

PRINCIPLE 9

Work-life balance

“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.”

– Principle 9 of the European Pillar of Social Rights



Work-life balance as a determinant of health

When work becomes an overwhelming part of life, it can put **additional time and emotional pressure on those with caring responsibilities** and become an unmanageable burden. Conflicts between work and family responsibilities may trigger stress, burn-out, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and overall mental health decline.

On the other hand, flexible and gender-sensitive working and leave arrangements with fair compensation promote workers' psychosocial health, productivity and job retention.³ Work and meaningful employment also plays a significant role in shaping identities, providing for quality of life and social status.

Combining work with care responsibilities

Measures to improve and protect the work-life balance help people across the social gradient. However, **parents and people with caring responsibilities that are from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most** from working arrangements that enable them to have more time to care for loved-ones.

The **impact of parenthood is particularly high**, with the employment rate of mothers with young children being more than 20 percentage points lower in several EU countries, compared to women without children.⁵ Single parents and families from disadvantaged backgrounds (migrants, low-income occupations, and education) are disproportionately affected.

But everyone - informal carers of elderly or chronically ill family members, low-income individuals for whom care is unaffordable or unavailable - **should be able to balance their work and life responsibilities without falling in poverty** due to missed income or increased spending on care. Too often, work is not a guarantee against poverty and social exclusion, with in-work poverty levels varying according to the levels of employment protection, active labour market policies, paid leave, childcare, and redistribution in the country.

Work-life balance in the health and care sector

Current developments around the health and care workforce provide an important case-in-point. **Employment conditions in this sector have long been challenging and suboptimal**, resulting in [critical shortages in care professionals in Europe](#).

Long before the skyrocketing demand for care, work arrangements in the sector were already challenging, with long and night shifts, rotation schedules, and weekend and statutory holiday work.

These **existing challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic**, which put further strain on the health and care sector and systems. As a result, working conditions in the sector have been described as “demotivating, failing to protect the physical and mental health of workers and allowing bias and gender- or ethnic based discrimination to flourish, with women clustered in lower-status jobs and being underrepresented in decision-making positions.”

Supportive work environments as determinants of health

Unfair working conditions and poorly designed workplace settings come at a **social, health as well as a fiscal cost**. Estimated expenditure on mental ill-health is at more than 4% of GDP in the EU. Adding indirect labour costs (lost productivity and employment) brings the loss to 6%. Inadequate support for equal sharing of parental and caring responsibilities between men and women creates a gender employment gap of about €370 billion per year.

Investments are needed to improve working conditions. **Adequate paid family leave, flexible working arrangements (including remote working), measures to support caring responsibilities and access to early childhood education and care are key policies** which contribute to a better work-life balance, reduced gender employment gap as well as better health and wellbeing.

Health-promoting approaches to improve working conditions improve quality of work, and thereby promote productivity and participation in the workforce, while reducing absenteeism.

Public health expertise can help put work-life balance principles and aspirations into practice, for instance by helping to align organisational planning, assessments, and social inclusion policies with the health needs of the workforce. They can provide a ‘roadmap’ for being proactive about improving physical and mental health, and wellbeing.

What does the EPSR Action Plan say?

The [EPSR Action Plan](#) sets out **five key goals** for EU Member States:

- ✓ The provision of formal early childhood education and care should be increased to ensure that at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 is in employment by 2030.
- ✓ Member States had to transpose the [Work-life balance Directive](#) by August 2022.
- ✓ Social partners should explore measures to ensure fair telework conditions and measures to ensure that all workers can effectively enjoy a right to disconnect.
- ✓ Public authorities and social partners should cooperate to protect the rights of mobile workers, including seasonal workers.
- ✓ Member States need to invest in health and care workforce, improving their working conditions and access to training.



