



Work-life integration

Policy Paper

AGE Platform Europe

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www.age-platform.eu

Informal care is a multifaceted landscape, shaped by the diversity of those who provide it, the unique situations they face, and the varying needs they encounter. It represents a tremendous economic value, informal carers playing a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of those most in need while supporting indirectly the broader healthcare system. **As demographic trends and policy shifts increasingly favour home care for older adults, the number of workers who also serve as informal carers is expected to rise significantly.** Adequate and flexible working conditions, along with quality care services, are essential not only to support but also to empower informal caregivers.

By valuing informal care, promoting gender equality, and ensuring access to flexible working arrangements tailored to individual needs, the implementation of the [EU Care strategy](#) and the strengthening of [the Work-Life Balance Directive](#) (Directive (EU) 2019/1158) can be transformative. These measures have the potential to create a more inclusive and equitable labour market. However, for these efforts to be truly effective, European legislation must better recognize and support the essential role of informal carers, and Member States must fully adopt and strengthen these provisions to maximize their impact.

Diverse situations and needs: embracing the complexity of informal care

Depending on their specific caregiving situation, **informal carers face diverse challenges.** Some are required to provide round-the-clock care, often living with the dependent person, while others, may only be able to visit a few times a week or after work. The needs of informal carers can vary significantly, with those providing emergency or short-term care facing different challenges than those involved in long-term caregiving, which can last for years. Addressing these varied needs requires tailored solutions within the broader framework of European and national policies. To date, the [Work-Life Balance Directive](#) defines a carer as a worker who provides personal care or support to a relative or a person who lives in the same household as the worker and who needs significant care or support for a serious medical reason. While providing a legal status to informal carers, this definition remains rather succinct and does not consider them in their diversity.

To fully address the diverse situations and needs of informal carers, we must move beyond the traditional binary view that separates work and personal life, often seen as opposing forces. Instead of using the term 'work-life balance', **AGE Platform Europe and its members advocate for adopting the concept of 'work-life integration,'** a term originally defined by the Haas School of Business at the University of California¹. This approach

¹ [Work-Life Integration - Human Resources - Berkeley Haas](#)

emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal and professional domains, recognizing that they are not mutually exclusive but rather intertwined aspects of our lives.

Unlike the notion of work-life balance, which can imply an unrealistic separation of time and responsibilities between work and personal life, work-life integration offers a more realistic and holistic perspective. It acknowledges that our careers encompass all roles we play in life, blending our professional responsibilities with our personal identities. This shift in understanding better reflects the lived experiences of informal carers, allowing for a more comprehensive approach to supporting their needs.

*“In the concept of **integration** lies the logic of holding together the components of a whole, consistent with the values and desires of the individual and his or her relatives. The traditional image of the binary opposition between work and life is replaced by a holistic vision in which synergies are created between all the areas that define ‘life’: work, home/family, community, personal well-being and health’.*

Cristina Cortesi, Italy, CUROPOLI Ente del Terzo

Empowering older women in the labour market

According to the World Health Organisation, on average **70% of unpaid informal carers are women**². Despite the growing participation of women in the labour market, they continue to take on a disproportionate share of family responsibilities and unpaid care. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in social structures and perpetuates gender inequalities. Reduced working hours or withdrawal from the labour market because of family responsibilities have immediate and long-term consequences for women's incomes and the distribution of family responsibilities, exacerbating the gender employment and the gender pension gap³.

In this context, older women can find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position. In addition to the cumulated gender discrimination, they are confronted with throughout their lives, they face a range of additional discrimination based on age. The intersectionality of sexism and ageism also creates an additional category of discrimination which has a significant impact on older women in the labour market. Other factors may also come into

² [Caregiving impacts on informal carers' health and well-being – a gender perspective – Eurocarers](#)

³ The gender pension gap was seen at 26% in the EU in 2022 - [The 2024 pension adequacy report - Publications Office of the EU \(europa.eu\)](#)

play, such as social class, origin and sexual orientation, creating unique experiences of marginalisation that weigh even more heavily when work-life integration issues come into play.

