



Local & Regional  
Europe

# CEMR position paper on Work-Life Balance

| 13 June 2017

## Foreword

*“Work-life balance is a concept that has recently gained increasing attention in the European public debate. CEMR believes it is important to reinforce and develop instruments that support better work-life balance, such as flexible working arrangements, childcare services, and reference benchmarks. Work-life balance affects all workers equally and, thus, it should be regarded as an objective for both men and women. However, a better work-life balance can also lead to deeper integration of women in the labour market and is an important component of also gender equality policy. In this context, different kinds of leave play an important role in work-life balance and CEMR advocate that their arrangement should be left to Member States and local and regional governments. Similarly, local and regional governments – also in their role as social partners – should be more involved in the implementation of work-life balance measures at European and national level.”*

**David Simmonds**  
CEMR spokesperson on Local and regional governments as employers  
Deputy Leader of the London Borough of Hillingdon (LGA, UK)



*“Promoting equality between women and men in local life is an important area of work for CEMR and its member associations. In fact, the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, developed by CEMR and its members in 2006, outlines concrete actions that Local and Regional Governments can take in their role as employers to facilitate the reconciliation of private and professional life for both men and women. Additionally, the Charter emphasises the essential role that childcare services play in enabling employees to balance their private, professional and social responsibilities. Being the sphere closest to citizens and employing a significant number of individuals, Local and Regional Governments are strategically well-placed to enact measures to improve work-life balance. CEMR is convinced of the suitability and efficacy of benchmarks and peer learning as a means to achieve improved work-life balance in Europe, and by extension, equality between women and men.”*

**Ibon Uribe**  
CEMR Spokesperson on Equality  
Mayor of Galdakao, (Basque Country, Spain)



## INTRODUCTION

### *The European Charter of Equality*

Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) assume their responsibility to ensure equal opportunities, equal treatment and equal pay. Article 11 of the **European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life**<sup>1</sup>, launched by CEMR in 2006, states that signatory LRGs commit themselves to take measures to recognise the right to equality of women and men in regard to all aspects of employment. These measures include education, training and capacity building, access to the labour market, equal pay for equal work, career promotion, work organisation, healthy and safe working conditions, and the right to the reconciliation of professional, social and private life.

### *A global goal*

As mentioned by the fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls: “Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large”. It is important to have a holistic perspective and approach on women’s and men’s conditions in the labour market. We stress the importance of having public services and care services in place, that make an equal participation of women and men in the labour market possible and to encourage more equal sharing of care responsibilities for children and dependants between men and women. Education, job creation, and accessible care services are key to achieve this result and, thus, a better work-life balance for working parents.

### *The situation in Europe*

Women remain under-represented in EU labour markets. The current gender gap in employment in the EU stands at 10 percentage points<sup>2</sup> and barriers to balancing work and caring responsibilities are still prevalent in many EU countries. For these reasons, despite the fact that work-life balance concerns women and men equally, the main focus remains on women and gender equality policy. Women’s employment is indeed a major driver of economic growth and their under-representation is a missed opportunity to contribute to development and the achievement of the Europe 2020 strategy to raise the employment rate for women and men (aged 20-64) to 75% by 2020. Women are more likely to take on parenting responsibilities and are also more susceptible to risk of poverty and social exclusion. Despite improvements, equal pay remains an issue that still requires attention across industries and at all levels of government. Facilitating work-life balance is fundamental to help women to be economically independent; this benefits both employers, employees, and society in general.

CEMR responded to the consultations of the social partners at European level on possible action addressing the challenges of work-life balance faced by working parents and caregivers in 2016. In addition to that, we wish to express our views on this subject not only from a local and regional government employers’ perspective, but address it from a broader angle, also reflecting CEMR’s long standing work on gender equality.

## CEMR POSITION

CEMR supports better and correct implementation of existing legislation, supplemented by non-legislative means such as sharing of best practice, capacity-building measures, guidance for all levels of government and awareness-raising actions. Research indicates that implementation and enforcement of existing legislation is uneven across Member States. We advocate for objectives to be designed and developed in partnership with local and regional government and its partners.

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<sup>1</sup> European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life: <http://www.charter-equality.eu/>.

<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender\\_statistics#Labour\\_market](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender_statistics#Labour_market).

## 1. Labour market participation of women

We think the most important measures to **improve work-life balance and female labour market participation in Member States** are: better sharing of parental leave between men and women; provision of high-quality, affordable childcare; 'gender budgeting' as a part of a gender mainstreaming strategy; increasing women's economic independence; and offering suitable time and flexible working arrangements where possible to better reconcile private and work life. We note that part-time work has ramifications on later pension gaps that are relevant, as part-time increases the gender pension gap due to lower contributions during working life. Transparency in pay structures has been a positive factor in closing the gender pay gap.

Women have a high presence in the public sector. According to an OECD study, women represent 58.2% of employees in the public sector whereas, compared to the whole economy, women's employment corresponds to 45.3%.<sup>3</sup> *Inter alia* to counter the shortage of skilled workers, the public sector is a pioneer in several Member States as regards the provision of measures for a better work-life balance to attract and retain employees. Indeed, in many cases this factor contributes substantially to the decision to apply for a job in that sector.

## 2. EU level benchmarks

Member States might benefit from increased knowledge of their progress in implementing existing legislation. Benchmarks, which are developed jointly, step by step and on the basis of surveys on the status quo, would allow targeted actions in those areas where performance is weakest. We support EU efforts to have a better understanding of gender equality issues across Europe, the exchange of good practice and gender equality policies that cut across various levels of government.

