their children and their aspiration to be a positive role model for them.

The women spoke about the challenge of looking for work between school hours because of lack of afterschool activities. The part-time jobs which would allow them to work while the children are in school require high levels of availability and flexibility from employees, which is not feasible for the women. In addition to this, these jobs are often low paid and many women in the group did not feel it was worth it to pursue these jobs.

Afterschool activities came up as barrier to having more time for education or work for many of the women. Pick up from school for pre-school children was additional barrier for women which left them with very little free time in the day. Pick up and drop off for both pre-school and older children was a solution proposed by the group to give them more flexibility.

Upskilling

Many of the women spoke about wanting to do something for themselves and upskill while also providing for their children. However, many of the women lacked aspirations for careers based on their talents and skills. The women felt that the policies which negatively impacted

1. Dept. Employment Affairs & Social Protection, April 2019. <http://www.welfare.ie/en/pressoffice/Pages/PR230419.aspx>

them and discouraged them from pursuing work were made from people who did not understand their experiences.

However, the women also spoke about the barriers to upskilling or pursuing education. A key theme that emerged around upskilling and returning to work was allowing the women to pursue their aspirations and identity apart from caring for others. The women expressed a desire for work to become a part of their life in a way that facilitates self-development, rather than just being a method of earning money. Despite this, the women spoke about the “fear of the unknown” when pursuing education. Some of the women felt like in order to get appropriate qualifications for good jobs which would pay well, the time commitment for the course was too long

Returning to Employment

For the women in the group who had achieved qualifications, they still faced barriers when trying to get work. They felt they could not balance their life outside work when in the workplace, as many employers do not allow them to have their phones on them. The women spoke about the necessity for this in case emergencies came up, or their child became sick. For the women in couples, they felt it was expected of them as the mother to take care of the child while they were sick and lose out on work. They felt that their employers did not expect them to have a “life” when in “work”.

The group brought up lack of confidence and anxiety around returning to work. Some of the women felt that the longer they were out of the labour market, the more anxious they were about returning to work and meeting new people. This juxtaposed with feeling of wanting more independence and having their own money.

Cultural differences emerged in the group with some of the women showing a preference for caring for their children full-time while they are young. However, the experience of some of the other women shows that being out of employment for a long period of time proposes challenges when they do decide to go back to work or education.

The gaps between the real and the legislative world

The issue of inclusive childcare for working parents as being a solution to supporting the women to get back to work or education came up strongly in the focus groups. Ireland spends just 0.2% of GDP on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) compared to a European Union average of 0.7% of GDP. Ireland has the most expensive ECEC fees in the European Union while ECEC professionals are some of the lowest paid in the economy. The National Childcare Scheme which came into effect at the end of 2019 has provided good subsidies for working parents with pre-school children. However, this emphasis on pre-school children does not address the main childcare issue which came up in the focus groups, which was childcare for school-age children.

A Day in the Life of Faith

Despite the diversity of the core group (n=16) of women REGAL Ireland worked with, many of the women shared the same view that policy-makers did not understand their day to day reality and the costs of caring. One of the exercises the women contributed to throughout the duration of the focus groups was to keep a photo diary of their care tasks and their daily responsibilities to illustrate the reality of their lives. These photo diaries showed us who these women were, and what their realities are; from washing and cooking for the kids, trying to manage their own mental health and budgeting. This reality was particularly hard for the women who were currently homeless and in emergency accommodation.

Human Rights

In order to explore the rights-enabling aim of the project and empower the women, the research team engaged the group with an exercise in exploring their Human Rights. The researchers went through the 30 Human Rights according to the UN Declaration of Human Rights and then women were split into groups to vote on the rights they felt were the most important to them in the context of their work-life balance. This exercise was a rights-enabling activity which allowed the women to be aware of their rights and how these were not being enforced in their daily lives. The top three rights that the women picked were: 1) *The Right to Work*; 2) *The Right to a Standard of Adequate Living*; and 3) *Right to Social Security and Right to Nationality (jointly)*

When discussing the right to work, the issue of wanting to work but being unable to because of childcare were discussed. The Right to Social security came up strongly as an issue with precarious work. Under current policies for parental leave, many of the women in our focus groups would not be covered due to insufficient social insurance contributions. This issue and the practice of means-testing were explored and linked with the inherent inequalities which exist in a system which is predicated on pay-related contributions. How can someone contribute to a social insurance system when they are structurally excluded from the jobs market?

What stakeholders say about the work-life balance of precarious women

Focus Ireland is engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders, including organisations and NGOs in the areas of lone parenthood, women's rights, anti-poverty, labour rights, migrant rights, and various key government agencies.

From June 2020, Focus Ireland in partnership with stakeholder organisations like the National Women's Council and Society of St Vincent De Paul ran a campaign called *#ChildcarePreventsHomelessness* to highlight the issue of childcare for working parents. This campaign drew attention to some of the key issues for the REGAL Project – that childcare is a barrier to stable and secure employment for parents who are parenting alone or in a couple. This campaign highlighted the interim findings from the REGAL Project, supported by a webinar presented by the researchers.

Dialogue with stakeholders is ongoing and formal inputs from stakeholders are due in the coming weeks, which will contribute to the final analytical paper.

Conclusion

Historically, much of Ireland's social policy formation in relation to women, work and care responsibilities is rooted in a patriarchal 'male breadwinner' framework. This model relied heavily on the unpaid caring work of women, and fundamentally treated earning and caring as separate entities. More recently, the policy landscape related to this area can be characterised by activation efforts to 'encourage' lone mothers to the labour market or to share the burden of childcare through increased provision of childcare supports and reforms to expansion of parental leave. However, many of these policy changes appear to be adversely impacting low income women leaving them in an ever-more precarious situation. Notable barriers identified in the Irish policy landscape include: 1) affordability in childcare; and 2) insufficient supports for carers. A precarious employment (and housing) market add further layers of exclusion to women with care responsibilities. These complex and overlapping factors, therefore, frequently leads to poor labour market outcomes for women, or indeed exclusion from the labour market entirely.

To explore the lived experiences of women with care responsibilities and living in poverty, the REGAL project in Ireland worked with a core group of 16 women who have a care role and have been or currently are homeless. Twelve focus groups gave the women the opportunity to tell their stories. The women felt that policy makers did not understand their lives and all the barriers they face on a daily basis that prevent them from attaining a better work-life balance. They spoke of experiences such as the high cost of childcare, poor quality and precarious employment, prohibitive and unjust social welfare systems, and a lack of confidence and training. Through photo diaries they captured the daily grind of providing care for others while also articulating the lack of care they afford for themselves which can lead to stress and exhaustion. In order to explore the rights-enabling and empowerment aims of the project, the women engaged with a rights-enabling activity. This allowed the women to be aware of their rights and how these were not being enforced in their daily lives. The top three rights that the women picked were: 1) The Right to Work; 2) The Right to a Standard of Adequate Living; and 3) Right to Social Security and Right to Nationality (jointly). Central to discussions in relation to these rights were the key barriers of unaffordable childcare, precarious and poor work, and inherent inequalities in the social welfare/insurance system.

2.5 Portugal

The context of the Portuguese case-study

The awareness that working with vulnerable groups requires time to build relationships of trust has led EAPN Portugal's associates to look for an entity that could ensure logistical issues and support the implementation of the project. Our first choice was the Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude (Moinho da Juventude Cultural Association). Sabura is a local development and community intervention project that energizes the local economy, enhances the cultural and artistic heritage of the community and allowed to check in loco the conditions for hosting the REGAL project and facilitate the recruitment of women participants.

In a second stage, we met with a group of eight women invited by the Moinho da Juventude Cultural Association.

The average age of the women who participated is thirty-nine, the youngest being twenty-one and the oldest seventy. Eight women are from Cape Verde, seven from Portugal, one from Guinea Bissau and one from Brazil, eleven of whom are Portuguese, three Cape Verdean, one Guinean and one Brazilian.

Regarding the level of education, one woman did not provide information regarding her situation, six indicated that they had completed secondary education, nine indicated that they attended university and only one indicated that she knew how to read and write despite not having any formal level of education.

Regarding the employment situation, one woman indicated she was retired, another was unemployed and the rest were employed.

The profession/occupation that three women claimed to have is that of sociocultural mediator with the Foreigners and Borders Service, two are educational assistants, one is a nanny, one is a psychologist, one is a documentalist, another identifies herself as a business prospecting technique, another is a receptionist, one woman is a geriatric assistant, another is a free time occupation monitor, another is a sociologist and one woman is a kitchen assistant. In terms of household composition, six women live in households of three, five women in households of two, two in households of six, two in households of four and two women live alone. The majority of the households are made up of women and their children, with one woman living with three uncles / aunts, one woman living with her parents, one woman living with her mother and daughter.

Four women have no children, eight women have only one child, three women have two children, one woman has five children, and the other seven children.

Not all mothers have indicated the age of their children, but some are babies and others are young adults with the smallest child having fourteen months old and the oldest thirty-one years old.

The socio-economic position of women

Women represent 53% of the population living in Portugal. The life expectancy of women at birth is 83 years. And 40.8% of women aged 15 and over in Portugal live as a couple. As life as a couple is the most usual, it is also women who make up 88% of single-parent families¹. When observing the level of education, typified according to the International Standard Classification of Education, based on Eurostat² data for 2017, we realize that 47.8% of Portuguese women aged 25 to 64 years have completed basic education, 23.7% secondary education and 28.5% higher education.

According to the same source, in that period the employment rate of women of working age was 64.8% and if we look at the cut-off of working mothers, we see that the employment rate of women with 1 child was 79%, with two children 80.5% and with three or more children 71% which demonstrates the relevance of work for women in Portugal and the pattern of double employment in Portuguese couples. The unemployment rate among women, on the other hand, was 9.5%.

Horizontal segregation of the labour market

In a publication³ of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG), a set of data on work and employment in Portugal is made available, namely the distribution of employment by sectors of activity where there is still a horizontal segregation of the labour market.

According to the bulletin, women represent 65.7% of the administrative staff, 64.4% of the personal services, protection and security staff and salespeople and still 59.2% of the specialist staff of intellectual and scientific activities. However, they only represent 35.9% of the representatives of the legislative and executive bodies, directors and managers.

In Portugal, only 12.1% of women work part-time and more than half of them just because they cannot find a full-time job. In Europe, female part-time employment exceeds that of men, and several studies point out the persistence of traditional social representations and the asymmetry in the sharing of tasks between men and women as an explanation for this trend that we will talk about later.

Wage inequality

This distribution in the labour market has serious consequences for pay and wage inequality, as we can see in the analysis⁴ of the pay gap between men and women published by the Portuguese National Observatory for the Fight against Poverty in February 2019, which states that for all professions, women's pay is about 15.9% lower than that earned by male workers. The high participation of women in the labour market, the reduced expression of part-time work and the various gender inequalities urge us to better understand the obstacles to reconciling professional life with family and personal life that condition the socio-economic position of women in Portugal.

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1. Retrato dos Homens e das Mulheres. 2018. Accessed on November 16, 2020 in: <https://www.pordata.pt/ebooks/PT2018v20180530/mobile/index.html>
 2. A vida das mulheres e dos homens na Europa. Um retrato estatístico. Edição 2018. Accessed on November 16, 2020 in: https://www.ine.pt/scripts/wm_2018/index.html?lang=pt
 3. Igualdade de Género em Portugal: Boletim Estatístico 2017. Accessed on November 16, 2020 in: <https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Boletim-estatistico-2017.pdf>
 4. EM FOCO: "Disparidades Remuneratórias entre Homens e Mulheres". Accessed on November 16, 2020 in: <https://www.eapn.pt/documento/631/em-foco-disparidades-remuneratorias-entre-homens-e-mulheres>

Poverty

Vulnerability to poverty and the impacts of the current crisis accentuate the precarious situation of women with low incomes. According to the EAPN Europe document⁵ on gender issues and poverty, women experiencing poverty are at a greater risk and suffer discrimination on the basis of gender and their poverty status.