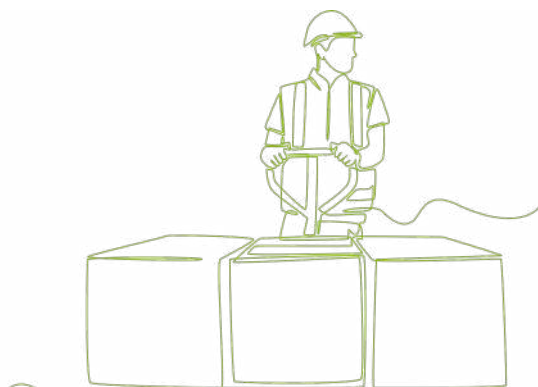
Where are we now?



The [Social Scoreboard](#) measures progress on the principles of the EPSR. Linked to the principle of childcare and support to children, the Scoreboard* outlines that in the EU:

- ⓧ The gender employment gap only decreased by 1 percentage point in the past 10 years (from 11.8 to 10.8).
- ⓧ The employment rate % of population aged 20-64 is at 73.1%.
- ⓧ The gender gap in part-time employment has decreased by 2.8 percentage points in the past 10 years (from 23.5 to 20.7).

* Latest figures - 2021



What are public health actors doing?

The following actions taken by public health actors at (sub) national level can support the implementation of this EPSR principle.

Czech Republic - Accessible and affordable nurseries in the workplace

The General University Hospital in Prague used European Social Funds (2012-2014) to [support employees who had babies or young children](#) by **founding its own affordable nursery** to accommodate their needs.

Priority for places was given to the children of nurses working at the hospital, who are considered the most disadvantaged group among health professionals.



Wales - The Healthy Working Wales Delivery Model

One of Public Health Wales's (PHW) objectives for 2030 is to **“have influenced main employers in Wales to create good work, maintain employment and invest in staff health and wellbeing.”** To this end, PHW developed the [Healthy Working Wales Delivery Model](#).

PHW also assessed the [health impact of 'home and agile working in Wales](#). The assessment demonstrated benefits for some population groups, but also exposed inequalities for others like women, those on low incomes, and care givers.



Austria - Gender-sensitive workplace health promotion

The Austrian Health Promotion Fund (FGÖ) developed **17 gender-relevant criteria and a 62-point checklist** to help employees implement [gender-sensitive workplace health promotion](#). This guidance draws in the gender perspective within health promotion efforts in the workplace, to meet the different needs of workers.



Germany - Flexible working arrangements across hospital settings

The Lutherhaus Protestant Hospital in Essen introduced a scheme of **50 different part-time models**, including:

- Qualified part-time employment (15–93% of full-time employment).
- Job-sharing, particularly for managerial functions.
- Coordination of duty rosters of couples across different departments.
- Establishment of time accounts (plus and minus hours).
- Flexible working hours with family-oriented core times.

The Medical University of Hannover provides **financial incentives for departments that encourage female doctors to return to work** following a year of parental leave.

Northwest Hospital Sanderbusch, Sande, is a member of the network “[Success Factor Family](#)” and **attracts qualified professionals to work in the remote area** in which it operates through its “family and children service department”. This department supports child-care solutions, including the option of working partly from home.



EU tools that help implement Principle 9

There are a range of other **policies and instruments at the EU level** that can help relevant actors in the field, including in public health, to work together to achieve EPSR Principle 9 on work-life balance.

More information about the EU institutions and programmes is available on EuroHealthNet’s Health Inequalities Portal.

More about the EPSR as a tool for regional and national action

The EPSR can therefore be a strategic tool to shed light on national or subnational priorities on childcare and support to children. It could in turn **highlight possible entry points for public health professionals** within existing initiatives and resources created as a result of other EU instruments and encourage strategic linkages between public health and non-health stakeholders.

In view of the already overstretched capacities of the health sector, the **EPSR could be an underpinning framework in promoting integrated approaches** - giving public health elevated importance in the sectors which deal with the social determinants of health and embedding the public health agenda in different fora.