For women aged between 50 and 64, the gender imbalance is more pronounced than for any other age group⁴. As a result of these new family responsibilities and the fact that they are not too far away from the statutory retirement age, many older women are reducing their working hours by opting for part-time work or early retirement, which reduces their income, slows down or prevents them from considering career progression and reduces their pension. The [Work-Life Balance Directive](#) aims to enable greater participation of women in the labour market alongside caring duties, and to reduce these responsibilities by encouraging more men to take over. However, the directive is unable to fully achieve its objectives, as demonstrated by an increase in unpaid care work and a rise of existing inequalities in unpaid care during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need to reassess and reshape the existing legal framework⁵.

Unvalued caregiving impacts both caregivers and the society

Today, 80% of care in Europe is provided by informal carers⁶. Due to the high number of women in this role and cultural perceptions, caring is often seen as a ‘feminine’ responsibility, ignoring and sometimes even devaluing men who are informal carers and confining women to this role. **It is important to promote and effect cultural change in the way we perceive caring and to raise the status of this role, regardless of the gender identity of the carer.**

Informal carers receive little or no recognition, even though the value of informal care is estimated at 2.4% of EU GDP⁷ and that informal carers struggle between their jobs and their caring duties. As things stand, many informal carers have no choice as to whether or not they provide care, or to what extent. In addition, **many carers experience negative effects** on their health, social inclusion, financial stability, educational opportunities and employment prospects due to a lack of adequate support. Of these, **the 45-65 age group is the most likely to provide care or informal help at least once a week⁸**, most of them to support ageing parents. These people are still active in the labour market, or might wish to be, but

⁴ In 2023, the employment rate of women aged 50 to 64 is 58.1%, compared with 70.1% for men: [Employment rates by sex, age and citizenship \(%\) \[lfsa_ergan_custom_12748933\]](#)

⁵ [Reshaping the Work-Life Balance Directive with Covid-19 lessons in mind-2022.pdf \(etui.org\)](#)

⁶ [EU Election 2024 Manifesto – Caring for informal carers: you have a crucial role to play! – Eurocarers](#)

⁷ [EU Election 2024 Manifesto – Caring for informal carers: you have a crucial role to play! – Eurocarers](#)

⁸ [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](#)

these responsibilities, combined with ageism in the labour market⁹, can make it difficult to maintain stable employment.

The [Work-Life Balance Directive](#), which aims to support informal carers, is a first step towards a better support, but its material provisions are clearly inadequate and hamper the effectiveness of improving the integration of work and private life. Firstly, the duration of carers' leave, which is five days per year per worker, hardly seems sufficient to provide care - at best, it provides for a few days to coordinate formal care services in the event of an immediate or urgent need for care. Secondly, while the directive introduces the right to adequate compensation for parental and paternity leave, no such provisions exist for carers' leave. **It is essential and urgent that informal care is better considered, valued and supported in Europe.** The [EU Care strategy](#) goes in the right direction by explicitly recognising the societal and economic value of informal care and the fact that carers should benefit from appropriate services enabling them to reconcile their professional and private lives, such as flexible working hours and access to respite care services. This EU Care Strategy must now be transposed into national legislation, with appropriate monitoring and evaluation procedures at EU and Member State level, and with the involvement of the organisations concerned on the field.

Informal carers and intergenerational solidarity: at work and in society

Flexible working arrangements help employees of all ages, whether as parents or as informal carers, to achieve a better work-life integration, thereby improving well-being and reducing stress. This can foster a more harmonious and supportive workplace where employees feel supported and valued, whatever their age. Indeed, flexible working conditions that take into account the needs of informal carers can lead to greater job satisfaction and retention of employees in all age groups. The flexibility and adaptability benefit all employees by creating a supportive environment that can respond quickly to changing circumstances, such as family emergencies or health problems.

Supporting workers who are also informal carers by offering them flexibility in their time and place of work promotes lifelong learning and professional development, enabling employees of all ages to gain new skills and experience that will also benefit the business. As well as supporting informal carers in balancing work and caring duties, adequate working conditions and support enable older workers to consider working beyond retirement age if they so wish. **This can also support people who have reached the legal pension aged in their decision to stay in the labour market for longer, to reconcile pension and part-time**

⁹ [End age discrimination in employment - AGE Platform Europe \(age-platform.eu\)](#)

work or to return to work after a break. Collaboration between the generations benefits from this, especially as the diversity of ages in the company allows for a better exchange of knowledge between employees, a retention of experience and innovation. Employers can also set up mentoring programmes. These exchanges and this diversity of ages in the workplace help to fight stereotypes and age discrimination.