The increased risk of poverty among women results from their socio-economic positioning and a stereotyped view of the gender roles of women and men.

The 2020 Report⁶ on Poverty and Social Exclusion in Portugal, of the National Observatory for the Fight against Poverty, promoted by EAPN Portugal / European Anti-Poverty Network assumes that despite the pandemic caused by SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) has transformed the situation of poverty and social exclusion in Portugal it is important to analyse the data from the 2019 Living Conditions and Income Survey as these allow us to understand the vulnerabilities of Portuguese society and may contribute to identifying possible areas of greater social fragility.

For our report, it is important to highlight the fact that the female population remains highly vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. In fact, while the risk of poverty or social exclusion rate for men decreased by 0.2 percentage points in 2019, the risk of poverty or social exclusion rate for women increased slightly by +0.1 pp. According to the National Observatory for the Fight against Poverty, this rate increase is more pronounced in some age groups, especially the younger ones. The data show that there is a strong increase in the risk of poverty or social exclusion among girls aged 18 to 24 compared to 2018. The risk of poverty or social exclusion rate among women in 2019 was 22.2%.

Work Life Balance

In Portugal, the Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment (*Comissão para a Igualdade no Trabalho e no Emprego*, CITE) is, since 1979, the national mechanism that has among its main attributions to pursue work life balance.

CITE has the particularity of being a collegial, tripartite and equilateral body, composed of one representative of the ministry with attributions in the area of employment, one representative of the ministry with attributions in the area of equality; one representative of the ministry with attributions in the area of public administration; one representative of the ministry with attributions in the area of solidarity and social security; and from those with a seat in the Standing Committee for Social Dialogue come from two representatives of each of the trade union associations and one representative of each of the employers' associations.

Legal framework

Regarding the celebration of the 40th anniversary of CITE, celebrated in 2019, Professor Maria do Rosario Palma Ramalho wrote an article⁷ that allows us to have an overview of the legal documents that frame the theme of reconciliation between professional and family life.

In Portugal, the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (CPR) is the basis of the legal regime of reconciliation between professional and family life, namely the rule in article 59, number 1,

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5. Gender and Poverty in Europe - EAPN Briefing Note - 2017. Accessed on November 16, 2020 in: <https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/EAPN-2017-EAPN-Briefing-Gender-and-Poverty-final.pdf>
 6. Pobreza e Exclusão Social em Portugal - Relatório 2020. Accessed on November 16, 2020 in: <https://on.eapn.pt/produtos/relatorios>
 7. Conciliação equilibrada entre a via profissional e familiar: uma condição inatingível a Igualdade de género no trabalho e no emprego. Accessed on November 16, 2020 in: http://cite.gov.pt/pt/acite/concretizar_igualdade_004.html

paragraph b), which establishes the right to reconciliation between professional and family life as a fundamental right of workers, as well as article 67, paragraph h), which includes the topic of reconciliation in family policies.

Noteworthy is the Equality Law (DL number 392/79, September 20) which established the general framework on equality between men and women at work and in employment. The Maternity and Paternity Protection Law (LPMP - L number 4/84, April 5), which establishes both the specific guardianship rules for pregnant workers, workers who have recently given birth, and workers who are breastfeeding, including the right to prenatal consultations, paid maternity leave, the conditioning of night work, and guardianship in the event of dismissal, as well as the father's right to be absent at the time of the child's birth and several additional family care leaves that could be enjoyed by both parents.

The current Labour Code ensures several rules, namely in the formation of the employment contract; during the execution of the employment contract and finally at the termination of the contract, which pass maternity and paternity protection and the right to reconciliation between professional and family life, treating all these aspects in an integrated manner. Regarding leaves, Professor Maria do Rosário Palma Ramalho systematizes the following categories: leaves related to pregnancy (including due to clinical risks or in case of pregnancy interruption) and maternity, but also adoption leave, which our law fully equates to biological maternity leave (articles 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, and 44 of CT); and leaves for early follow-up of children by the mother, father or both: maternity leave, now called initial parental leave, in the part that exceeds the period of exclusive enjoyment of the mother and intended for her physical recovery from childbirth, and which can be shared between the parents or even partially enjoyed simultaneously by both (article 40); paternity leave, extended by Law number 120/2015, September 1 (article 43 of the Labour Code); complementary parental leave, which can be used by either parent after the initial parental leave, as provided for in article 51; and special leaves to care for chronically ill or disabled children, which may be used following or as an alternative to complementary parental leave (articles 52 and 53).

The Labour Code also provides for the right to reduce working hours by up to 5 hours a week to provide assistance to a child under one year of age who is disabled or chronically ill (article 54), as well as the right to so-called flexible working hours for two, three or four years to meet the needs of children up to 12 years of age or who are disabled or chronically ill (article 56). The justification for these measures is, of course, the health of the mother and / or the health of the child itself.

The right to time off for pregnant workers, workers who have recently given birth or workers who are breastfeeding (which is extended to parents in the case of breastfeeding) from some forms of work organization, such as adaptability schemes, time banks and concentrated hours (article 58), as well as the right to time off from overtime (article 59) and night work (article 60).

Finally, the Labour Code determines the possibility of practicing two special employment contracts: the part-time employment contract; and the telework contract.

The part-time employment contract may be used in accordance with article 55 of the Labour Code, and determines that workers with children under the age of 12 or with disabilities or chronic illnesses have the right to transiently modify their full-time employment contract into a part-time employment contract, for a period that can range from two to four years depending on the case, and which can be distributed between parents in successive periods.

The telework contract based on the needs of reconciliation is provided for in article 166, number of the Labour Code and gives the worker who has a child under the age of 3 the right to start carrying out his activity in a telework regime, provided that such activity is compatible with such regime and that the employer has the necessary resources and means for that purpose.

The provision of care

Regarding the provision of care, we made use of the 2018 ad hoc module on the reconciliation of work and family life, which was carried out together with the Employment Survey by the Portuguese National Institute of Statistics in the 2nd quarter of 2018⁸.

According to the survey, the caregivers were mainly women (54.7%), aged between 35 and 44 years old, who had completed at most the 3rd cycle of basic education, employed, female workers by account of others and who worked full time.

Only 50.8% of caregivers said they resort to childcare services. Although with very similar percentages, it was men who made the most use of these services.

The main reason pointed out for not using those services was that the care is provided by the person himself / herself or together with the spouse. This was followed by the indication that the care is provided with informal support and that children take care of themselves. The percentage of men who presented these reasons was always higher than that of women.

However, women were the ones who most mentioned the cost of childcare as a reason. These percentages illustrate how a conservative view of motherhood and an inequality in the division of tasks based on stereotypes still prevail.

84.3% of caregivers said they did not feel the effects of parental responsibilities at work and only 5.9% indicated they had changed jobs or employers or had reduced working hours to better reconcile work and family life.

The characteristic of the professional activity that made it more difficult to reconcile work and family life of caregivers was the unpredictability of the schedule or the atypical schedule, followed by long working hours and demanding or strenuous work.

55.9% of caregivers indicated that it was generally possible to make changes to their entry and / or exit times in at least 1 hour, this percentage being higher among women than men. As for the possibility of being absent from work for full days, only 38.7% of the caregivers indicated that it is generally possible, with this facility being mentioned more by men than by women. The survey also sought to assess the use of initial parental leave and / or extended parental leave as a strategy to reconcile work and family life.

It should be noted that initial parental leave and extended parental leave are considered as career breaks.

Only 8.1% of men reported having interrupted their careers for at least one month to care for their children. At least 39.8% of women reported having interrupted their careers for at least one month to care for their children.

The most extensive interruptions were reported almost exclusively by women. 22% of the women indicated a total absence between 6 months and 1 year.

55.8% of caregivers indicated not having used the extended parental leave, but only the initial parental leave.

8. Módulos ad hoc do Inquérito ao Emprego - Conciliação da vida profissional com a vida familiar - 2.º Trimestre de 2018. Accessed on June 14, 2019 in: https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaques&DESTAQUESdest_boui=316333584&DESTAQUESmodo=2&xlang=pt

The uses of time

The brochure⁹ of the INUT Project - National Survey on the Uses of the Time of Men and Women, promoted by the *Centro de Estudos para a Intervenção Social* – CESIS (Social Intervention Study Centre) in partnership with the Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment (CITE) gives us very interesting data on the patterns of participation of women in professional life, family life and personal life.

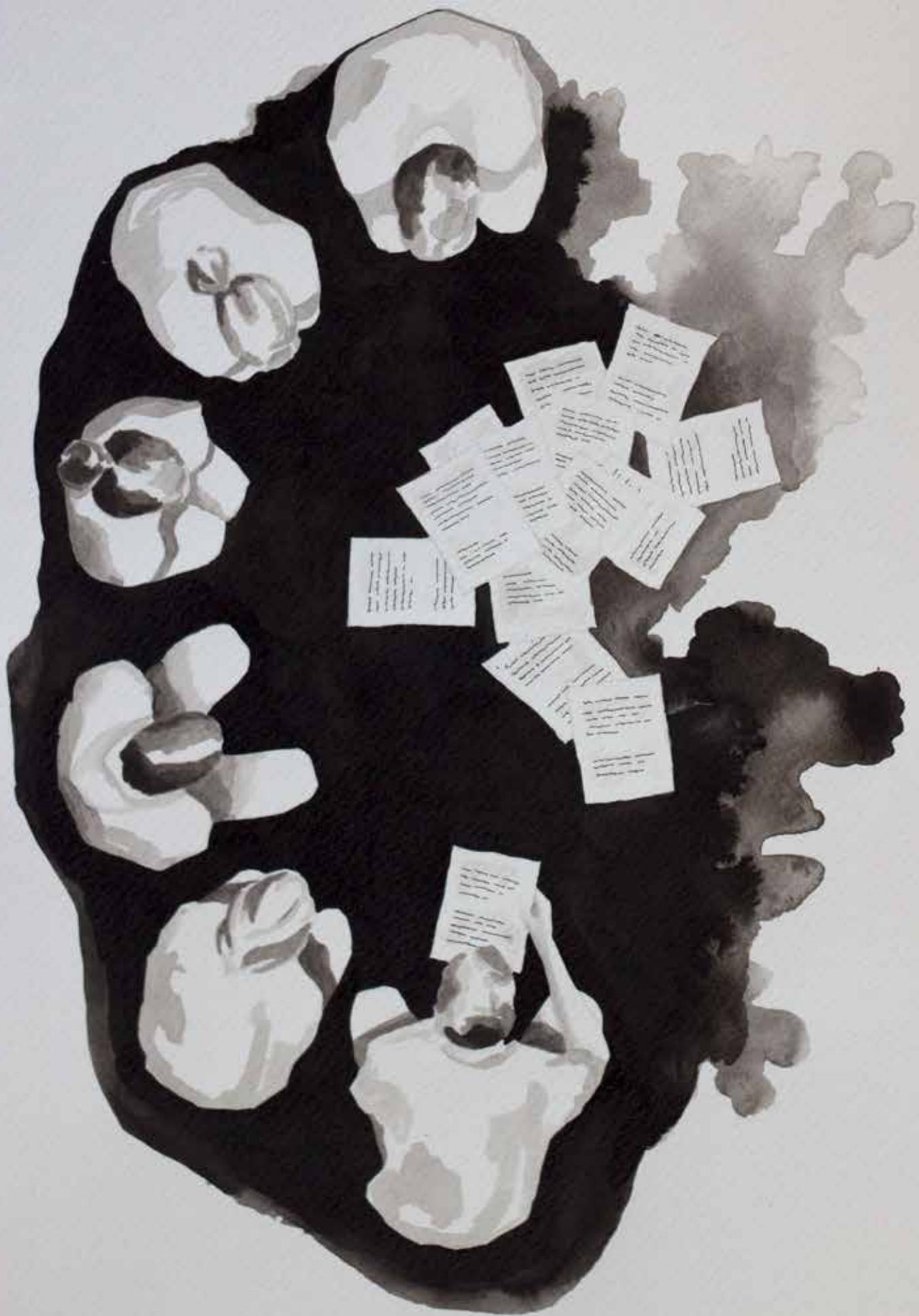
With regard to time allocated to paid work, women devote 40 hours and 47 minutes per week to their main professional activity. Paid work refers to paid professional activities performed in the context of the labour market.

