

Gender equality, the reconciliation of work and family life and fertility rates

A fertility rate of about 2.1 is needed for a population to remain stable according to Eurostat estimates. In 2017 Malta's rate stood at 1.26 births – the lowest in the EU 28 member states. The total fertility rate in the European Union stood at 1.59 births per woman. The data also showed that the average age of Maltese women giving birth stood at 30.5, an age which until 2013 was below 30.

Undoubtedly, many issues related to family responsibilities are taken into consideration by prospective parents, when it comes to family planning and to having children. Family formation influences women's and men's working lives differently, resulting in a decrease in women's earnings and an increase in men's. The Gender Equality Index points out that the gender gaps in earnings are wider for couples with children compared to couples without children across Europe. Such a financial penalty for women can lead to postponing having children until the family income is high enough. Improved work-life balance measures are thus crucial.

Managing a career and family responsibilities is particularly apt after spending several years investing in education and in career advancement. Hence, being financially stable and investing time in a career before starting a family can mean that childbearing is postponed until later in life. Very often, women, as well as men, are seeking to reconcile employment and parenthood through family-friendly measures and flexible working arrangements.

In light of this, measures that facilitate work-life balance play a major role. Leave packages which provide substantial and flexible options for families ensure that women and men can effectively cater for their families' needs soon after the birth of a child, enabling parents to adjust to the respective caring responsibilities. In addition, paid leaves minimise the financial burden incurred in place of the salary.

The current EU legislation for maternity leave provides a minimum of 14 weeks, of which 2 weeks are mandatory. In Malta the maternity leave is 18 weeks long with 100% of earnings for 14 weeks and 4 weeks flat rate. On the other hand, the paternal leave is regulated at the national level and varies across the Member States, with only 13 countries offering 2 weeks of well-paid paternity leave. In Malta, the paternal leave entitlement is minimal and varies according to the type of work, ranging from a minimum of one to five day paid leave. In addition, the parental leave directive grants a minimum of four months parental leave to all workers, women and men, in order to care for a child. Such leave is available in Malta without pay.

According to the Eurostat data, France has the highest fertility rate with 1.90 births per woman with the rate of women in the labour market standing at 67.2% (2017). In France, the maternity leave is 16 weeks with full pay, paternity leave entails two weeks of well-

paid leave - at least 66% of previous earnings, and parental leave is paid – flat rate and/or earnings earned - for more than 30 months.

Sweden, with the participation rate of women in the labour market standing at 79.8%, has the second highest fertility rate with 1.78 births. Swedish parents can avail themselves of 480 days of paid parental leave, 390 of which with nearly 80% of their normal pay. This makes Sweden a child-friendly system, with men in Sweden taking nearly a quarter of all parental leave.

Moreover, Sweden is the most gender-equal society among the EU28 Member States as per the Gender Equality Index 2017 published by EIGE. In effect, Sweden ranks first and France ranks fifth in this index which takes into account the gender gaps and different levels of achievement of gender equality in relation to work, money, knowledge, time, power and health. For instance, Sweden is one of the Member States with the most flexible workplaces whereby workers have the ability to take time off for personal or family matters. Sweden is also one of the Member States with the lowest gender gaps both in unpaid care for family members and in their engagement in cooking and housework.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) acknowledges the importance of gender equality and equal opportunities for women and men, particularly in relation to measures that balance career and family life. Moreover, strong family-effective structures support parents to continue in their employment whilst raising a family, as can be seen in the high participation rate of women in the labour market in both Sweden and France. NCPE welcomes the European Commission's directive on work-life balance for parents and carers that aims to strengthen the reconciliation of caring responsibilities with work and to promote equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men. The proposal which includes the introduction of paternity leave and carers' leave, strengthening parental leave and extending the existing right to request flexible working arrangements, will modernise the existing EU legal framework in this regard.

The current climate of low fertility rates is a pressing issue. First Vice-President Frans Timmermans, Commissioners Marianne Thyssen and Věra Jourová welcomed the agreement of the new work-life balance as *"fit for purpose in the 21st century will open up opportunities for working women and men to share caring responsibilities, for children and relatives, on an equal basis"*.

Gender equality not only at societal level, but also in the household and at work, can have an impact on family planning among other issues. A gender-equal society that fosters equal opportunities for women and men and the equal sharing of family responsibilities, as well as the provision of effective measures to support mothers and fathers in addressing their family needs following childbirth, can contribute to encourage

prospective parents and consequently to increase birth rates in countries with a low fertility rate such as Malta.