Finally, outside the workplace, flexible working arrangements can allow older relatives to modulate their working hours and locations to help young parents, while conversely, younger workers can support their parents in their caring roles. This intergenerational solidarity means that at any age, parents and carers, can be supported in their job search, retraining, apprenticeship and progress in the labour market.

“Intergenerational solidarity is a two-way street: young people often rely on parental support when job hunting, and when parents lose their jobs, it can force their children to abandon studies and take any available job. The employment status of older workers directly impacts the younger generation. Supporting older workers, especially in caregiving roles, also supports young people's employment, fostering positive intergenerational solidarity.” – an AGE Platform Europe Member

Some Member States are implementing policies and/or legislation aimed at attracting carers from abroad, like EU initiatives designed to bring in talent from outside the EU, in order to address the increasing demand for care services in these countries. Many people with a care background are responding to this demand for better working conditions and better pay. Although this dynamic responds to immediate needs, it can lead to long-term problems for the countries of origin and destination. These policies contribute to a major brain drain in the countries of origin, the loss of potential informal carers who are essential to the smooth running of the economy and **the loss of intergenerational exchanges**, and therefore the transmission of knowledge, within families. By recruiting from abroad, host countries may also be tempted to reduce investment in support, education and training in care, work-home integration and losing part of intergenerational exchanges within their own population. To remedy this, **it is essential to start harmonising legislation and policies at European level to value the work of informal carers in all Member States.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

A critical reassessment of European work-life integration standards, and particularly the [Work-Life Balance Directive](#), is needed to ensure that they meet the needs of modern workers. To this end, AGE Platform Europe recommends enhancing the position of informal carer, both at work and in society, by:

1) Strengthening carer's leave

According to a study carried out in January 2023 by Reed Smith for the Social Platform¹⁰, **the [Work-Life Balance Directive](#) is not implemented equally in all Member States**. Belgium, for example, does not respect the minimum 5-day leave for carers. Some countries, such as France and Greece, have added conditions based on the carer-recipient relationship or the length of employment. The directive also gives carers the right to request flexible working hours and arrangements. However, Member States vary in their implementation, with some, such as Cyprus and Sweden, requiring a period of professional qualification for requests for flexible working European monitoring of the implementation of the directive in the Member States must be the number one priority.

The directive should also be revised and strengthened to guarantee a higher common minimum number of days off, without conditions of qualification or length of employment, and with appropriate monitoring and evaluation procedures both at EU and Member State levels. Smaller companies or those with limited resources should be supported by governments to enable them to guarantee these minimum provisions to employees. Informal carers represent a significant economic save which is likely to increase in the years to come given the policies favouring staying at home as long as possible. To maintain this fragile balance, governments must also guarantee support and assistance to the most vulnerable businesses and their employees.

Finally, the directive currently gives employers the discretionary power to grant flexible working arrangements and leave, without there being any formal legal right for workers. Carers can ask to work flexibly, but employers are not obliged to accede to their request. There is an urgent need to define the criteria under which an absence is justified and must be accepted by the employer in European standards. Based on these criteria, **employers should then justify their refusals on a common basis in all Member States**, protecting both their interests and those of carers. At the same time, and beyond European or national

¹⁰ 2019 EU Work-Life Balance directive - Overview of national transposition measures. (s. d.). Reed Smith - Prepared at the request of Social Platform.

legislation, collective agreements should also play an important role by involving the social partners and negotiating as closely as possible to local needs, the specific features of the sector and the constraints of employees.

2) Providing financial and structural support

To date, European standards do not guarantee **financial support for carers**. The [EU Care strategy](#) aims to fill this gap through Council recommendations, which urge Member States to take voluntary action.