Regarding the organization of paid work time, fixed hours are the predominant form of work time organization, followed by shift work, and both have a negative impact on the articulation of paid work with family and personal life.

With regard to time allocated to unpaid work, we have to look at the tasks and responsibilities carried out in the context of households, without any monetary counterpart, that is, domestic chores and care work.

Concerning domestic chores, women spend an average of about 3 hours and 6 minutes and, to provide care, women occupy about 3 hours and 14 minutes a day. Childcare is often provided at the same time as domestic chores. Almost half of the women consider that they do not have enough time to do everything they want to do on weekdays.

9. Inquérito Nacional aos Usos do Tempo de Homens e de Mulheres – 2016. Accessed on November 16, 2020 in: http://cite.gov.pt/pt/destaques/complementosDestqs2/INUT_brochura.pdf



3. Work-life balance and vulnerable people in the EU legislation

Premises

REGAL aims to emphasize the need for action towards vulnerable women, already struggling to even get access to the labour market. Once they succeed their entrance into the labour market, their working conditions tend to be often vulnerable and discriminatory practices due to parenthood or pregnancy are often witnessed.

In its study, Eurofound makes it clear that in-work poverty is rising. Figures for 2014 show the different groups where in-work poverty is high:

	Working, at risk of poverty %	Working-age population %
Single-parent household	6.4	4.1
Two adults with 1 or 2 children	28.0	28.4
Two adults with 3 or more children	8.0	4.9
Other household with children	13.6	11.7

(Eurofound (2017), *In-work poverty in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef1725en.pdf)

In this study, Eurofound analyses the possible factors that influence in-work poverty. One of the factors is the presence of children (and the wish to have children). This results in defamilialisation. Defamilialisation refers to the extent to which the individual relies on the family in order to provide for their welfare. The term is used to understand the exclusion of women from the labour market as a result of their care obligations. There are two channels through which defamilialisation can influence in-work poverty – having a single earner in the household and intergenerational dependency. Single-earner households with multiple dependants have one of the highest risk profiles for in-work poverty. One of the reasons that households with two parents and children have a single earner is the care obligations that prevent women from participation in the labour market. Therefore, welfare policies that lower barriers to female participation in the labour force (such as state-subsidised childcare) increase the number of dual-earner households, and so lower in-work poverty.

Another individual factor that matters is having a migrant or ethnic minority background (Álvarez Miranda, 2011). A recent study sheds light on the increased risk factors among first-generation migrants (Branyiczki, 2015). It shows that the average age of working immigrant heads of households is slightly lower than their native counterparts, and there are somewhat more dependent and fewer full-time employed members among immigrant households. Part-time jobs and temporary job contracts, particularly, are more widespread among foreign-born workers. The study also shows that a much greater proportion of immigrants have elementary occupations, especially among those migrants that come from outside the EU.

The combination of these barriers (access, working conditions, living conditions) be so important that vulnerable women cannot look beyond these barriers. This kills every aspiration and expectations about their future on both professional level as on family/work-life level. They keep being trapped in their own vulnerable context. The awareness on their rights of equal treatment is, because of their vulnerable living conditions, on a low level. Moreover, the abuse of their rights is often used both by the vulnerable women themselves as a 'job maintaining' strategy as well as by the employer themselves as a discriminatory practice. On the broader level, this hinders progression in Europe to overcome vulnerable women lagging behind in the

labour market and keeps the poverty rate of working poor on a high level. Looking beyond this, it creates children growing up in vulnerable family conditions, having a higher risk on staying in a generational vicious circle of poor living and professional conditions.

REGAL tends to express the need for action for vulnerable women on work-life conditions on both the micro level (empowerment of target group), meso level (directly involved stakeholders such as employers, civil society and trade unions) and macro level (EU and national policy makers).

REGAL aims to:

- Raise awareness and empower vulnerable women so that they become able to claim their rights
- Raise awareness by employers on the harshness of the daily work-life struggle of vulnerable women and offer at the same time good practices from out the aspirations of the vulnerable women themselves. As a result, a free access toolkit, developed by the project, will be provided to be used by a broad range of employers. Through storytelling with an emphasis on coping strategies and aspirations, this participatory method tends to offer positive and constructive solutions for work-life balance in the field of care responsibilities, flexible working arrangements, effective legal protection, that should end their vulnerable work-life situation.
- Raise awareness within the civil society and trade unions world in order to sensitize attention for the vulnerable work-life conditions of vulnerable women in their organisational a policy management.
- Offer recommendations for policy makers in order to overcome the vulnerable work-life conditions for vulnerable women and tackle indirectly the working poor rate.

The NGO partnership in REGAL, with a daily practice of working with vulnerable women offers a wide scope of the target group (being vulnerable women) and of the different situations why these women are/ became vulnerable and experience difficulties and vulnerability in work-life balance conditions: women with low qualifications working in the cleaning sector(BE), sheltered women (IRL), vulnerable women with a migration background (FR), vulnerable women with very low income (PT), vulnerable women living in deserted rural area (ROU).

The EU and work-life balance legislation in relation to vulnerability

Europe is indisputably one of the worlds' leaders when it comes to women's rights and gender equality with the work life balance package in April 2017 as its latest achievement. Apart from that a series of policy instruments were developed to tackle vulnerability, mostly in the area of 'tackling poverty' such as the poverty target within the EU2020 strategy. However, in the writing process of REGAL in 2018, no specific policy links both areas of equality: no specific gender-based policies are developed for vulnerable people or vice versa. The employment guidelines within EU2020 emphasize the need to integrate gender and the Semester fails until now to integrate a genuine gender dimension. The Social Investment Package (2013) has no direct focus on poverty among women but makes reference to equal opportunities and better access to the labour market. However, in a Resolution of 20 October 2010, the European Parliament deplores the fact that the Platform ignores gender aspects of poverty and social exclusion and gives particular visibility to the needs of young, older and migrant women in the fight against poverty. The resolution points out the prominent role of family policies.

The Work-life balance package Directive, published in January 2019 is the first legislative proposal that follows the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in November 2017,

and is an important step forward in the consolidation of existing rights, and the establishment of new ones.

Vulnerability is referred to cautiously in the Directive, in different sections “Member States are encouraged to assess if conditions of access and detailed arrangements of paternity and carers leave, and flexible working arrangements should also be adapted to special needs, such as those of single parents, parents with a disability or parents of children with a disability or long-term illness, adoptive parents as well as to special situations, such as multiple births and premature births” (Recital 37). Here we see the recognition of the need for both universal measures for all families and specific measures for families in vulnerable situations. This should now be further operationalised in the transposition of the Directive in national legislation.

As regards parental leave, the Directive maintains the right of each parent to at least 4 months of parental leave to be taken full-time, part-time or needs-based for each child up to the age of 8 years old. It extends from one to two non-transferable months of parental leave. Moreover, the two non-transferable months must be paid at adequate level, with the payment to be determined by national governments (Article 5). This new European standard mixing non-transferability and pay must pave the way for an increase in the women’s employment rate due to their higher availability in the job market and higher involvement of fathers as carers. However, the Directive does not refer to a European payment threshold (e.g., like sick leave level for paternity leave) for the whole period of the minimum four months’ parental leave. The EU Work-life balance alliance of NGOs supported the European Parliament’s proposal for a 78% threshold for the income replacement rate and payment of leaves remains fundamental to address poverty. Article 8.2 stipulates that “such payment or allowance shall be set in such a way as to facilitate the take-up of parental leave by both parents”. This reference and the fact of introducing guidelines for payment that allows “decent living standards” (Recital 31) shows the importance of payment to boost the effectiveness and take-up of parental leave in promoting work-life balance for parents with middle and low incomes. This is not the case where parental leave is currently unpaid or paid at very low rates.

Next to that, the requirement of a length of service of up to one year, as referred to in Article 5.4 of the Directive, reduces eligibility for parental leave which limits the impact of this piece of legislation. Young people are among those who are most likely to be employed with temporary and atypical contracts, with low job stability. Asking a length of service of one year, even if the one year can be the sum of shorter contracts with the same employer, means not recognising the changes of the labour market in the past couple of decades.

In times of job insecurity in Europe, where for many workers the alternative would be structural unemployment, the Directive goes in the right direction by being applied to workers with different kinds of employment contracts or relationships (part-time, temporary, fixed-term contracts), as highlighted in Recital 17 and Article 2 of the Directive. The Directive strengthens social rights and working conditions, aligning them with the European Social Pillar of Rights. It must be noted that while the Directive does not apply to self-employed workers, the European Commission must carry out a “study on the rights to family leave granted to self-employed.” (Article 18.2b).

The Directive fails too to harmonise the payment levels for the leaves across the EU, as there are only minimum thresholds for paternity leave payment, while for parental leave the adequate payment applies to two months only with the decision in the hands of Member States, and for carers leave there is only a recommendation for adequate payment which again is left to the Member States to determine.

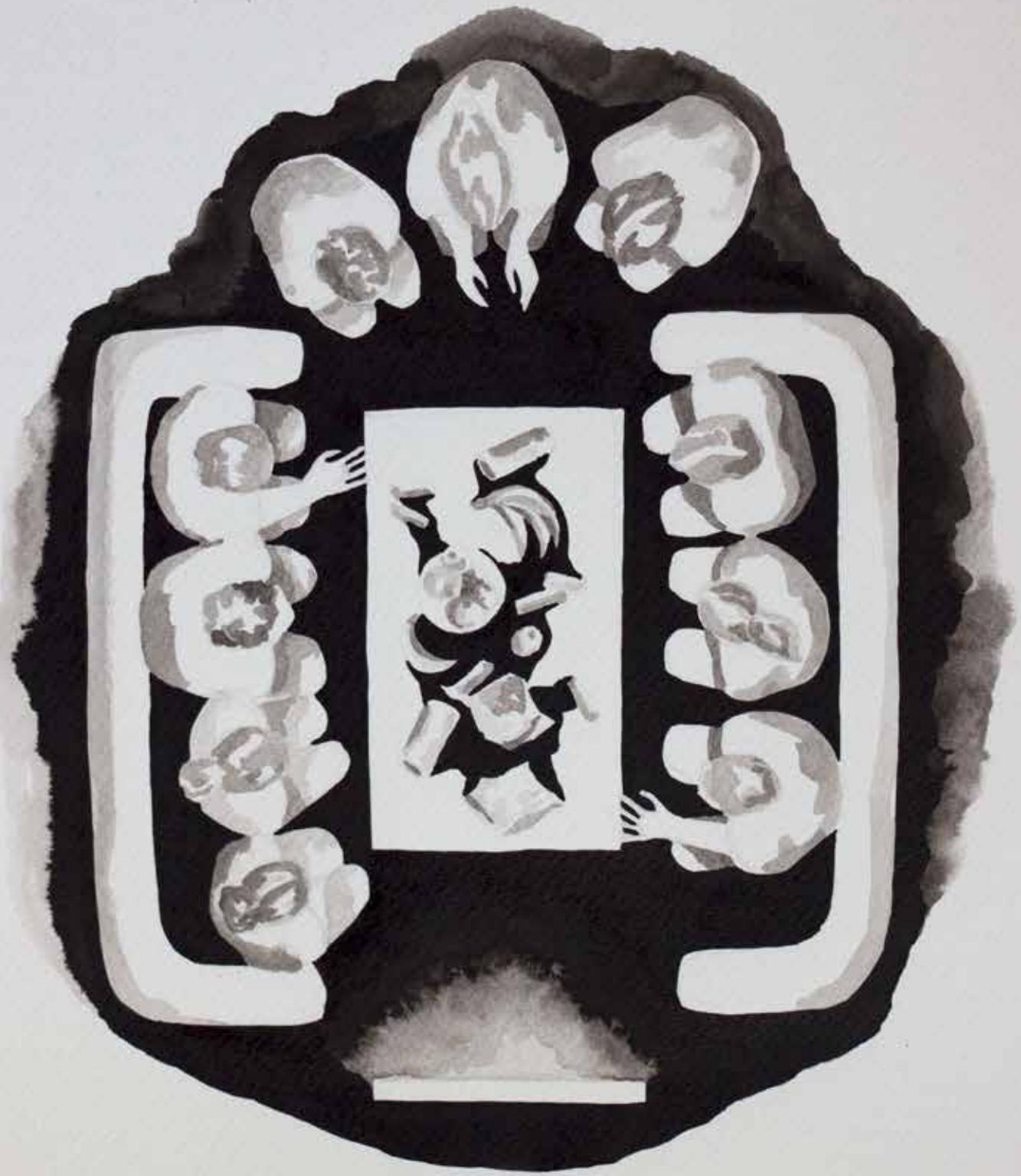
The REGAL-project: going beyond the general nature of the work-life balance package

