

International Day of families - Family responsibilities in relation to employment

“The European Pillar of Social Rights is about improving the daily lives of Europeans. Today’s provisional agreement makes this vision very concrete, giving families with working parents and carers a real choice on how to combine their work and family life.” This is what the First Vice-President Frans Timmermans, Commissioners Marianne Thyssen and Věra Jourová said when the European Parliament and the Council reached a provisional agreement on the proposal for the directive on work-life balance for parents and carers. This directive has been adopted.

Over the past few decades, we have seen a change in society, including in the composition of families and in the roles taken by family members including the increased participation of women in employment. In such a scenario work-life balance issues have become a necessity for workers to reconcile paid work and family responsibilities.

As today is the International Day of the Family, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) takes this opportunity to continue to raise awareness on the importance of work-life balance particularly through flexible working arrangements and family-friendly measures (FFMs) in the workplace as well as other support structures such as care services. In addition breaking down stereotypes tied to traditional gender roles in relation to care is also key to enhance work-life balance for both women and men at the workplace whilst opening up opportunities for all on an equal footing.

Family-friendly measures facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life by fostering adequacy of family resources and child development, facilitating parental choice about work and care, and promoting gender equality in employment opportunities. Family-friendly measures are also beneficial to employers as they contribute to strengthen the loyalty of employees with reduced staff turnover, show increased employee effort, management efficiency, increased co-operation among workers and less sick leave take-up. These were the findings of the final report from NCPE’s project *Living Equality*.

The new Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, introduces measures to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life for women and men. It proposes an introduction of paternity leave, as fathers will be entitled to take at least 10 working days of paternity leave around the time of birth of the child, compensated at least at the level of sick pay. It strengthens the existing right to four months of paid parental leave, with two months that cannot be transferred from one parent to another. This is an effective measure to highlight the importance of fathers in the sharing of family life particularly on the birth of a child. Also, it will give parents the right to request to take leave in a flexible way. For the first time it introduces five days carers’ leave for workers providing personal care or support to relatives or persons living in the same household.

These proposals will address the traditionally held view that only women can be the main carers in the family. In this context, NCPE carried out a set of initiatives to raise awareness

on the importance of men's role, on sharing family and domestic responsibilities and on the benefits of family-friendly measures in order to strive towards equal economic independence for women and men. During the Equality Beyond Gender Roles (EBGR) project's launch conference Minister Helena Dalli said *"We need to move away from a society where it is generally accepted that family-friendly measures are for women and where men are often looked down upon when they ask, according to their rights, to follow suit."* In fact, through the publication of posters, NCPE gave visibility to men who have made use of FFMs such as telework, parental leave and flexitime to take care of dependent family members.

Moreover, Chapter 456 of the Laws of Malta, the Equality for Men and Women Act, safeguards workers against discrimination due to family responsibilities. These provisions cover less favourable treatment at the workplace, experienced by workers, directly or indirectly, because of family responsibilities due to parenthood, or when caring for a dependent family member, or else for reasons of actual or potential pregnancy or childbirth. Therefore, parents and carers cannot be rejected for hire, passed over for promotion, demoted, harassed or have their employment terminated because of family responsibilities. Should such discrimination arise, NCPE may initiate investigations on receipt of a complaint.

The enjoyment of family-life is hardly possible without adequate work-life balance that caters for the needs of different family structures. Challenging stereotypical ideas on the roles of women and men in families, alongside the effective implementation of the work-life balance directive are thus crucial. A real choice on work-life balance for working parents and carers is key for the full enjoyment of family-life for all families. As Timmermans, Tyssen and Jourová said *"This is a huge step towards a more social Europe and shows the true spirit of the Pillar"*.