



AGE Platform Europe Policy Statement

Carer's leave and reconciling work and family life for older workers

February 2016



EU agenda on work life balance: older workers need to balance care and work as well!

Our position in a nutshell

AGE Platform Europe (AGE) has responded to the 2016 European Commission's consultation on work-life balance, organised in view of possible legislative initiatives in this field. AGE strongly welcomes that the commission's plans on work-life balance include a reflection on a possible carer's leave directive, enabling reconciliation between work and care duties for family members in the whole life perspective, including for older workers.

AGE considers that there is room for social innovation in this field. Member states should address the increasing challenges that informal carers face to remain in employment in a context of shrinking or inadequate long-term care services, which place increasing responsibilities for the care of the dependent elderly back on to families. This impacts in particular on women aged 45-64 years who are withdrawing from the labour market to care for dependent parents and/or grandchildren in order to allow their younger family members to work.

AGE's response to the consultation also highlights the key aspects to make carer's leave relevant to people's life paths: it should be coupled with investments into supporting services for informal carers and formal care services and allow for employee-driven flexibility in employment relations. Finally, AGE highlights the contribution that grandparents can play for supporting their adult children in care and education.

Policy background

After removing the planned revision of the maternity leave directive in summer 2015, stuck in the legislative process since 2008, the Commission has come forward with a roadmap for a larger reflection on work-life balance for families and carers. The Commission might take legislative initiatives in the fields of maternity, paternity and parental leave and also included a possible proposal on leave for people with caring responsibilities for family members. Social partners also have a key role in introducing carer's leave schemes in collective agreements. The EU Commission has therefore conducted a consultation of social partners in December 2015 to enable them to come forward with negotiations on measures to reconcile work and family life.

Who cares?

In Europe, around 12% of men and 16% of women between 18 and 64 are caring for a family member in need for care at least once a week.¹ Among older workers (55-64), 18% of men and 22% of women provide care.² The majority of these are in employment, but about half of full-time informal carers and 30% of part-time carers are not. Employment rates especially of older women are dramatically low – 45.2% for women between 55 and 65 in the EU-28.³ Often, carers have no choice but to withdraw from the labour market to care for their family members and may be penalized for that not only in terms of lost professional income and career development but also in terms of lower pension entitlements and lost rights to social protection after the care period. In many EU countries, care services are all but affordable, accessible and available to all who need care – and the situation has been further aggravated since the economic crisis in 2008. In some countries, care services take over the heaviest and more specialised tasks of caring, but in most countries the bulk of dependent older people's care needs, such as emotional support and support in daily life activities, is still provided by family carers. As long as states do not play their role in providing comprehensive formal care, informal carers remain an invaluable source of care and promote inclusion of people with health limitations into societies.

What are the benefits of legal provisions on carer's leave?

Legal provisions for carer's leave can bring clear, positive benefits for both individuals providing informal care and those in need of care, as well as for society: working informal carers will no longer need to leave their job, and care costs linked to demographic ageing will remain more sustainable. However **legal provisions for carer's leave should not become a substitute to investment in formal care and other social services**, nor be perceived as a unique measure that would address all challenges faced by older workers with informal care duties. To be meaningful, carers and people in need of care have to be supported through coherent and comprehensive public policies and services. Properly designed, carers leave is good for:

- **Care recipients:** as they have regular contact with their families and can stay in their communities for longer, keeping them more active and ultimately healthier
- **Informal carers:** as they can continue to work and keep their income, are protected against dismissal and sickness, continue to build their pension and other social rights, including unemployment insurance and ideally can count on supportive services that

¹ Eurofound, [Working and caring: Reconciliation measures in times of demographic change](#), 2015.

² *Ibid.*

³ Eurostat 2014.

train them, provide them with a peer group and can provide respite care to avoid burnout.

- **Societies:** as carers continue to contribute with their experience, taxes and contributions; as people in need for care are not left alone by formal care services and their relatives, they live more healthily and thereby alleviate states' health budgets for care and as reconciliation of work and informal care promotes more inclusive societies for all ages and genders.

Carer's leave: what are we talking about?

To be successful, legal provisions for carer's leave need to encompass the following aspects:

- **Possibility to combine informal care and work:** just as parental leave, carer's leave should allow for flexibility to be taken on a part-time basis, so that the employment relationship can continue, carers can stay in the labour market and update their skills and can return to full employment when their care duties are less severe or care arrangements change.
- **Pay:** Carer's leave should be paid by the social security systems, as to adequately compensate for the loss of income of the informal carer. It should however not create incentives to withdraw from work – it should be always financially more interesting to combine informal care and work rather than stop paid employment. Yet income security should also be available to those carers who were not in employment prior to the caring situation, for example single mothers or jobseekers, as situations of care dependency can arise unexpectedly, and at any moment in people's lives. Financial compensation is crucial to make carer's leave also an interesting option for men and to promote gender equality in care provision.
- **Maintenance of social rights:** people who care for their family members should benefit from social rights just like any other worker: rights to unemployment benefits and health insurance cover should be maintained and, last but not least, pension rights should continue to be accumulated. The on-going shift from public pay-as-you-go pensions - which include such gender equality measures - to privately funded schemes, will reinforce the inequality between informal carers (i.e. mainly women) and non-carers.
- **Supporting services for carers:** Informal care is work, even if it is not remunerated as such. Therefore, services should be put in place to support informal carers. These range from personal and household as well as medical services in the own home to day-care

centres, trainings for informal carers, supportive relationships between social care, medical care and the family, care facilities that can allow informal carers to get respite care once in a while.