This project goes beyond the general nature of the work-life balance package and tries to overcome the vacuums for the underrepresented groups in the current legislation. REGAL aims to link its objective with the European Pillar of Social Rights that states that equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered, and that secure and adaptable employment shall be guaranteed and employment relationships into vulnerable working conditions shall be prevented.

Vulnerable women face manifold barriers within their work-life conditions, often characterised by discriminatory and low quality. Becoming pregnant or having young children rises even more these barriers and often leads to (indirect) dismissals and an even more difficult re-entrance to the labour market. Until now only general answers in this matter are provided in EU and national legislation without taking into account the specific situation of vulnerable women.

Through awareness raising instruments, with at the same time an analytical, problem solution as well as policy recommendation nature, REGAL strives for a better enforcement of EU law on work-life balance for vulnerable women.

With that particular scope, REGAL opens the door for ways to reduce the number of working poor (women) and bridges different related EU social policies and objectives. In the last chapter of the EU synthesis paper, we assembled a series of policy recommendations with which the EU can demonstrate her ambition to overcome the vulnerability gaps in this policy field. The transposition of the Work-life Balance package will be here a vital stage.



4. Work-life balance and vulnerable people: aspirations of the women translated into policy recommendations

4.1 Romania

Conclusions and recommendations for policy development stakeholders in Romania

The concept of WLB is very little used in public policies context and is totally unknown at employers and employees' level in Romania. A national sustained campaign on the importance of this vital balance between work and life would lead to an awareness of employers (and implicitly to the possibility of realizing adapted employment contracts) and to an individual and collective empowerment of vulnerable people.

Recommendation: Being a new concept, a long-term awareness campaign is needed for the intrinsic assumption of this human value for a healthy life.

The participants in the focus groups want a stable, equitably paid job that offers them the security of the possibility to access the specialized medical services and the security of an income at the retirement age.

Recommendation: Representatives of local authorities must intensify their efforts in developing correct paid jobs in rural areas.

The lack of jobs in rural areas leads to an imbalance between the jobs offer (small) and the job demand (large) influencing the emergence of undeclared work, the exploitation of employees by the obligation to accept unpaid overtime, declaring a program minimum working hours of taxes payment by the employer and respectively of the reduction of the socio-economic and medical benefits for the employed person.

Recommendation: Permanent awareness campaigns among the population regarding the rights and obligations of employees and employers (with concrete examples of "what happens if...") lead in time to the ethical assumption of the norms and principles of labour legislation. A permanent awareness and an intensification of the public authorities' efforts in the management/control of this phenomenon (failure to comply the norms from the labour legislation) lead in time to a correct administration in the labour process (work/payment/rights/obligations/benefits).

The discrepancy between the costs of daily life (EU level) and the income level in Romania (accordingly with Romanian economical stage of development; PIB), determines the vulnerable people (low level of education; low qualified jobs):

- in the simultaneous access of two or even three jobs and therefore the increase of the imbalance between work and life;
- in identifying similar but better paid work alternatives - in an emigration context, a phenomenon with serious social repercussions (broken families, minor children left at home without support, depopulation of Romanian villages etc.)
- giving up the fight for a better life and entering in the "poverty zone".

Question: what can the Romanian authorities do for an increase in the standard of living in Romania? What resources can be found at local, national and European level to ensure a decent standard of living for a rural person?

Change of attitude: following the participation in the project, following the personal examples discussed ("individual stories") and following the joint discussions, the women realized that the "commute" to work in developed European countries is not a solution to their problems but a greater imbalance between work and life. Women hope is in their and all factors responsible involvement for sustainable development at the local level.

The villages lack in specialized institutions in the early education of children (ECEC), leads to an impossibility for women from rural areas to access a job until the child reaches the age of three. The three-year period is a sufficient period for long-term unemployment or loss of employability skills.

Recommendation: local development of early education alternatives for children from local resources or involvement of civil society (mutual associations, women's organizations, civil associations) in this social services development and providing alternatives in employability for vulnerable women in rural areas.

The Rural women in Romania work daily 18-19 hours out of 24 in the household, family etc. - this work is not considered a contribution to the work process; non-payment of taxes to mandatory systems entailing the lack of benefits (medical services, pension etc.).

Recommendation: Given the large percentage of the population in Romania who is in this situation (women in rural areas), urgent measures are required to open a dialogue and public consultations (between civil society representatives, public policy developers and representatives of the target group) regarding the recognition of this work, contributions and benefits.

In rural Romania there is an acute lack of medical services. Doctors do not want to go to the countryside, nurses can only practice in an accredited medical cabinet. Dental and emergency services are generally lacking in rural areas in a context in which women in rural Romania cannot afford a personal car or do not have a driver's license. Access to these services is also increased by the inadequacy of public transport. In the event of a medical emergency, the distance and the lack of adequate transport can have serious repercussions on a child or a vulnerable person life.

Recommendation: Carrying out (Development) in a public - private partnership (public authorities, transport companies, civil associations) of an emergency transport to medical services - easily accessible (logistically and financially) by a vulnerable person.

In case of illness of a dependent person (minor under 12 years old), the employed woman must resort to the goodwill of the employer in order to have days off from work in order to take care of the sick child.

Recommendation: Legislative changes are required in Romanian labour legislation in this regard. See the labour legislation in Germany (the legislation of a European country) in which in the case of a sick minor child the responsible parent benefits from paid medical leave for the care of the child.

4.2 France

The gaps between the real and the legislative world

The different measures put in place by French authorities for work-life balance have had various impacts on the actual life of many families particularly through the implementation of childcare centers and the allocation of social benefit. These measures also have the advantage to help to learn more about the family function by interviewing association public facilitators.

Legal documents have set the framework for a gender equality. However in spite of the legislative framework, discrepancies in the practice in various domains have been observed due to sticking points in some companies and also the resistance of some men. The question of work-life balance is related to gender equality. In this way the law of August 4, 2014 for actual gender equality has permitted to put in place many measures in the employment world:

- Ban on access to public procurement contracts (Government, territorial collectivity, etc.) to enterprises violating the requirements of professional equality;
- The enterprises of more than 50 employees must from now on deposit their agreement or action plan related to professional equality at the Direction Régionale des Entreprises, de la Concurrence, de la Consommation, du Travail et de l'Emploi (DIRECCTE), or be subjected to financial penalties ;
- The parental leave is reformed in order to increase the rate of women employment and encourage the sharing of parental responsibilities ;
- The discriminative dismissals linked to sexual harassment are increasingly punished by the industrial tribunal.

However in the actual world, discrepancies are observed between regulations and actual women situations. Women often work at part-time, are generally in low wages employment; when they succeed in getting in high rated job, they are confronted with glass ceiling. In addition to wage inequalities women and men don't have equal access to employment. Women more often face precarious job or part-time job particularly in low class. They face direct barriers (training, non-employment diversity) and indirect ones (mobility, children care, family situation) to the access of employment in addition to the fact that they are responsible of the large part of household chores. Legislative documents constitute a real progress however they don't sufficiently take into consideration key aspects we have noticed throughout our project with the target population.

The social investment policies answer to the need of encouraging birthrate to counter demographic aging, developing services to reduce poverty risks among children (the poverty of children is always low in houses where both parents are employed) and of encouraging access to employment among women. However it's observed, in spite of the political commitment, that the societal challenge is that the social investment approach also integrates the societal goal of gender equality by considering the differentiated impact of the facilities on women and men or more by considering that the work-life balance is not transposed in reality. Marlène Schiappa, Secretary of State for gender equality recalls that: *"The harmonization of professional life/family life has been considered for long as relevant to the responsibility of women only. However it's only by a coordinated commitment of public authorities, the world of employment and individuals - women and men - that it will be possible to put an end to the "mother ceiling"*.

In relation to the target population of our study it appears that their particular situation has not been taken into account and that there's a lack of concern of this population in relation to this issue.

The different observations made during the implementation of this program lead to examine more closely the concept of « common law » (concerning, above all, the structures of public action) and the effectivity of the principles of equality of treatment of migrant women. An analysis of intersectionalities is therefore necessary to understand the discriminations women can faced.

An initial observation concerns the low level of « visibility » of migrant women in public space areas.

What stakeholders say about the work-life balance of precarious women

In February 2014 the Ministry of women rights released a report entitled: « *L'égalité pour les femmes migrantes* »¹⁷. After a diagnosis of the conditions of migrant women in France, recommendations for the integration of migrant women and for gender equality have been made. This report is the conclusion of a working group composed of experts from the society and associations.

Its publication in February was followed six month later by the 4th of august 2014 law for actual gender equality that, as we emphasized it, interested few migrant women that face problems of employability and are victims of cumulated discrimination. This report was inspired by a common finding with partners with which we work on the project: the necessity to rethink integration policies by taking into account the gendered dimension of the modes of social inclusion of women. Women have an important role to play in the social and economic life of their area in spite of some vulnerability. Therefore the transversality of public policies is important to promote their access to rights and gender equality.

Among the recommendations, an emphasis have been put on the necessity to better equip the facilitators: to include a mandatory module on gender equality in initial trainings of professional in contact with migrant women, to implement a reception integrated service with a short term integration process that include from the beginning information on women rights that open gateways to specialized associations.

Today, the financial and technical partners of GRDR at the national level share our diagnosis on the necessity to activate many levers that will enforce women employability and a work-life balance combining a territorial approach and a particular attention to the public. The territorial point of entry permits to show a multi-actors approach as we do through a project concerning women of Grigny in the Essonne area.

The conversations with our different partners like territorial collectivities show that many cities are sensitive to this problem of work-life balance. They seek particularly to put in place a crèche system for children in order to create employability conditions for women. Let's remind that in the "districts policy" of the city, one-third of families are single parents and that the children care continues to be an important obstacle in the work-life balance. Some partners also emphasize the necessity to work on images and some social codes that confine women to household chores and to children care. The question of work-life balance concern the topic of organization within family. It also implies a change of behavior among men. It must not only be considered in the perspective of family policy and must also involve the employment.