## 3. Regular monitoring and public reporting

It would also be beneficial to monitor on a local and regional level and to assist local and regional governments to adapt their employment practices.<sup>4</sup> The publication of monitoring and survey results increases transparency and would be an effective non-legislative tool to encourage full and proper consideration of equal treatment. However, taking the bureaucratic burden into consideration, CEMR is against additional reporting obligations for the local or regional level. The existing reporting obligations (see e.g. Article 14 (4) Directive 92/85/EEC, Article 31 Directive 2006/54/EC) must be sufficiently flexible and as simple to conduct as possible. Further data collection and research by the Commission, in collaboration with the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), could look to identify root causes, consequences and associated factors in combating gender inequality in employment.

## 4. Flexible working arrangements

CEMR thinks that employers should give consideration to employees' requests to obtain flexible working arrangements, subject to refusal by the employer for operational or business reasons. Concerning the type of flexible working arrangements, the possibility to request a temporary reduction in working hours, and the eligibility conditions of the right, CEMR believes that it is essential to leave the definition of the most appropriate normative framework to Member States and social partners at European, national, regional and local level.

CEMR wishes to emphasise that it is necessary to have a comprehensive approach to work-life balance, including the possible impact that new technologies and digitalisation can have on work patterns. We advocate a wide use of telework and other arrangements that can favour a better work-life balance. A number of local and regional authorities already have flexible working arrangements in place and

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<sup>3</sup> OECD, *Government at a Glance 2015*, Chapter "Women in public sector employment", p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the CEMR Observatory supports the implementation of the [European Charter for Equality of Women and Men role in Local Life](#), including the development of action plans and monitoring progress.

undertake reform efforts to better support work-life balance among their workforce. We are supportive of flexible working options adapted to specific contexts, as controlled approaches to flexible working can offer many benefits in terms of employee retention and motivation.

## 5. Childcare services

CEMR believes that childcare services are key to improve work-life balance for both women and men, and to meet the 'Barcelona objectives' for the development of childcare facilities for young children in Europe. The European Commission declared that, by 2020, at least 90 % of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age should be provided with childcare.<sup>5</sup> In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to support public investments in Member States. A widespread and effective childcare system may have positive effects on the quality of citizens' life, for example by reducing informal care that is a burden often shouldered by women. CEMR calls for relevant proposals in the country specific recommendations in the relevant social policy part of the European Semester and adequate measures financed by the EU cohesion policy to respond to these needs.

## 6. Provisions for leave

### 6.1 Maternity leave

CEMR esteems that an extension of the current length of the maternity leave, as set in the Directive 92/85/EEC, in some cases might be counterproductive for the reintegration of women at work. Employers have a high interest in enabling women and giving them free choice to return to work at an early stage. Possible alternatives to a prolongation of maternity leave include: affordable, flexible childcare and other care services, a functioning infrastructure of breastfeeding times, relaxation rooms, telework, gender-neutral design of part-time work schemes, flexible work time models, and vocational training opportunities facilitating the return to work.

CEMR supports the existence of a period of dismissal protection and that no women should be dismissed due to her being pregnant or requesting leave. Further, and consistently with this position, we also support the right to written reasons for dismissal during the full period for which dismissal protection is provided as well as the entitlements for breastfeeding mothers in relation to breaks and facilities for breastfeeding.

### 6.2 Paternity leave

CEMR supports the principle of a paternity leave and considers that this measure would have a positive impact on work-life balance and gender equality in the labour market. We also point out the importance that the paternity leave – whatever may be the legislative framework recognising it – is conceived of as a non-transferable right for fathers.

### 6.3 Parental leave

Given the high differentiation existing among labour markets and social systems of EU Members States, CEMR members prefer to not express a unanimous position on this specific policy measure.

Some deem the existing EU legislation on parental leave appropriate; therefore, they oppose any changes to the relevant European legislation on parental leave that concern the length and the flexibility with which the permit can be taken (Directive 2010/18/EU).

Parental leave can contribute to gender equality. Yet, the take-up rates by fathers remains very low so far, which could be *inter alia* related to socio-cultural barriers (stereotypes) or to the fact that they earn on average more than the mothers as well as to taxation systems, which penalise second earners in some Member States.

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission, *Barcelona objectives*: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/130531\\_barcelona\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/130531_barcelona_en.pdf).

Further, CEMR believes that, despite the fact that the EU does not have competences on the definition of level of pay, it would be advisable to encourage the Member States to guarantee an adequate level of allowance, as already established by several national legislations in Member States. Moreover, it is fundamental to establish a longer non-transferable period to favour a more equal work-life balance between parents and facilitate the labour market integration of women.

#### **6.4 Carers' leave**

CEMR recognises the relevance of this issue that deeply affects many European families – especially due to the increasing ageing population – and the capacity of women to be integrated in the labour market, as they often assume the role of 'informal carers'. A coordinated action, i.e. through the European Semester, would be welcome, insofar as it leaves to Member States freedom for implementation according to the features of national labour markets.

#### **FINAL COMMENTS**

The importance of the social partners and social dialogue on the one hand, and of local and regional government on the other hand should be supported and also respected by the European Commission while preparing proposals on work-life balance and further approach.

Municipalities, county councils and regions as employers, service providers and clients of welfare services are essential for the social cohesion and employment in Europe. A strong participation of municipalities, county councils and regions, as well as of the social partners at national and local level, in both the development and implementation of work-life balance policies, is necessary to have real effect.

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## About CEMR

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) is the broadest organisation of local and regional authorities in Europe. Its members are over 50 national associations of municipalities and regions from 41 European countries. Together these associations represent some 150 000 local and regional authorities.

CEMR's objectives are twofold: to influence European legislation on behalf of local and regional authorities and to provide a platform for exchange between its member associations and their elected officials and experts.

Moreover, CEMR is the European section of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the worldwide organisation of local government.

[www.ccre.org](http://www.ccre.org)