

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA

FORUM OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF THE EEA EFTA STATES

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SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF THE EEA EFTA FORUM

Reykjavík
28-29 June 2018

Opinion on Equal Pay and Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers

Rapporteur: Sigrún Blöndal

The EEA EFTA Forum of Local and Regional Authorities (the Forum):

- A. Recognising that equality between women and men is a fundamental value of the EEA States, which is enshrined both in the Treaties of the European Union and in the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA Agreement);
- B. Noting the European Commission's Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU 26 April 2017;
- C. Noting the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on an initiative to support work-life balance for working parents and carers, COM/2017/0252;
- D. Noting the different proposals and initiatives presented by the European Commission on 26 April 2017 related to the European Pillar of Social Rights;
- E. Noting the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee EU Action plan 2017-2019 tackling the gender pay gap, COM/2017/0678 final;
- F. Noting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations and its focus on gender equality and women's empowerment;
- G. Having regard to the EEA EFTA Comment on possible action addressing the challenges of work-life balance faced by working parents and caregivers of 22 February 2016;
- H. Having regard to the Resolution and Report of the EEA Consultative Committee on Work-life balance in the EEA of 8 May 2018;
- I. Noting the reinforced subsidiarity principle set out in the Lisbon Treaty and its explicit reference to the local and regional dimension and self-government;
- J. Acknowledging the impact of European Union law and policy on local and regional authorities in the EEA EFTA States through the EEA Agreement;
- K. Noting the role of the Forum as a body in the EFTA structure:

1. Stresses the fundamental role of local and regional authorities in promoting work-life balance as service providers in fields such as education, child-care, elderly care, support for people with disabilities and social services in general. As employers, within the framework of the social dialogue, local and regional authorities can encourage fathers to take paternity and parental leave, allow flexible working hours, close the gender pay gap and combat stereotypes and change workplace culture;
2. Welcomes the Commission's initiatives to promote work-life balance as women are still underrepresented in the labour market despite high qualifications, their terms and conditions of employment are overall worse than men's as well as their career progression. Furthermore, the gender gap in earnings, social protection and pensions is still significant — with part-time work among women, due to unequal family and caring responsibilities, being an important explanatory factor;
3. Underlines that whilst equality between men and women is a fundamental goal, gender equality is also a vital factor and driver for economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness. Low female participation in the labour force means skills shortages, difficulties retaining workers, and lower productivity for businesses;
4. Stresses that work-life balance policies should be considered a social investment rather than only a cost. Against the backdrop of an ageing and shrinking population, and a rapidly changing world of work, policies to promote equal and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems are needed. Full female participation in the labour force, under equal conditions and supported with adequate childcare and social policies, are imperative for economic and social sustainability in Europe and to keep fertility rates from dropping further;
5. Highlights the importance of paid leave for both parents to counter gender stereotypes and unequal caring responsibilities and to enable both mothers and fathers to bond with their children from an early age;
6. Is of the view that deciding the level of compensation during leave is the competence of national authorities, including the social partners. Furthermore, challenges may arise from using sick pay as the basis for compensation as levels of sick pay vary greatly across Europe. Compensation at the level of sick leave could limit the take up of parental leave, especially by men, where the sick pay is markedly lower than the ordinary salary, while on the other hand it can entail excessive cost in some EEA EFTA countries where the sick leave compensation is the same as the ordinary salary;
7. Underlines that accessible, affordable and high-quality care facilities are fundamental for work-life balance and calls on the EEA EFTA States to improve care infrastructure and funding to provide such quality care services to families;

8. Is of the view that carers' leave can contribute to a better reconciliation of work and caring responsibilities and to improve talent retention, especially of women, in the labour market;
9. Highlights the importance of flexible working conditions to allow workers with caring responsibilities to reconcile them with full-time employment, and that the flexibility consider interests of both the employee and the employer;
10. Emphasises the need to extend the rights provided for in the proposal for a Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers to self-employed and atypical workers;
11. Underlines that working for gender equality is a shared task of European, national, regional and local authorities;
12. Welcomes better data collection and stresses the need for data collection at local and regional level to ensure effective, fitting and resource-efficient policies in this field;
13. Highlights that closing the gender pay gap is important for work-life balance and calls on the European Commission and the EEA States to consider the use of periodic equal pay certification based on an Equal Pay ISO Standard, as has been done in Iceland;
14. Instructs the Secretariat to forward this Opinion to the EFTA Standing Committee at Ministerial level.