Our partnership with local collectivities shows the awareness upon the necessity to develop a global approach in order to create an effective work-life balance by working with women, men and public authorities. It must be ascertain that many local collectivities have signed the European charter for gender equality in local life. This charter put the emphasis on the neces-

sity to deploy actions to eliminate all types of discrimination and preconceptions based on gender or ethnic origin.

Among the partners involved and mobilized in the REGAL project, the national agency of employment in France « Pôle Emploi », invited in the framework of a Focus group, presented its offer to enforce women employability. Concerning the tools put in place we can cite the help for crèche - AGEPI that aims at contributing to the childcare fee of children less than 10 years, or helping devices for employers, particularly grants and subsidies for enterprises that recruit people in precarious situations, with a device adapted for the training and the certification of people integrated in the company. Pôle Emploi has in addition recruit company assistants in the Agency to manage the relationship Enterprise/employment market.

In spite of this customized offer, we observe that women are not fully aware of the existence of these devices. This lack of information is particularly due to the fact that the Agency delegates some issues and missions to other partners with the view to subcontract public action in relation to the employment market, resulting to the fact that provisions available are not visible.

At last, concerning the vulnerability of some single parents, Pôle Emploi has designed a pilot project of experimentation in the 18th district of Paris in partnership with Association projets 19 to encourage the access to employment of single women with children. There are also customised children care services i.e.: Digitised service for periodic crèche: macygogne.fr.

The presentation of these multiple offers illustrates a contradictory situation. Indeed in spite of the declination of a significant offer that encompasses issues related to women in situation of vulnerability, the Focus group brings into light the repeating difficulty of access to information and the necessity to support women in their approaches to avoid situations of “no access” to common law as detailed in the third part of the report. In other words, it must be noted that in a context whereby diagnoses are made, challenges shared and specific devices developed, devices are still strongly underuse.

As part of the Focus Group, the meeting with the Centre de formation Esperem has also brought out many lessons. Wealthy of 50 years of experience in the support of vulnerable women, the Association has been the pioneer in the inclusion of the issue of work-life balance in the perspective of access to employment. Indeed, the association has developed children help homes and accommodation sites for single women with their children. Today, the pilot structure 5, Centre d'Hébergement et de Réinsertion Sociale (CHRS) in Paris, is equipped with crèches with mode of care customized to ease the integration process of women. This approach combining support process towards employment and inclusion of related concerns linked to parenthood has it beginning in the years 1970s for Esperem. The goal being to propose a global approach in the social support built with the view of dual temporality of social action: to respond to short term needs and work on the building of a long term professional project. Through this experimentation, Esperem participated to warn public authorities on the challenge of an approach combining employment policy and family policy, and so contributed to the creation of companies' crèches.

Houria Saouchi, in charge of the development of network at Esperem also insists on the fact that the customisation of working hours is a requirement to really take into consideration the issues of vulnerable women. The current health crisis must encourage public authorities to reflect about the development of online work by taking into account the challenges of the work-life balance for vulnerable women.

With respect to these different elements one could think that the question of work-life balance doesn't present the same challenges for people in a precarious situation particularly migrant women because they value the employability and the visibility in public space. But this is only the visible part of the iceberg where barriers to work-life balance are figured out. Today this issue of work-life balance of migrant women is gradually becoming a concern for public policies as we noted with the analyses of the ANCT, of Pôle Emploi and of Esperem. The Regal project has allowed for, by working with women and associative and corporate actors, initiating constructive interactions and show that the care mode is only one of the aspects of work-life balance. Many associative actors are mobilizing themselves around the government to encourage women access to employment and their role in public space as well as the role of men in family life for a better management of work-life balance.

4.3 Belgium

Continuing for what, if you don't get any opportunities?

The women in our focus group, working in the cleaning sector, have small, modest expectations for their lives: a normal family life, a work to live; the older women are looking forward to their retirement. When they look back at their past choices, we hear some regrets. Different women dream of a different job. But here, too, various obstacles come into play: language, old age, insecurity versus the (financial) security of the current job, Some women have invested in themselves. But it was difficult: combining a hard job with studies and home care, ... this requires a lot from them. Then the question arises as to whether it still makes any sense: continue for what, if you don't get any opportunities?

Their aspirations are low, even if they make an investment. Their 'life experience' doesn't give them many options, another life isn't for them. Appandurai said that aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life. Aspirations to the good life are part of some sort of system of ideas which locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs. The modest aspirations of the women reflect their position in the larger "map of ideas and beliefs". As Appandurai shows people and especially women with low level of schooling have a small place upon this map of ideas and beliefs. Their opportunities to enhance their place on this map is limited, limited as they have less capability-sets than others. With Appandurai we can conclude that limited capability-sets hinder people to view other visions on the "good life".

Work-life balance is for them a self-constructed difficult amalgam

REGAL enhanced the self-appreciation of the women. From this enhancement women invested in a discussing about the "good life" for women with low skills. At the heart of their discussions was the feeling that they must invest more than others in realizing a WLB. This means that the measures for WLB are not adapted to their situation and needs; these measures are designed for middle class people or people having a 9 to 5 job.

Secondly, WLB is for them a self-constructed difficult amalgam. Amalgam: they must look, to search themselves for solutions to raise their children, to care for their parents, of to care for themselves. The solutions are meanly found in their own network: husband who must find another job, parents need to care for their grandchildren, neighbours who take the children overnight, ... Investing in a network is not easy: their working hours do not coincide with the daily business as usual hours.

Thirdly, the job can be described in most of the cases as a heavy job. They are tired, they have physical constraints, they are looking forward the moment they can retire. Even the young ones in the group were complaining about the heaviness of the job.

Modesty as a way of life

Fourthly, the modesty of their individual aspirations reflects the modesty of their political aspirations on WLB. Overcoming the obstacles for their WLB was a difficult step (a step to far) for some of them. The most heard statement was "that's life". Fifthly, there were no complaints about their salary and working conditions, especially comparing with relatives working in other cleaning companies. But at the same time, they talked about their financial difficulties, the little earnings of their husbands, the bigger expenses of the kids. Time leave measures with lower allowances were not a financial reality for them.

What women say: 4 propositions

The result of the discussions demonstrated that nowadays measures on WLB are not functional for these women. Therefore, four propositions are being put forward:

- Jobs for low skilled women are usually low remunerated. These jobs are also mostly low appreciated, even seen as invisible jobs. The household income is rather low compared to other families. Special paid leave measures are thus not attractive for them: the income losses are too important. Our suggestion is then that paid leave measures are income related with an additional prime for low-income groups. The same applies for specific social care services.
- Jobs for these low skilled women are often accompanied by irregular working hours, very early or very late. Social care services are not always available during the needed hours. Especially in rural or semi-rural, semi-urban areas these services are not available. Can a social investment realize a country wide service? Can existing social care services be extended to early, late hours and night hours? All the interviewed women used today an informal network of care givers. The suggestion raised if the system of care givers can be extended to childcare?
- Jobs for low skilled women are often “heavy” jobs, demanding physically a lot of them. Several answers are possible. Typical for all these jobs is that they have not flexible hours, the job must be done between strict hours. Flexibility is almost a rule for 9 to 5 jobs, but not for these jobs. Can flexibility be extended to these jobs? Do these jobs have to be done during these specific hours? The flexibility of the 9 to 5 jobs can give room for flexibility for other jobs. Is a redefinition of statute of “heaviness” of jobs relevant? Is it possible to diminish the burden of the job? A side aspect of the burden of the job is the living-working traffic: some women are spending a lot of hours waiting for a train or sitting on public transport. Investing in public transport, extending public transport in early, late and traffic hours is necessary for them.
- Almost all the interviewed women have a low skilled educational history: they stopped early, they have a dual learning history, they have a non-certified foreign degree. This life history limits them to create a large capability set. This means also a limitation of a broad and enhanced vision on possible futures for themselves and society. Investing in education is vital for a democratic society where all positions in the labour market are validated. Investing in a broad and enriched lifelong learning is moreover necessary to have an equilibrated vision on the “good life”, where everyone can take part in the building of this vision.
- Although their remuneration comparing to other companies is fairly good, they all aimed for a higher household budget. A higher household budget would free them from the difficult search for a real WLB. A higher remuneration for low skilled jobs or low appreciated jobs would uplift them, would give them more room for self-development and a genuinely WLB.

The propositions retranslated together with the stakeholders

More respect for care jobs is vital

There is very little visibility and little daytime work in these jobs: before and after offices are closed, they have to be cleaned. Revaluing of care professions is necessary. Upgrading in appreciation in itself: it is very much looked down upon. Cleaning teams should be treated with much more kindness: we are very dependent on them but there is not enough appreciation and that is an important form of sexism. It is an important aspect that should be taken into account.

The concept of the cleaner as a colleague who cleans your office space when you are working during the day, doesn't exist. That should be normal practice but it is not. For the sake of productivity and social standards, this is pushed into invisibility. We need to have a change of mentality.

Higher pays in order to be able to develop a work-life balance

An income is an important buffer between a precarious job, family income and mental well-being. The higher your income, the less the job will affect your combined WLB and well-being. The higher the family income, the more you use that income to buy time; earning more means you can spend more time with your family and child.

Income is primordial: working hours must be reduced without loss of pay, but a minimum wage is also necessary: today this is fixed at 10 EUR/hour. We claim in order to overcome precarity, it should be 14 EUR/hour. This would mean a big improvement for people in precarious employment.

A structural wage increase should also include the reflection to look for alternative financing. This does not apply to all but to many low-paid jobs, such as catering, cleaning. There's little margin to give more pay, so we need to think outside the box: how should something be financed? For example: all ladies in the toilets should become municipal officials. Where should the money come from? Think differently about how to finance this. Wages for vulnerable professions must go up, but sometimes we need to think differently about how we finance these jobs.

Recognition of the maintenance job as physically heavy with a reduction of the full-time standard

Working in the maintenance sector is physically a very demanding job. The physical aspect in this work is very demanding: hardly anyone can keep this up until retirement because it is too heavy, hence there are many part-time jobs in this sector. Part-time work is very often, actually equivalent to full-time work in this sector. If it is almost impossible to work full-time and combine it with your family life, then it is actually a full-time job that you do but for which you are only paid part-time.

Part-time work is the individual solution that individual families seek for the lack of a good WLB, while we should be looking for structural, collective solutions and that is possible through a reduction in working hours with pay.

Therefore, a full-time standard of 38 hours is unachievable in that sector. In these sectors, we would lower that standard. The discussion on collective labour reduction is very important in that sector. A specific full-time standard for this sector is needed so that wages are a bit higher for better recognition.

Accessible and affordable childcare for vulnerable groups

Childcare plays a crucial role: the price of income-related childcare is still too high for this vulnerable group: the previous government tripled the lowest level of childcare, more than EUR 5 per day, per child, 220 hours per month for 2 children: this is not feasible if you look at the monthly wage. In addition, the supply of income-related childcare is already too low. For jobs with flexible hours and supply in rural areas, there is indeed no adequate childcare. A recent study shows that there is less supply in poorer neighbourhoods. A plea for free childcare for vulnerable target groups is not unfeasible: In Malta and Berlin, free childcare has been implemented. The reason used is the insufficient language knowledge of children in Berlin who went to nursery school. There is also the social function of childcare: despite all the nice policy texts in Flanders, it has not been applied in practice.

Affordable childcare would ensure that the care burden is reduced for the women and they can pursue jobs that they actually want to do, rather than what is practical for them. Affordable childcare allows women to pursue the jobs they are qualified for and passionate about.

Specific amounts of time credit and unpaid leave for vulnerable groups

Fixed amounts of time credit and unpaid leave: it is very strange that these are fixed amounts. Efforts have been made to have these lump sums, but you should have a much more crucial amount for low incomes. Social allowance for children should also be part of it: if you make it higher, you do a lot for low-income people with children.

