

# **Work-Life Balance: Impacting on Women's Employment**

## **Report on a SAAGE Initiative Seminar held in Brussels on Tuesday 24th April 2018**



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## **Background**

The seminar sought to deepen the knowledge and understanding among relevant European Commission officials of the different work-life balance measures, individually and in combination, and their impact on women's employment. Specifically, it focused on exploring different leave arrangements and different flexible working arrangements in this regard.

The seminar was organised by the Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini (FGB) and the European Commission as part of the Scientific Analysis and Advice on Gender Equality (SAAGE) initiative. It was facilitated by Niall Crowley.

## **Opening**

Greet Vermeylen, Gender Equality, DG Justice and Consumers, opened the seminar. She presented the work-life balance package developed by the European Commission. This includes legislative and non-legislative measures to support work-life balance for working parents and carers. The Commission is in discussion with the Member States and with the Parliament on a proposal for a Directive on work-life balance.

Greet located this work in the wider context of European Commission initiatives on the gender pay gap (DG Justice and Consumers), on a framework for early childhood care and education (DG Education and Culture), and on the Pillar of Social Rights (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion).

## **Leave Arrangements**

### **Introduction**

Professor Alison Koslowski, Social Policy and Research Methods, University of Edinburgh, currently, Visiting Researcher at University of Stockholm, Co-coordinator of the Annual Review of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research, presented on the issue of leave arrangements in an interactive manner with the participants.

### **Interaction**

The problem is stark: the employment rate of women drops by half after having the first baby and never fully recovers, even after 30 years. It is good for children to have economically independent mothers who are attached to the labour market. Leaves can incentivise women's employment even before child birth, promote gender equality in caring work, enable staff retention, provide a form of employment protection, and reduce conflicts between work and family life. Leaves can enhance child development, reduce child poverty and improve family relationships.

Maternity leave usually targets mothers and is a health and welfare measure. Paternity leave targets fathers and is a gender equality measure in providing for immediate involvement of fathers in childcare. Parental leave targets fathers and mothers and is a care measure. The distinction between maternity, paternity and parental leave is beginning to blur in some countries, leading to the emergence of a single, generic parental leave entitlement. There is also leave to care for children who are ill (force majeure).

Looking across the Member States, there are a plethora of design options. It is recommended:

- ✓ Leave policies should be integrated with the system for childcare and early years education, with the end of well paid leave coinciding with entitlement to high quality affordable childcare.
- ✓ Leave should be well compensated, with 90% to 100% of earnings a hallmark of the best systems and 66% of earnings considered as well paid. This is particularly relevant for take-up by fathers.
- ✓ Leave should be an individual entitlement, or a substantial part of it. Family entitlements results in a high uptake by mothers but not by fathers and are associated with low levels of participation in employment by mothers.
- ✓ Parental leave should be around 52 to 78 weeks duration. This coincides with high levels of labour market participation by women, whereas longer leaves of 2 to 3 years coincide with a reduction in participation.
- ✓ Think carefully about flexibility of implementation as part-time leave can bring work-life balance difficulties, particularly for fathers. Gender equality aspect of leave is related to fathers being sole carers of children in infancy.
- ✓ Consult employees and aim for administrative simplicity. There are benefits for and challenges to employers.
- ✓ Fund through a national insurance system, collected through employers, and topped up from general taxation.

- ✓ Eligibility via stable employment may exclude many workers as work becomes more precarious. Leave is used disproportionately by those higher up the income distribution.

## **Flexible Working Arrangements**

### **Introduction**

Professor Suzan Lewis, Organisational Psychology, Middlesex University Business School and founding co-editor of the journal *Community, Work and Family*, presented on the issue of flexible working arrangements in an interactive manner with the participants.

### **Interaction**

There is much evidence that flexible working meets the needs of workers, families, and employers. The concepts of full-time work and of fixed working hours are arbitrary and are based on the gendered and outdated notion of the ideal worker. The sense of entitlement of people, what they feel entitled to, is gendered. It is a product of what is normative, what is feasible, and what compares with others.

Three strands of flexible working are evident, each with their own strengths and limitations:

- ✓ Part-time or reduced hours: Offers more opportunities for work-family balance and is often more efficient. This, however, is not always flexible or a matter of choice, often under-valued, has a gendered take up, and can be accompanied by work intensification.
- ✓ Teleworking, homeworking or remote working: Offers enhanced proximity to family and potential for increased productivity. There are issues of visibility, it is not always a matter of choice, and is often used in a gendered way.
- ✓ Flexitime, core hours or total flexible working: Offers work life balance and productivity. There are issues of visibility and is not possible in some areas. Total flexible working is based on goal setting and getting the work done rather than the hours worked. This is most supportive of combining paid work and care.

Regulation can change the sense of entitlement, but this can remain gendered. Implementation is therefore key. Deep-seated cultural change is needed in the organisation to challenge ideal worker assumptions and to ensure women's progression and career development. Implementation needs to be collaborative

and bottom-up. Flexibility can be pursued through dialogue and mutual adaptation. This is a long-term process.

Policy needs to be designed to address implementation in practice and culture change in organisations to support work life balance, women's employment and labour market progression.

### **Resources**

Blum, S., Koslowski, A. and Moss, P. (eds) (2017) *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2017*, Available at <http://www.leavenetwork.org>