

European Union Introduction to Work-Life Balance

Work-life Balance (WLB) as an activity area of the European Union

Reconciliation of work and family life has been on the European agenda since the early 1990s. Since then, the European Commission and the Council of the European Union have increasingly acknowledged the issue of care, insisting on the need for European countries to enhance work-life reconciliation and allow parents to reconcile their paid and unpaid work (D'Andrea, 2022).

Work life Balance (WBL) means according to the European Pillar of Social Rights the following: “Parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services. Women and men shall have equal access to special leaves of absence to fulfil their caring responsibilities and be encouraged to use them in a balanced way” (European Commission, 2022, p. 45). This area of WLB-related activities is currently embedded within the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission and addressed by its different subordinate directives and legal frameworks (Filippi et al., 2021). The most relevant directive is the EU Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers that European Union Member States needed to implement by mid-2022. The directive aims to address women’s underrepresentation in employment and encourage a better sharing of care-giving responsibilities between women and men (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021). Additional European bodies are involved in providing measures and recommendations on WLB, e.g. the Council of the European Union, as they participate in enacting European legislation, the European Works Councils, or the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound). The European Works Council is an information and consultation body representing employees in European multinational companies. Here European employee representatives of a specific multinational and their management counterparts meet to discuss topics related to the progress of business and how it affects employment, working conditions and working



methods. Eurofound focuses on managing research, gathering information, and communicating its findings in the EU. Therefore, the agency provides survey data and information on the topic of healthy workplaces and WLB.

Policies / Research on the effects of WLB

As mentioned in the previous section, the European Commission works on the topic of WLB via the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, European efforts to promote more sustainable forms of WLB through improved policy support takes on even greater importance. Therefore, the European Commission provides legal measures (e.g. the European WBL Directive) to support member states in implementing awareness raising on the topic. This directive is primarily designed to address WLB challenges faced by working parents and carers to balance work and family requirements. The WLB Directive has the potential to improve the situations of family members of people with intellectual disabilities, and people with intellectual disabilities themselves, to better combine their work with their parental and/or caring responsibilities. The WBL Directive introduces, amongst other things, minimum standards for parental leave including paternity leave, carers leave, the right to flexible working arrangements for parents and carers, and safeguards against unfair dismissals (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021). The directive also introduces changes to the existing EU minimum parental leave requirements and new provisions on paternity leave, carers leave and flexible working arrangements to ensure a cultural shift towards equal distribution of care between men and women. However, implementing the WLB Directive across European countries varies. The most extensive national work-life policies can be found in the Netherlands, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Estonia. In the rest of the European countries so far, no draft law or only draft legislation is in place. Apart from legal frameworks, also different monitoring surveys give insights into WLB issues between European countries. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a European Union Agency, whose role is to provide knowledge to assist in the development of better social, employment and work-related policies. Eurofound conducts surveys such as



the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) which provides comparisons between countries on the reconciliation of work and family life, flexible working time arrangements and the provision of quality care services. The European Company Surveys (ECS) provide data on why and how companies make use of a broad variety of working time arrangements. The European Working Conditions Surveys (EWCS) look at the organisation of working time across the EU and issues related to it including flexible arrangements, working time preferences and work-life balance (Eurofound, 2022).

Apart from conducting surveys and legal frameworks in relation to WLB, the European Commission also provides competence frameworks addressing the topic of WLB, but in a broader sense by focusing on competences of self-regulation, critical thinking and personal wellbeing. The European competence framework for better lives LifeComp is a non-prescriptive conceptual framework, and it can be used as a basis for the development of curricula and formal and non-formal learning activities. Within this framework personal competences refer to the care of physical, mental, and social health, and the management of emotions, thoughts and behaviour (European Commission, 2020).

Initiatives

This section will focus on best practice examples of European countries in implementing projects or initiatives on equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men. Additionally, we present current results of work-life Balance Index surveys showing countries with good WLB indicators in a broader sense.

Best practice examples of EU member states are broad, here we will present three initiatives of Germany, Sweden and Italy. The city of Munich in Germany developed a project supporting women entrepreneurs to get into self-employment. In Sweden an initiative aims at making full-time jobs the norm for female care workers. In Italy a project aims to support employers and employees alike by considering the organisational needs of companies and the right to WLB of workers to make home-based childcare accessible to all.