For WLB measures, poverty tests should be made in a non-stigmatising and integrating way. Automatic granting of benefits should be part of every policy. It is not enough to tamper with the conditions; we must think more broadly. And also look at the family composition.

Specific attention and measures for single vulnerable mothers is needed

For single mothers, the problem is twice as bad. The biggest problem for single mothers is loneliness, total isolation. A 500 EUR time credit and 765 EUR thematic leave: this is not feasible for them. The time credit measures are not feasible for them. Actually, you have to say that they do not exist for people with a low income, you cannot pay the rent with it. It is also a contradiction because Flanders' ambition is to get the employment rate up, so you have to get the ancillary conditions right and focus on the preconditions such as public transport and childcare; otherwise, you will never get the employment rate you want.

Tailor made approach instead of digitalised job seekers strategy in order to valorise people's skills

VDAB labour mobility survey: job aspirations of jobseekers, short-skilled women tick the same groups of occupational preferences very much. The recent 'Digital first strategy of the VDAB': you do not immediately have a personal service, but everything happens digitally first. Shortly educated women are all sent to the same jobs, mainly cleaning, which leads to traffic jams and no smooth flow to the labour market.

The automatic vacancy matching of the VDAB (digital tools) reinforces this considerably. This must be reversed: digital first must start from personal service because there is a need for objective support to guide women to the labour market towards the right jobs based on their competences. On the basis of their competences being correctly mapped, it is very difficult for short-skilled people to assess what perspective they have on the labour market, what competences they have and what is the best way for them to get to a sustainable job with prospects. Digital first is diametrically opposed to how short-skilled women should be positioned in the labour market.

If there is a personal service, it often remains stuck in stereotypical steering. So, on both counts it goes completely wrong. They remain stuck in stereotypical professions. Competence-enhancing training: here it is often said that the language knowledge is not yet sufficient, or the competences are not yet strong enough, and therefore they are not allowed to start certain vocational training courses. It is necessary that selection screenings on language and on cultural bias are screened to remove the cultural bias so that it is still possible to move on to competency enhancing training.

Cleaning is still seen as a bottleneck profession; this therefore has nothing to do with the supply (short-skilled women are all directed there) but everything to do with the working conditions and the wages. Both have to go up.

A wider validation of care for dependents

Care for the disabled and other dependents must be accessible, of high quality and better adapted to various family forms: we still assume too much about two-parent families with a social network. Access to forms of care is a right that can be used very easily and where the price is tested against what the people in need can bear and where the availability is tested against the feasibility in combination with participation in the labour market.

Home care for children is an option that should not be neglected: several health insurance companies offer home care for sick children. You could extend this perfectly to children of parents who have more difficult hours. This is an avenue that can be explored. Rich double-income couples arrange this via au pairs.

Flanders can give an enormous boost to thematic leave through the incentive bonus by providing more and broader benefits, including for informal care, etc.

The expansion of the Mantel Care system is insufficient for this recommendation. The Mantelzorg system is almost pocket money. Much more is needed. Shouldn't the time credit be extended to care outside the family? If you take care of children of your neighbours, you are not qualified for support of any kind. The informal care system is the softest form; but we can ask for much more. We should ask for a much higher compensation or make use of the better systems, such as time credit. The 'family' is very small defined for time credit: only family members or direct blood relatives: this should be extended.

4.4 Ireland

Basis for Recommendations

To frame their policy aspirations, the concept of Human Rights was discussed and explored with the women in the focus groups. Following this exercise, the women identified a set of overarching principles, based on Human Rights, which should guide all policy formulation.

Figure 1. Overarching principles to guide policy formation



The Roma and African members of the group felt strongly that policies should ensure equality and reduce discrimination. Again, they often expressed this in terms of the life they wanted for their children, where they were not judged based on their ethnicity. They aspired for their children to be recognised as Irish citizens as they were born here.

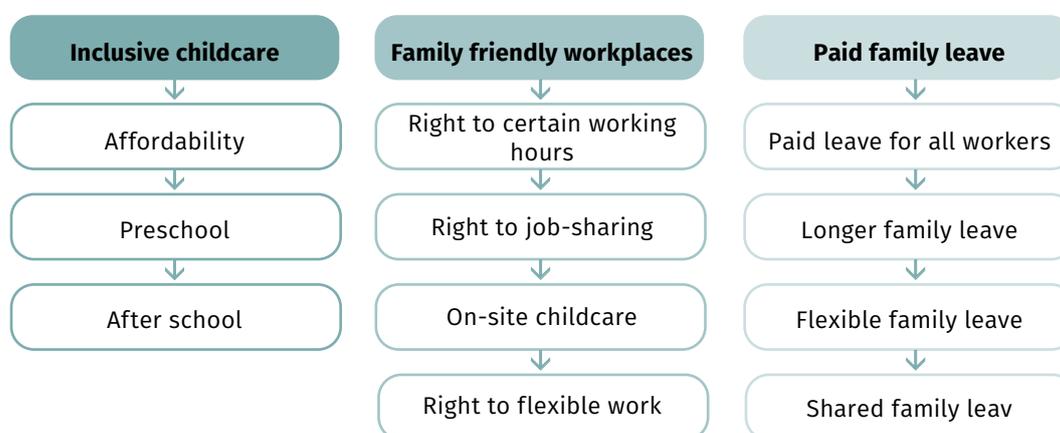
The women who were part of the REGAL research represented a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds. All of the women had experienced homelessness, some had now exited homelessness and were trying to rebuild their lives, others were struggling with the constraints of emergency homeless accommodation. Just over half were parenting alone, and just under half were parenting with a partner, however it was clear that being partnered or not made little difference to their burden of unpaid care and domestic work. Shared parenting was a principle that most members of the group felt strongly about. Many spoke to past or current experiences with male partners that was lacking parental and domestic involvement, and thus the burden of unpaid work was falling on them. This was unequal and unfair.

Translation into Policy Recommendations

A general election took place in Ireland during the course of the focus groups. Using the policy proposals contained in party manifestos to stimulate discussion, the women considered a range of policy aspirations, adjusting and adding to published proposals, and drawing in principles from their exploration of human rights and overarching principles.

In terms of nationality, there were three broad groups: women who had grown up in Ireland, women from Romania, and women from African nations, predominantly Nigeria. Despite the diversity of the group, the exploration and discussion of policy preferences in the focus groups (as discussed in section 2) resulted in many of the women sharing the same recommendations for policy changes which would significantly improve their work-life balance. Figure 1 below illustrates the three core policy preferences and the main elements of each, as identified by the women.

Figure 2. Policy recommendations identified by the research participants



Inclusive Childcare

Despite the attempts to introduce affordable childcare through the National Childcare Scheme, the high cost of childcare in Ireland remains the most significant barrier to labour market access for those with a care responsibility. As highlighted by stakeholders, the National Childcare Scheme leaves lone parents working full-time or in education worse off than they were before. Affordable childcare would ensure that the care burden is reduced for the women and they can pursue jobs that they actually want to do, rather than what is practical for them. Particularly as many of the women have worked in healthcare settings which requires long shifts and sometimes night shifts, affordable childcare would allow them to pursue the jobs they are qualified for and passionate about.

The policy changes implemented through the National Childcare Scheme focuses on early years' childcare until children are 3 years old. However, many of the women cited the lack of afterschool clubs or activities as a huge barrier to giving them additional hours in which they could work. The group recommended that where afterschool activities be held within the school or where this is not possible, transport is provided. The women often had to collect their children from school in order to bring them to their afterschool club, meaning that they remained constrained and reduced availability for work or education.

Recommendations:

- A review and restructuring of the National Childcare Scheme with specific consideration given to affordability and related targeted provisions for low income parents, particularly those with school-age children.
- Significant investment in the provision of a programme of pre and after school activities including transport that would afford low income parents the opportunity to consider realistic and meaningful employment and/or training opportunities.

Family-friendly workplaces

Many of the women had experienced precarious work in which they were not guaranteed a certain number of hours per week, where they were required to be fully flexible and where their employers did not provide them with the flexibility to look after their care responsibilities. For example, some employers would not allow the women to have their phones with them during work, which was not feasible for lone parents who need to be able to be contacted in the event of an emergency.

As Lorraine stated through her experience doing a course, on-site childcare ensured peace of mind for her while she was doing her course. Particularly as many of the women cannot afford to own a car and rely on public transport, dropping off their children at childcare is an additional burden which could be eased by increased availability of on-site childcare.

Stakeholders identified the availability of good jobs, or decent work, as a key issue in the lives of marginalised women. Women in Ireland are more likely to be in low paid, poorly regulated jobs in sectors such as care or retail. Ensuring the right to certain working hours and eliminating zero-hour contracts¹ would provide women with the stability and security of a guaranteed wage every week. Additionally, an increased commitment to job-sharing schemes would allow the women to balance their caring responsibilities with work more effectively. However, any such endeavours are hampered by the Irish State's reluctance to regulate the labour market in relation to exploitation of vulnerable workers, low pay and precarious work. Ireland is one of only two of the EU 27 countries where Collective Bargaining is not yet mandatory.

Recommendations:

- The adoption of an EU Directive to 'harmonise the laws of EU Member States on collective bargaining and thereby establish the right to bargain in Irish law'
- Robust regulation of the labour market with specific consideration given to guaranteeing a significant level of security and flexibility of employment that benefits working parents.
- Significant investment in the provision of a programme of on-site childcare in places of employment and education.

Paid Family Leave

Although there has been a welcome expansion of social insurance benefits for parents in recent years, due to insufficient social insurance contributions from being out of work, many of the women are not covered by parental leave. There is still a limited recognition of the impacts of unpaid care work that needs to be addressed within the social insurance system to give these women access to paid parental leave. The women felt that parental leave should be longer and for the women in couples that there should be more flexibility for shared leave with fathers.

Input from stakeholders articulated that parental leave is a key support mechanism that can assist parents balance work and family life and maintain their connection to the labour market. However, provision of paid statutory leave for parents in Ireland is lower than the EU average.

Recommendations:

- Reform of policy to ensure that:
 1. all parents are supported to take leave regardless of their level of social insurance contributions
 2. leave can be shared (based on family choice) to encourage a more equal sharing of parental leave between men and women
 3. leave is flexible, built around personal needs, career ambitions and the life stage, and employers are encouraged to support this.

Recommendations for Social Welfare

The women expressed the stress and anxiety caused by the constant financial struggle they faced. As a result of the factors previously discussed, many of these women are trapped in their circumstances and are locked out of the labour market, leaving them to rely solely on

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1. Employees on zero-hours contracts are protected by the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997. However, this does not apply to casual or precarious work.

social welfare payments. As illustrated through a budgetary exercise, these women are living on the minimum. An example provided by one of the members of the group who could not work due to the cost of childcare, showed that as a lone parent with 3 children under 12, she was surviving on €311 per week. After she has paid expenses such as rent, electricity, transport, phone, TV, she is left with €95 for the week to cover food, baby supplies and any unexpected costs. The minimum disposable income required to avoid poverty for a household with one adult and three children is €566.07² per week.

Income supports were a key issue identified by stakeholders, and specifically how amendments to the eligibility criteria for the One-parent Family Payment (OFP) in 2012 which were designed to incentivise welfare recipients away from passive income support to seek employment actually discouraged lone parents to work and drove some low income families deeper into poverty.

It is also clear that many of the stipulations around how many hours the women can work or be in education and keep their social welfare payments are not fit for purpose and an additional barrier to the women fulfilling their aspirations. The example provided by Lorraine illustrates that even for flexible courses that can be done from home and would provide the skills necessary to pursue flexible and meaningful work, they are unattainable if they want to maintain the stability their social welfare payments provide them. In Lorraine's case with the half-rate carers payment, she expressed frustration that this only allows her to be in education for up to 15 hours a week even though her son is in school for 30 hours a week. The group recommended a review of social welfare payments.