“In Portugal, if you need home care for your relatives, there is no place available anymore, and you don't have the choice, especially if you can't afford it in the private sector. The only option is to become an informal carer.” Teresa Martins, Portugal, APRe! - Associação de Aposentados Pensionistas e Reformados

In many regions, either home care or residential care are unavailable or not affordable: for example, home care might have to be paid from a persons' own pocket, while residential care, which might not be adequate to a persons' situation, might be fully reimbursed. The Council's recommendation on long-term care¹¹ emphasizes the need to **strengthen the affordability and availability of home and community-based care**. The funds not spent by the State and/or local institutions on building and managing residential facilities for dependent older people should be redirected to support informal care, by providing financial support for informal caregivers and developing the care services sector for instance.

Reinforcing community support is also essential and could involve creating support networks with more proactive public services that maintain regular contact with older people as a preventive measure, rather than responding only in emergencies. Regular communication between care professionals and caregivers must be established to better coordinate the care provided. In Portugal, for instance, several initiatives have been developed since the COVID-19 pandemic, such as neighbourhood policy programs¹² that support and maintain regular contact with isolated older individuals.

Caregivers could be compensated in various ways, such as through paid support services like respite care, counselling, psychological support, training, and peer exchange programs. Caregiving time could also be factored into the calculation of their pensions. **Upgrading the**

¹¹ [EUR-Lex - 32022H1215\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹² https://www.gnr.pt/ProgEsp_idososSeguranca.aspx

status of caregivers through appropriate remuneration would not only support current informal caregivers—most of whom are women—but also help achieve the objectives of the [Work-Life Balance Directive](#) by encouraging more men to become involved.

Finally, **new technologies are an asset to consider improving the integration of work and private life**. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking was adopted by many companies and remains an option for many workers. Teleworking can help carers by reducing commuting times, for example. However, it is essential to supervise and regulate teleworking so that it does not lead to an overload of work for informal carers or reinforce gender inequalities. Furthermore, teleworking is only possible for a few professions and cannot be generalised as an ideal option for all jobs. Nevertheless, new technologies have the potential to be explored to improve working conditions and facilitate the integration of carers' professional and private lives in a wider range of professions.

3) Adopting an inclusive and intersectional approach

Adopting an inclusive and intersectional approach to supporting informal carers is essential to recognise the diverse realities of carers and to create a more equitable environment in which all workers can reconcile their work and caring responsibilities.

The intersection of age with discriminations based on gender, social class, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation significantly exacerbates the challenges older individuals face in accessing support for their role as informal carers. **The definition of a 'carer' in European legislation also needs to be broadened to better reflect diverse family structures**, including stepfamilies and LGBTI families, which may not be recognised in the same way in all Member States. By adopting an inclusive and intersectional framework, future reforms can ensure that all carers - regardless of their employment status, age or family composition - receive the necessary protection and support.

Extending protections to retired people and all type of jobs, including platform workers and the self-employed, many of whom are older or retired workers, would also ensure that all carers have the same rights and support, regardless of their situation. Although some Member States have social security schemes for the self-employed, these vary considerably. Other EU laws, such as Directive 2010/41/EU on equal treatment between men and women working as self-employed persons¹³, indirectly support work-life integration, but do not offer equivalent measures.

Financial inequalities between informal carers have a profound impact on their ability to access care services and support. These financial inequalities can lead to significant

¹³ [Directive - 2010/41 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

disparities in the quality and availability of care provided to those in need. Carers with greater financial resources can afford better quality care options, while those with fewer resources can rely on less comprehensive state-funded services that are often overstretched and underfunded. This disparity affects not only the carer, but also directly the health and well-being of the person being cared for.

To meet these challenges, **it is essential to adopt a person-centred approach** to supporting informal carers that would advocate greater flexibility in access to services, allowing carers to choose the types of support that best meet their needs, whether that be financial assistance, respite care or advice. It would also involve better integration of services to ensure that carers can easily navigate and access the full range of support available without unnecessary barriers.

You can stop ageism!

Please read our [one-pager](#) on communicating on older persons in a non-stereotypical way.

About AGE Platform Europe

AGE Platform Europe is the largest European network of non-profit organizations of and for older people. We elevate older people's voice, bringing their experience and aspirations to the table to celebrate ageing and fight for equality at all ages.

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