The 'guide` project of the city of Munich in Germany

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| Logo | |
| Topic/ Area | Support women's life |
| Title | The "Guide" project |
| Type of Initiative | |
| Date released | |
| Partners/ network | European Social Fund |
| Description of the methods/ approach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women who are returning to the labour market after a break due to family responsibilities • Women over the age of 50 who want to be self-employed • Unemployed women who want to be self-employed • Women with a migration background who want to start a small business (European Commission, 2019). |
| Purpose/Aim | To support the specific needs and situations of individual women's lives, including their employment history, health, family commitments and personal interests. This practical approach helps guideadvisors to make a realistic assessment of how setting up a business will affect the individual entrepreneur's life. |

The Avesta Municipality of Sweden promotes full-time employment

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| Topic/ Area | Full-time Employment |



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| Title | Avesta Project |
| Type of Initiative | |
| Date released | 2011-2013 |
| Partners/ network | Avesta Municipality of Sweden & European Social Fund |
| Description of the methods/ approach | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• An annual check with employees regarding their desired percentage of part-time leave of absence• A timetabling method with employees responsible for timetabling at their workplace• The adoption of software to support this whereby each employee indicates their desired, individual timetable using Time Care software, followed by a collective process of negotiation to adjust individual's desired timetable into a functional whole• The creation of a pool of permanent care employees to act as stand-in (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022). |
| Purpose/Aim | <p>The Municipality of Avesta promoted a “full-time project” between 2011 and 2013, financed by the European Social Fund, and obtained good results with more than 90% of their employees now working full time. There is valuable learning from this initiative in terms of negotiating change, timetabling work, and managing increased demands on services. In 2011, the Municipality of Avesta started the project ‘100 procent stolt och kompetent’ (‘100% proud and competent’), and the administration decided to make all staff full-time employees by default. If necessary, workers had the option to notify the organisation each year if they needed to work part-time and indicate their desired percentage of leave. Suitable cover could then be arranged in advance thanks to a pool of stand-in workers. The project also introduced a new timetabling system whereby employees were given responsibility for their own schedules. This was helped by the adoption of IT-based software, which would</p> |



allow each employee to indicate their desired timetable and negotiate this with their employer.

The LaFemMe project in Italy for WLB and the participation of women in the labour market

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| Logo | |
| Topic/ Area | WORK LIFE BALANCE |
| Title | LaFemMe |
| Type of Initiative | Online Tools, Applications or Platform |
| Date released | 2011-2017 |
| Partners/ network | Italy's Ministry of Labour and Social Policy with support from the European Social Fund |
| Description of the methods/ approach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking measures to improve organisation, productivity, and flexibility within companies • Introducing corporate welfare measures to reduce the cost of care services and encouraging employers to offer welfare plans to staff • Improving maternity and paternity processes to help workers return to work • Encouraging company-level and territorial-level bargaining, improving industrial relations and supporting social partner participation • Disseminating know-how and best practice to raise awareness of work-life balance • Creating an online service portal to facilitate access to information and training (European Commission, 2019). |
| Purpose/Aim | To support employers and employees alike by considering the organisational needs of companies and the right to WLB of workers. The project held training courses and consultations for companies, social partners, and labour market operators (such as employment agencies) to help them support workers. |



Focusing on the topic of WLB from a broader employee perspective, it is also interesting to reveal some country-specific survey results of the OECD Better Life Index and the 2022 European Life-Work Index of the Remote company. According to the OECD Better Life Index important aspects of WLB are related to the amount of time a person spends at work, and this working time determines the time devoted to leisure and personal care. The best scored countries of the OECD Better Life Index are Italy, Denmark and Norway. Italy performs well across most of the well-being dimensions and is in comparison to other OECD countries on the average in health, work-life balance, and civic engagement. The average number of hours per day spent on leisure and personal care is 16.5 hours. In Denmark and Norway, the average number of hours per day spent on leisure and personal care is 15.7 hours (OECD, 2022).

The 2022 European Life-Work Index of a global company Remote is an index analysis highlighting European countries offering employees the best WLB through statutory rights and workplace benefits which allows their employees to develop in their personal lives alongside their careers (Remote, 2022). The three countries that achieved the highest scores out of the 2022 European Life-Work Index are Luxembourg, Spain, and Norway. Luxembourg performs well particularly regarding statutory maternity leave (100% of individual wage for 20 weeks), statutory annual leave (37 days). Spain has a universal government-funded healthcare system, and a significant minimum wage (the equivalent of 10.72 EUR/hr). Norway has employment laws reflecting strong WLB regulations, and a collective agreement among nine key industries that covers 70% of workers. The results reflect that WLB in the broader sense is interrelated with many aspects, including regulations related to parental leave, paternity leave, carers leave, and flexible working arrangements. Additionally, WLB in European countries is impacted among others by the number of days of annual leave, the healthcare system, regulations on the minimum wage, and collective labour agreements.