Recommendations:

- The introduction of an independent poverty-proofed benchmarking of social welfare rates, directly indexed to the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL).
- The introduction of a programme of income supports for lone parents who have been financially penalised as a result of reforms to OFP.
- A review of social welfare payments with specific consideration given to eligibility criteria that disincentives recipients to pursue employment and/or education.

2. According to Social Justice Ireland 'Poverty Focus 2020' Report <https://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/publication/6310/2020-05-18-sjipovertyfocusmay2020final.pdf?cs=true>

4.5 Portugal

The reality experienced and the reflections elaborated by women that made possible the implementation of the REGAL project in Portugal showed that, despite the challenges that exist, women in a vulnerable situation seek to use the available resources to articulate their professional life with their family and personal life.

When they do not have economic resources to access public or market services or answers, they mobilize community networks and seek local support in order to remain in the labour market.

The sphere of work is valued even when employment is not ideal and prevents the performance of other activities, either because of long hours or atypical hours, or especially because of low income.

Family life is equally valued, but when we enter the private sphere it is the unpaid work that most occupies women and contributes to the lack of time for personal fulfilment. Motherhood and care for dependents are responsibilities that they assume, often without a partner, and that prolong daily journeys.

The participants in our research have no income to invest in their training or in leisure and / or personal development activities that will allow them to enhance their skills for the job market or strengthen their opportunities to devote more resources to the family.

Long daily routines, economic concerns and reduced hours of rest do not provide an environment conducive to critical reflection on rights or foster the capability to aspire to better living conditions.

The opportunity created by the realization of focus groups had an impact on the awareness of the common discriminations suffered by women and in particular by women in a vulnerable situation. And this is one of the aspects valued by women and stakeholders that it is important to highlight, the appreciation of the REGAL project for the spaces of reflection it provided to women who valued being questioned and the recognition of their experience as people with specific knowledge.

The discussion also awakened the need to question public policies and the investment that is made in women and families. The understanding that the State has a role in promoting their well-being and that it is necessary to encourage corporate social responsibility has stimulated the desire to know more about the role that European institutions can also have in building a more inclusive society capable of listening and dialoguing with women in order to build a fairer social policy that promotes gender equality.

Sharing personal wishes or aspirations demands more time and a less uncertain and disturbing social climate than the state of emergency we live in allows. However, it was possible to agree on some proposals that facilitate the reconciliation of professional, family and personal life.

First of all, a strong bet on women's empowerment in order to know their labour rights and specific reconciliation measures.

As it is not enough to know the rights, it is necessary to have a favourable climate for their exercise, so a second proposal involves raising the awareness of employers to the importance

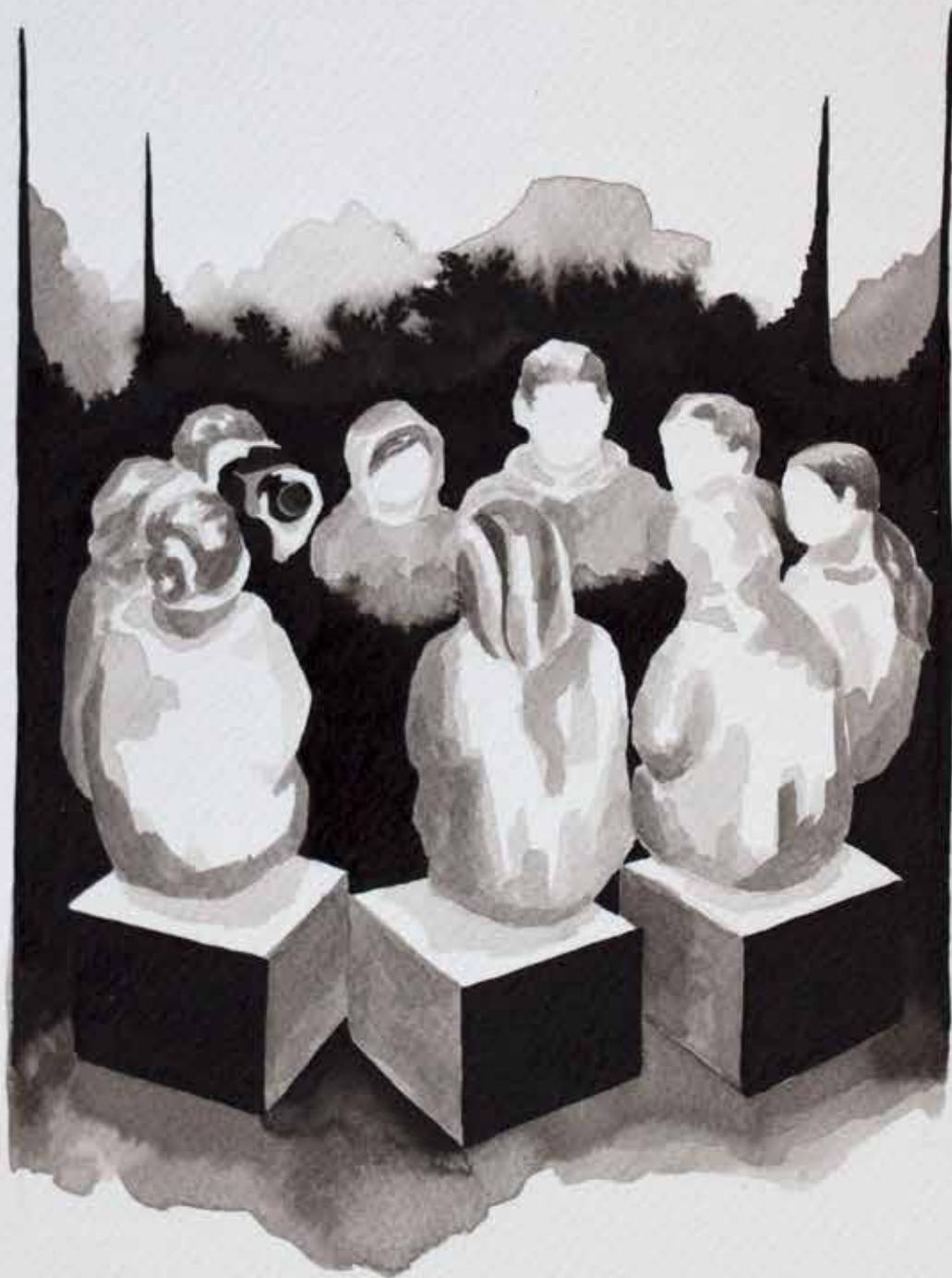
of reconciliation as an instrument to motivate women workers that allows management gains and an increased productivity.

The increase in income from work is a demand to the extent that low wages limit the options for reconciliation and above all prevent investment in resources that promote the well-being of women and their families.

The promotion of a public discussion on the reconciliation between professional, family and personal life that allows to know good practices, promote equality and deepen other issues such as inclusive management, work relations and citizenship.

Women expect European institutions and national policy makers to deepen a strategy to promote the reconciliation of work, family and personal life taking into account the specificities of people in a vulnerable situation, in particular discrimination and increased difficulties resulting from belonging to gender, territory of origin, economic situation and social condition. It is necessary to look at the real daily lives and look for creative solutions that allow one to recover time to live. Only with bold policies in the labour market and in social protection policies will it be possible to recover the balance for the lives of precarious women at work and thus contribute to the improvement of their quality of life.

We suggest that the policies of equal opportunities to be redefined, taking into account the specificities of minority groups, their life experiences and their contexts. It is also essential to rethink private-public spaces and promote greater equality between men and women in sharing domestic and family responsibilities.



5. Work-life balance: recommendations for Europe. An alternative look from a perspective of vulnerability

As the agreement on the EU work-life balance directive adopted on 24th January 2019 covers aspects of Time, Resources and also paves the way for future action on access to Services, we use these aspects as subsections in this chapter, next to a more general, value-based sub-chapter and finally a chapter that deals with more situational challenges. These recommendations were shaped throughout the focus group sessions in the five participating REGAL countries: Ireland, Portugal, Belgium, France and Romania. The REGAL recommendations are a mixture of measures that the EU can take up itself or that the EU can advise or recommended throughout the European Semester and the implementation of the work-life balance package to its member states.

Aspects of values

Gender equality embedded in a genuine definition of participation in society

What is gender equality? Do women have to mirror male roles? The REGAL starting point is that we want a better society for all; a more qualitative society for all. 'Everyone at work' is a goal in itself. The idea should be that everyone participates in society as much as possible. Work is a way to do that but not always and not in some cases, for some women it is better not to work. Upgrading the care professions is here essential: both financially and in terms of wages. Women care in the broadest sense: care for, care to maintain life, e.g., cleaning professions are also part of that.

Job quality must come first

Job quality must come first. You can only take on care needs and tasks if your job is of good quality, and that mainly concerns time, quality and autonomy, but also income.

It's not about precarious women, it's about precarious jobs

It is the work that is precarious and not OK, not the target group itself. Social exclusion mechanisms are a cultural, social phenomenon. The situation and the work are precarious, the women are not. Women can escape individually, but is it the intention that we keep putting other precarious women in the precarious jobs? We need to frame this better. Having room to strive for a better life is an interesting proposition. Now there's an unequal distribution of opportunities reflects in people's minds. We must work on emancipation as countering people's inferiority complex. This must be done.

Attention for mental well-being

Attention to mental and psychological well-being: many women are left with an enormous feeling of guilt: they feel like being a bad mother. They also have a limited social network, because they have such difficult working hours. And that is exactly what is important for mental well-being.

A lack of physical and mental space to think beyond their daily questions is the result: it is difficult to look beyond their own reality. This has to do with the fact that we place the responsibilities with the individuals themselves: you have to manage your own time. The vulnerable women experience very little free time and self-care. Elements that are important to recharge batteries makes them mentally exhausted. Importance of informal network: actively invest in it as much as possible, dependence on reciprocity.

More respect for care jobs is vital

There is very little visibility and little daytime work in these jobs: before and after offices are closed, they have to be cleaned. Revaluing of care professions is necessary. Upgrading in appreciation in itself: it is very much looked down upon. Cleaning teams should be treated

with much more kindness: we are very dependent on them but there is not enough appreciation and that is an important form of sexism. It is an important aspect that should be taken into account.

The concept of the cleaner as a colleague who cleans your office space when you are working during the day, doesn't exist. That should be normal practice, but it is not. For the sake of productivity and social standards, this is pushed into invisibility. We need to have a change of mentality.

A sensibility campaign on Work-life balance for employers and employees in Central and Eastern EU member states

The concept of WLB is very little used in public policies context and is totally unknown at employers and employees' level in Romania. We assume this will be also the case in other Central and Eastern EU member states. Work-life balance, being a new concept, a long-term awareness campaign is needed for the intrinsic assumption of this human value for a healthy life. A national sustained campaign on the importance of this vital balance between work and life would lead to an awareness of employers (and implicitly to the possibility of realizing adapted employment contracts) and to an individual and collective empowerment of vulnerable people.

Social consultation/dialogue for all

Access to social consultation is important, certainly in the light of the increase in non-standard work. It is important that they know they can make their voices heard.

Also, because there's a clear link between vulnerability and powerlessness and abuse: it is only because people are vulnerable and have no other options, because they have no margins that people are so vulnerable to abuse at work and don't claim certain rights at work. For example, if they have certain rights to leave, to work less when pregnant, they literally don't ask for them because they are afraid of losing their job. Trade union representation is the biggest protective factor here against all kinds of abuses.

The adoption of an EU Directive to 'harmonise the laws of EU Member States on collective bargaining'

This implies a robust regulation of the labour market with specific consideration given to guaranteeing a significant level of security and flexibility of employment that benefits working parents. A significant investment in the provision of a programme of on-site childcare in places of employment and education must be part of this.