- **Comprehensive care systems:** legal right to carer's leave for informal carers should only be one of the measures taken with the aim to support dignity and wellbeing of older persons in need of care and assistance. Comprehensive policies including universal access to formal care, prevention and rehabilitation, integrated care, eHealth, age-friendly environments, quality control and monitoring, should also be envisaged to lower the burden on informal carers in a context of rapid demographic ageing.
- **Support for employers:** Employers might not know about the challenges of combining work and care. Information should be given on how reconciliation measures can actually improve productivity, building the understanding of employers and colleagues. Sometimes, a change of the duties and attributions of a worker might be necessary and even advisable – information should be provided to employers on how to negotiate these changes in a positive and sensible manner.

What are supportive services?

Social services are indispensable complements to carer's leave provisions. Indeed, leave schemes also bear the risk to entrench gender differences in the share of care responsibilities in the household: typically the spouse with a higher income, usually the man, has an incentive to increase his paid working time and the spouse with lower income, usually the woman, an incentive to step out of the labour market partly or entirely to provide care. The burden of care has to be bearable to be reconcilable with working life, therefore supporting services are essential. For better health outcomes, it is necessary that specialised medical tasks are carried out by doctors and nurses, while informal carers' role should be more concerned with activities of daily living in the household. Unfortunately, where services are unavailable, the family carer is often faced with tasks that go beyond his or her capacity – isolation and over-burdening is a common condition among carers⁴. Supportive services for informal carers should

- Accomplish the most specialised tasks of caring,
- Provide trainings to family carers to avoid common mistakes,

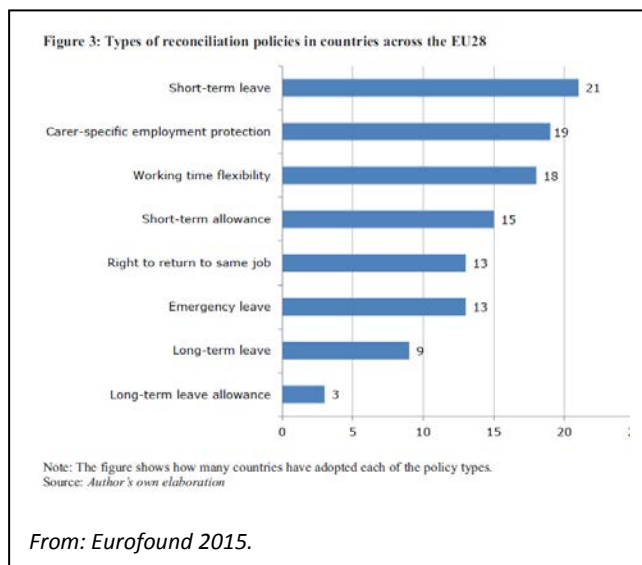
⁴ See Traintafillou *et al.* (2010) : *Informal care in the long-term care system*. Interlinks – Health systems and long-term care for older people in Europe. Modelling the interfaces and links between prevention, rehabilitation, quality of services and informal care. Athens/Vienna.

http://interlinks.euro.centre.org/sites/default/files/WP5_Overview_FINAL_04_11.pdf especially part 3.3

- Facilitate peer groups to exchange experiences,
- Provide the possibility for day-care and respite care to allow the informal carer to take breaks from his or her duties,
- Be affordable, of high quality and accessible.

These services require investments, especially in member states where they are absent so far. This is a shared responsibility of national, regional and local authorities. While European structural and investment funds can have a key role in directing investments into the establishment of supportive services, the bulk of the investment should come from national or local levels. Therefore, the monitoring of the availability of quality care infrastructure should be an integral part of the European Semester. Moreover, investments into care services should be considered as social investments and subsequently excluded from deficit calculations within the budgetary surveillance processes - this is crucial to ensure social investments are taken with a long-term view in mind.

What is the state of play of reconciliation policies?



Eurofound (2015) has analysed the leave systems with a view of long-term care responsibilities. Many EU countries already recognise family care duties as a ground for adapting working lives. A vast majority of them allow short-term leaves, often unpaid, for ‘imperious reasons’. These breaks can be used if a sudden accident requires time from family members to set up help structures for their disabled or injured family member. Employment protection is in place for most of these leave schemes. Working time flexibility is also relatively

prevalent in national legislations, existing in 18 countries. In some countries, long-term leaves exist (one year to a few years) and help in providing intensive care over a long period. Usually, employment is guaranteed after the break, but no financial compensation is granted. Only few member states have more elaborated carer’s leave schemes.



Childcare: the role of grandparents

Another issue concerning work-life balance is important for older persons: childcare. While the employment rate of women increases progressively also due to investments in child-care and appropriate parental leave schemes, 49 % of grandfathers and 58 % of grandmothers provide care for grandchildren.⁵ Grandparents can greatly help their own children to reconcile the founding of their family with the pursuit of their careers and thereby contribute to work-life balance. Many of these grandparents are still of working age.

Grand-parents' role should be acknowledged in parental leave schemes. If parental leave is granted per child and transferrable, on certain conditions, to other family members, the role of grandparents in helping raise children would be better recognised and would enable grandparents to reconcile care for grandchildren with their own employment.

To conclude...

Policies to promote a good work-life balance – that is to say, a successful reconciliation of competing demands from work and home – should assist all those on whom caring responsibilities largely fall, in juggling employment with the care of their dependents, just as childcare facilities in many counties are helping parents with young children to remain in employment.

⁵ Hank, K. and Buber, I., 'Grandparents Caring for their Grandchildren: Findings from the 2004 Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe'. In: *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 30(1) 2009, 53-73. Quoted in: Del Boca, D. et al., '[Early child care and child outcomes: the role of grandparents. Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study](#)'. In: *Families and Societies Working Paper Series*, 20, 2014. p. 3.