



There is a way, but is there a will for work-life balance?

By Pierre Baussand, Director of Social Platform, the largest civil society alliance fighting for social justice in the EU.

Every day, thousands of families across the European Union face the struggle of balancing their professional and personal lives. The impact of poor work-life balance is felt most acutely by women and disadvantaged people. With approximately 70 percent of public sector workers being female, cuts to the sector have had a drastic effect on women's employment. In its 2015 roadmap 'New start to address the challenges of work-life balance faced by working families', the European Commission highlights that the EU employment rate of women is just 63.5 percent – far below the target set by the Europe 2020 Strategy. Considering poor female labour market participation and the gender pay gap, is it any wonder that women are more likely to experience poverty than men?

One of the key factors preventing families from enjoying work-life balance is the unavailability, inaccessibility and unaffordability of services. A lack of investment in care services has contributed to greater reliance on informal care for dependent family members. With 80 percent of these roles filled by women, the European Institute for Gender Equality pinpoints unequal sharing such responsibilities as the most problematic area in terms of gender equality in the EU.

While labour market participation and access to services may seem like two separate issues, they are intertwined; for example, the gender pay gap means women earn less than men, which could mean they struggle to afford formal care services, meaning they are pressured into taking up part-time or low-skilled work to provide informal care, negatively impacting their pension and preventing them from enjoying work-life balance throughout the whole life cycle. Work-life balance isn't the only victim – failure to capitalise on the role that women play in the labour market has a detrimental impact on the economy, too.

Despite this seemingly hopeless state of affairs, there are many actions that the EU and individual Member States can take to make work-life balance a reality.

The development of a coherent EU framework for all types of leave that promote adequate pay and the equal sharing of responsibility for dependents would enable women to enjoy more participation in the labour market. To address the gender pay gap, the EU could encourage Member States to raise the level of minimum wage progressively towards 60 percent of national median wage, and to implement the principle of 'equal pay for equal work'. Ensuring sufficient investment in high-quality services within European economic policies would result in less women being forced to choose between caring for dependent family members and pursuing a career, with the financial implications that both bring; the European Structural and Investment Funds and the upcoming European Pillar of Social Rights are just two EU instruments that could be used towards this end.

There are many options open to decision-makers, but what seems to be lacking is the political will to bring about change. I hope that the Commission's roadmap can shake off the spectre of the blocked Maternity Leave Directive and revitalise efforts to achieve work-life balance for all.