Aspects of resources

Be aware of the rise of precarious jobs and ensure minimum conditions of decent work

The current situation of the last years shows an important increase in precarious jobs. Jobs for short skilled persons with short, irregular contracts especially in the service sectors. There's an important need to ensure that all jobs meet the same minimum conditions of decent work. Discussions about platform work that are currently taking place and question these minimum conditions, already apply now to women in the cleaning, catering etc. sectors: unpaid waiting times, intermediate shifts, compensation for long-distance travel. There's a need to create a momentum to also look at other jobs: are these the working conditions we are aiming for?

Higher pays in order to be able to develop a work-life balance

An income is an important buffer between a precarious job, family income and mental well-being. The higher your income, the less the job will affect your combined WLB and

well-being. The higher the family income, the more you use that income to buy time; earning more means you can spend more time with your family and child.

Income is primordial: working hours must be reduced without loss of pay, but a minimum wage is also necessary: today this is fixed at 10 EUR/hour. We claim in order to overcome precarity, it should be 14 EUR/hour. This would mean a big improvement for people in precarious employment.

A structural wage increase should also include the reflection to look for alternative financing. This does not apply to all but to many low-paid jobs, such as catering, cleaning. There's little margin to give more pay, so we need to think outside the box: how should something be financed? For example: all ladies in the toilets should become municipal officials. Where should the money come from? Think differently about how to finance this. Wages for vulnerable professions must go up, but sometimes we need to think differently about how we finance these jobs.

Family-friendly workplaces

The availability of good jobs, or decent work, is a key issue in the lives of marginalised women. Women in some of the studied member states are more likely to be in low paid, poorly regulated jobs in sectors such as care or retail. Ensuring the right to certain working hours and eliminating zero-hour contracts would provide women with the stability and security of a guaranteed wage every week. Additionally, an increased commitment to job-sharing schemes would allow the women to balance their caring responsibilities with work more effectively.

The impact of covid-19 on women's WLB needs to be taken into account in policy proposals

Covid-19 impacts severely on the WLB of especially women. Women's situation worsened worldwide because of more care tasks, unequal access to telework, telework causing poorer demarcation between work and free time. Structural problems come to surface: Matthew effects in uptake of certain measures: covid-19 parental leave options in some member states are much more often taken up by people from higher wage categories, people with lower wages do not make use of it because the benefit is simply too low for them. There can also be purely technical barriers: the non-take-up figures for the growth package, for example, are high: the application procedure is far too complicated; it should actually be automatic.

Aspects of Time

Part-time work needs equal treatment: also, in the area of WLB and lifelong learning

The assumption that part-time work is a good way to deal with WLB, does not appear to be the case at all in practice: if you look at the time allocation, this means that care work is distributed very unequally but that the total care burden for women is certainly not reduced.

We cannot treat part-time workers unequally: they must have the same opportunities for promotion, for training (in all jobs). Our labour market is very segmented: it is very difficult to move from one type of job to another. But lifelong learning must ensure that people are broadly employable on the supply side and that they have the choice despite possible barriers on the demand side. The statutes must have the same working conditions regardless of the employment regime.

A collective reduction of working hours without cuts in wages should be experimented at EU level

A collective reduction of working hours as an instrument for more quality between paid and unpaid work/care should be experimented at EU-level as an innovative way for a genuine WLB. This has to be seen as a social challenge: a collective answer is needed, not just an individual one. Through collectivity, you create also a more gender-sensitive answer.

The implementation of the WLB package: measures need to be accessible for all

The existing measures of parental leave and time credit) must be accessible to all and ensure that there are no Matheus effects in their take-up. Allocation should be automatic if you are entitled to it and where there is an income test.

Paid Family Leave

Parental leave is a key support mechanism that can assist parents balance work and family life and maintain their connection to the labour market. Reform of national policies should ensure that all parents are supported to take leave regardless of their level of social insurance contributions; leave can be shared (based on family choice) to encourage a more equal sharing of parental leave between men and women; leave is flexible, built around personal needs, career ambitions and the life stage, and employers are encouraged to support this.

Specific amounts of time credit and unpaid leave for vulnerable groups

In some studied member states, we see a system of fixed amounts for time credit and unpaid leave: it is very strange that these are fixed amounts. Efforts have been made to have these lump sums, but you should have a much more crucial amount for low incomes. Social allowance for children should also be part of it: if you make it higher, you do a lot for low-income people with children.

For WLB measures, poverty tests should be made in a non-stigmatising and integrating way. Automatic granting of benefits should be part of every policy. It is not enough to tamper with the conditions; we must think more broadly. And also look at the family composition.

A wider validation of the statute of 'care for dependents'

Care for the disabled and other dependents must be accessible, of high quality and better adapted to various family forms: we still assume too much about two-parent families with a social network. Access to forms of care is a right that can be used very easily and where the price is tested against what the people in need can bear and where the availability is tested against the feasibility in combination with participation in the labour market.

Home care for children is an option that should not be neglected: several health insurance companies offer home care for sick children. You could extend this perfectly to children of parents who have more difficult hours. This is an avenue that can be explored. Rich double-income couples arrange this via au pairs.

The time credit should be extended to care outside the family. If you take care of children of your neighbours, you are not qualified for support of any kind. The informal care system is the softest form; but we can ask for much more. We should ask for a much higher compensation or make use of the better systems, such as time credit. The 'family' is very small defined for time credit: only family members or direct blood relatives: this should be extended.

Recognition of the maintenance job as physically heavy with a reduction of the full-time standard

Working in the maintenance sector is physically a very demanding job. The physical aspect in this work is very demanding: hardly anyone can keep this up until retirement because it is too heavy, hence there are many part-time jobs in this sector. Part-time work is very often, actually equivalent to full-time work in this sector. If it is almost impossible to work full-time and combine it with your family life, then it is actually a full-time job that you do but for which you are only paid part-time.

Part-time work is the individual solution that individual families seek for the lack of a good WLB, while we should be looking for structural, collective solutions and that is possible through a reduction in working hours with pay.

Therefore, a full-time standard of 38 hours is unachievable in that sector. In these sectors, we would lower that standard. The discussion on collective labour reduction is very important in that sector. A specific full-time standard for this sector is needed so that wages are a bit higher for better recognition.

Remove gendered barriers for encouraging professional integration

Europe could encourage companies to favour special pathways of professional integration and maintaining the employment for mothers which are either looking for a job or which are professionally active and wish to remain professionally active while being available for their children.

By encouraging flexibility of working hours of women with younger children or by enabling them to undertake teleworking once or twice a week if they want in order to reconcile harmoniously their mother role with their professional activities.

The EU must continue to accentuate the role of men in time-credit measures

The EU WLB package is here a good starting point. However, the EU must continue to encourage men to take up the measures with a reserved part of parental leave for men, e.g., as in Scandinavian countries. This can succeed, especially if more leave can be taken, but must not be at the expense of women's own leave.

Flexibility: not only an employers' right. Workable work as a principle

Flexibility tends to confirm that it is 'the customer who chooses': the employee her/himself has no say in this. Sometimes the women witnessed even gaps between hours: it then comes down too little money for many hours. Employees in those jobs often do not have enough autonomy to plan their hours. On the other hand, employers do have a lot of flexibility to introduce different contracts. High task demands and low autonomy take their toll. Workable work must become the principle: sliding, human hours must be possible for these undervalued, demanding jobs. Next to that, wages must be set against night hours. Flexibility premiums should be applied at night so that they can be used to stop earlier or later. For vulnerable persons, it is difficult to help determine and strengthen their own employment conditions. Trade unions have to work on this with training and sector covenants.

Aspects of access to services

Accessible and affordable childcare for vulnerable groups

Childcare plays a crucial role; the price of income-related childcare remains too high in the studied EU member states. In addition, the supply of income-related childcare remains too low.

Affordable childcare would ensure that the care burden is reduced for the women and they can pursue jobs that they actually want to do, rather than what is practical for them. Affordable childcare allows women to pursue the jobs they are qualified for and passionate about.

For jobs with flexible hours and supply in rural areas, there is indeed no adequate childcare. A recent study shows that there is less supply in poorer neighbourhoods. A plea for free childcare for vulnerable target groups is not unfeasible: In Malta and Berlin, free childcare has

been implemented. The reason used is the insufficient language knowledge of children in Berlin who went to nursery school. There is also the social function of childcare: despite all the nice policy texts in Flanders, it has not been applied in practice.

Specific attention and measures for single vulnerable mothers is needed

For single mothers, the problem is twice as bad. The biggest problem for single mothers is loneliness, total isolation. The relatively small amounts of time credit measures are not feasible for them. Actually, you have to say that they do not exist for people with a low income, you cannot pay the rent with it. It is also a contradiction because Europe's ambition is to get the employment rate up, so you have to get the ancillary conditions right and focus on the pre-conditions such as public transport and childcare; otherwise, you will never get the employment rate you want.

Ancillary aspects

Tailor made approach instead of digitalised job seekers strategy in order to valorise people's skills

Member states tend more and more to digitised job seekers systems. This evolution is far from ideal for vulnerable groups. Short-skilled women tick the same groups of occupational preferences very much. Shortly educated women are then all sent to the same jobs, mainly cleaning, which leads to traffic jams and no smooth flow to the labour market.

This must be reversed: digital first must start from personal service because there is a need for objective support to guide women to the labour market towards the right jobs based on their competences. On the basis of their competences being correctly mapped, it is very difficult for short-skilled people to assess what perspective they have on the labour market, what competences they have and what is the best way for them to get to a sustainable job with prospects. Digital first is diametrically opposed to how short-skilled women should be positioned in the labour market.

If there is a personal service, it often remains stuck in stereotypical steering. So, on both counts it goes completely wrong. They remain stuck in stereotypical professions.

Competence-enhancing training: go beyond the language barrier

In competence-enhance training it is often said that the language knowledge is not yet sufficient, or the competences are not yet strong enough, and therefore trainees with a migration background are not allowed to start certain vocational training courses. It is necessary that selection screenings on language and on cultural bias are screened to remove the cultural bias so that it is still possible to move on to competency enhancing training.

WLB implementation needs specific recommendations concerning diversity

Segregation on the labour market is generally a problem: differences between statuses emerge for women, the low-educated, people with disabilities: especially when combined, difficult to escape from certain segments. Problems are even more pronounced among women with a migrant background, especially among recent newcomers who came here for family reunification. They have no guidance on the labour market, no local network, are not being introduced. They suffer thus even more from sticky floors and other thresholds.

Remove administrative barriers for encouraging professional integration

Training scholarship at the EU level for women, entrepreneurs, migrants and mothers should be more open to diversity and help to overcome the problems of unaffordable training fees. Now scholars with a migration background only have access to precarious traineeships and

contracts that do not give them the required experience to find a true job. An authorisation of the foreign partner that got his degree in the host country to stay with his pregnant partner should be part of this simplification.

The EU needs to take the forefront for a common recognition of foreign diplomas

The recognition of foreign diplomas remains an important hindrance of highly skilled persons with a migration background to obtain a job that is valorised for their qualifications. They often stick in low-valorised jobs because of the non-recognition of their diplomas. It is incomprehensible that this is so difficult: Europe must make this procedure simpler, quicker and more flexible in order not to lose all this talent.

Pay attention for spatial planning and transport aspects in the broad sense for the implementation of WLB

Poor public transport and heavy traffic congestion: commuting can take a lot of time and this lost time and cost is compared with possible working time. For some inactive people, it can prevent them from taking the step to work because it is not feasible or attractive. For others, it ensures that they cannot do more hours than they are already doing; there is the link with teleworking: not everyone has that option. This reinforces the divide between well-paid, well-educated, especially men who can telecommute and poorly educated women who very often cannot.



