

International Day of Families - Achieving a work-life balance

Although families worldwide have significantly transformed in the past decades, families are still the most basic social unit upon which society is built. However, stereotypical views of women's and men's role in the family still persist. In fact, although an increasing number of women joined the labour market, they continued to carry the bulk of family responsibilities. The goal of achieving work-life balance particularly for women workers has become even more challenging.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the already existing gender inequalities in the distribution of unpaid household and caring responsibilities. A study carried out by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) between June and July 2020,¹ found that during the pandemic the increase in the number of hours spent doing household tasks and childcare increased more for women than for men, while the time spent on leisure, personal care and sleep decreased more for women than it did for men. In fact, there was a substantial 16% gap between female and male respondents reporting an increase in the time spent on home-schooling; 80.2% for females and 64.2% for males.

Care responsibilities vary during the life cycle, particularly caring for children and dependent adults. Social expectations rely on women to take on these caring roles. However, families are made up of both women and men and all genders should have the possibility to combine private and working responsibilities in an equal measure. This is the core of the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive² which will be transposed into Maltese law by August 2022.

This Directive, which entered into force on 1st August 2019, is key to supporting work-life balance for parents and carers through a much-needed modernisation of the existing EU legal framework covering family-related leaves and flexible working arrangements. It is envisaged that this reform will reduce the wide gap in unpaid care responsibilities between women and men and, consequently, address also the underrepresentation of women in the labour market. These new provisions will enable fathers or second parents to take at least 10 working days of paternity leave around the time of the birth of the child. Moreover, both parents will be entitled

¹https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Our_Publications_and_Resources/Research/The_COVID_19_pandemic_Research_on_the_distribution_of_work_in_households.pdf

²<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1311&langId=en>

to four months of paid parental leave, two of which will be non-transferable between the partners, thus incentivising men to make use of this leave. It introduces a five-day carers' leave for workers who provide personal care or support to a relative or person living in the same household. Carers and working parents will also have the right to request flexible working arrangements such as reduced hours and flextime.

EU Member States have three years to adopt laws and provisions to comply with the Directive. This development will encourage a better sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men in view that there it may counterbalance the much higher uptake of family-friendly measures by women when compared to their male counterparts. Indeed, in 2017 and 2018, in Malta, women in public administration were by far those who made most use of parental leave, teleworking, responsibility leave, adoption leave and reduced hours.³

As today is the International Day of Families, the NCPE takes this opportunity to continue to raise awareness on the importance of work-life balance for the well-being of all family members. During the past years, the NCPE has been promoting family-friendly measures such as telework to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life. The importance of this work has been highlighted with the on-going COVID-19 pandemic that demonstrated that teleworking can be an effective flexible working arrangement. Moving forward and taking into consideration the positive impact of remote working, the NCPE deems that such work-life balance measures should be strengthened and sustained to safeguard equal opportunities for women and men and promote their equal footing in their careers.

Furthermore, the NCPE assists employers in the drafting and formulation of equality policies besides providing training on equality and non-discrimination. To support this work, the NCPE awards its Equality Mark Certification to companies and entities committed to creating a work environment that fosters equality for everyone regardless of their gender and their caring responsibilities.

As the world is currently struggling to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, there is an opportunity to transform the way our societies function to foster greater equality for all including for family members. Taking a more progressive approach to work-life balance and equality between

³ NCPE Annual Report 2019, Correspondence with the People and Standards Division (P&SD), 12th February 2020



National Commission for the Promotion of Equality

women and men can lead to a truly gender-equal society that benefits from the abilities and experiences of its human resource for the well-being of all.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2295 7850 or equality@gov.mt or our Facebook page.

6th May 2021