Gender Equality as Investment: EU Work-Life Balance Measures and the Neoliberal Shift

AALS, Works-in-Progress Panel in EU Law
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See Red Women’s Workshop, UK, 1974
Working with text levels

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Source: EU Commission, Gender Equality Strategy, 2020-2025, May 2020

Women in the EU spend **22 hours** per week on care and household work, while men spend only **9 hours**.

44% of Europeans think that the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family. 43% think the most important role of a man is to earn money.

The difference between women's and men's employment rate in the EU is **11.6%**.

Only 55.3% of women born outside the EU are in employment, compared to 69.7% of women born in the EU.

Only 16% of Roma women are in paid employment in the EU.

Source: Eurostat, 2019

Source: EU Commission, Gender Equality Strategy, 2020-2025, May 2020
EU work-life balance directive (2019)

• 10 day paid paternity/second-parent leave (compensated at least at the level of sick pay)
• carer’s leave of 5 working days
• compensation for parental leave (‘adequate compensation’)
Why are EU work-life balance measures central to the neoliberal project?
A brief overview of the evolution of economic ideas

• In 2000
  • structural reforms of domestic labour policies and welfare systems
  • eliminating ‘rigidities’ in the labour market
  • attaining ‘fiscal sustainability’
  • investing in ‘human capital’

• In 2010
  • 2008/2009 the financial/sovereign debt crisis
  • increased surveillance of Member States’ labour & welfare policies through the European Semester
  • austerity measures
Retaining high-skilled women in the labour market & ensuring ‘fiscal sustainability’

1. INTRODUCTION

Across the European Union, women remain underrepresented in the labour market. The economic loss due to the gender employment gap amounts to €370 billion per year \(^1\). Women are increasingly well qualified and more women than men graduate from universities in Europe but many disappear from the labour market due to their responsibilities as parent or as carer of family relatives. Existing policies have not brought equal opportunities that allow fathers and mothers to work and care together for the welfare of children and society at large.

Taking action is not only a question of fairness, gender equality and optimal allocation of skills but also a question of countries' fiscal sustainability. It is both a social and an economic imperative.
Why do these measures entrench class divisions?

- investment in social capital discourse targets primarily highly-skilled workers
- low level of compensation for periods of leave
Feminism, substantive equality & neoliberalism

See Red, Women’s Workshop, Bite the Hand, UK, 1978