JOINT EUROPEAN STATEMENT

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CARE DOESN'T FOLLOW A SCHEDULE. FLEXIBILITY MATTERS.

For European policies and workplaces that enable people to work, care and live.

Across Europe, millions of people provide unpaid care to a family member, partner, friend or neighbour while also working, studying, raising a family and participating in their communities.

This care is essential to the wellbeing of individuals and to the sustainability of Europe's care systems. Yet the realities of caring are still too often invisible in employment and social policies.

Care doesn't follow a schedule.

A care need can change from one day to the next, or from one hour to the next. An appointment can be moved. A care arrangement can fall through. A person's condition can deteriorate unexpectedly. An emergency can arise.

Yet working life is often organised around fixed schedules and assumptions that caring responsibilities can be planned in advance.

For many people, this creates an impossible balancing act.

When flexibility is not available, informal carers may have to reduce their working hours, turn down career opportunities, take unpaid leave or leave employment altogether. Over time, this can mean lower incomes, reduced social protection and pension rights, greater risks of poverty and social exclusion, and impacts on health and wellbeing.

Flexibility is not the solution to insufficient access to affordable high-quality long-term care services and respite care. It is one part of the puzzle of support for working carers.

People should not have to choose between caring for someone they love and earning a living.

Five days are not a care plan

The EU Work-Life Balance Directive introduced important rights for workers with caring responsibilities, including a minimum of five unpaid working days of carers' leave and the right to request flexible working arrangements.

These measures represent an important step forward.

But **five days cannot reflect the reality of ongoing, intensive or fluctuating care needs**. An unpaid right is an empty right.

The challenge is therefore not simply to provide more leave. It is to create working environments and social protection systems that can adapt to the reality of care.

Flexibility means having options

Flexibility is not a perk. For many working carers, it is what makes employment possible.

From rights on paper to flexibility in practice

We therefore call on European and national policymakers, employers and other stakeholders to ensure that people with caring responsibilities can genuinely combine work and care.

We call for:

1. Accessible and meaningful carers' leave
Leave arrangements should reflect the diversity and changing nature of caring responsibilities and should provide meaningful support to those who need it.

2. Greater flexibility at work
Flexible working should be accessible to people with caring responsibilities and adapted, where possible, to changing care needs.

3. Protection against economic insecurity
Caring should not push people into poverty, undermine their social protection or permanently damage their employment and pension prospects.

4. Supportive workplaces
Employers should be encouraged and supported to develop workplace cultures and practices that recognise caring responsibilities and enable employees to remain in work.

5. Recognition of informal carers
The contribution of informal carers to individuals, communities and Europe's care systems should be recognised and supported.

6. Flexible access to affordable high-quality long-term care services and respite care

Flexibility is not the solution to insufficient access to affordable high-quality long-term care services and respite care. It is one part of the puzzle of support for working carers. Services need to be flexible to the realities of carers.

Our message to Europe

Europe's care systems depend on millions of people providing care every day, often alongside paid employment.

We cannot expect informal carers to keep Europe's care systems running while asking them to fit unpredictable care responsibilities into inflexible working lives.

Care doesn't follow a schedule. Flexibility matters.

We call on European institutions, national governments, employers and all relevant stakeholders to make flexibility a reality for people who combine work and care.

Because everyone should be able to work, care and live, without being forced to choose.

SIGNING ORGANISATIONS

This statement is supported by organisations representing and working with people across Europe in the fields of disability, families, mental health, gender equality, ageing, and care.