The European Care Strategy

The [European Care Strategy](#) (communication adopted in September 2022) focuses on EU action to provide **high quality accessible and affordable care services for children and people in need of long-term care**, and to support decent working conditions for care workers.

For long-term care, policy measures include:

- Developing sustainable long-term care that ensures better and more affordable access to quality services.
- Ensuring adequate social protection for long-term care needs - investing in care services, the improvement of working conditions in the sector, an alleviation of the burden on informal carers.

Revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood care and education:

- Increase participation in affordable, accessible, and quality early childhood education and care, by revising the [Barcelona targets](#).



The Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025

The [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#) sets out a **vision, policy objectives and actions to make concrete progress on gender equality in Europe** and towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Measures include:

- Enforce pay transparency measures to ensure that women and men receive equal pay for the same work and for work of equal value.
- Transpose and implement EU-rules on work-life balance for women and men's work in practice and equal uptake of family leaves and flexible working arrangements.
- Invest in childcare services and implement the [EU Child Guarantee](#) to provide high quality and affordable services.
- Adopt EU-wide targets on gender balance in all work sectors, in corporate boards and in politics.

The Work-life balance Directive for parents and carers

The [Work-life balance Directive](#) (adopted in 2019) mandates a **more equal sharing of care responsibilities** by combatting gender stereotypes. As such it:

- Introduces paternity leave of at least 10 working days.
- Introduces an individual right to a minimum of 4 months of paid parental leave, and makes two out of the four months of parental leave non-transferrable between parents.
- Introduces carers' leave of 5 days/year for workers providing personal care.
- Extends the right of flexible working arrangements to all working parents of children up to at least 8 years old, and all carers.

Additional policy measures included in the Work-life balance Directive include:

- Protection against discrimination and dismissal for parents and carers.
- Encouraging a gender-balanced use of family-related leaves and flexible working arrangements.
- Improving provision of formal care services (childcare, out-of-school care and long-term care).
- Removing economic disincentives which prevent women from accessing the labour market or working full-time.
- Designing support measures for informal carers, such as counselling, psychological support, respite care, together with policies to formalise informal care.

The European Parliament resolution on Telework and the Right to Disconnect

The [European Parliament's resolution on telework and the Right to Disconnect](#) calls on the European Commission to adopt a legislation to **protect workers' right not to engage in work-related activities outside working time**, by means of electronic communication tools.

It should entitle workers to switch off work-related tools and not to respond to employers' requests outside working time, with no risk of adverse consequences.

The Directive on adequate minimum wages in the EU

The aim of the [Directive on adequate minimum wages](#) (October 2022) is to establish new EU rules that promote **adequate statutory minimum wages in EU Member States and help to improve working and living conditions**. This would equally apply to those within the care economy, who often face precarious conditions and/or limited financial support.

Available resources

Available EU funding

- [EU Funding explained](#) - A EuroHealthNet Briefing
- [EuroHealthNet's E-guide on Financing Health Promoting Services](#)

Contact points for further assistance

- [European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions](#) – (Eurofound) and its resources on Work-Life Balance
- [European Institute for Gender Equality](#) (EIGE)
- [COFACE Families Europe](#)

Technical resources

- EuroHealthNet's Policy Précis on [Gender Equality and Health](#)
- EuroHealthNet's Policy Précis on [Working Conditions, Health and Equity](#)
- EuroHealthNet's Policy Précis on [Reducing inequalities by investing in health-promoting care](#)
- EuroHealthNet's Policy Brief on [Protecting Older Workers from Psychosocial Risks: Strategies for a healthier workplace](#)
- EuroHealthNet Magazine article on '[Health Inclusive](#)', a project run by The Austrian Health Promotion Fund (FGÖ) to make health promotion inclusive for employees with disabilities
- The EU Alliance for Investing in Children position paper on the [European Care Strategy and Council recommendations on the revision of Barcelona targets and access to affordable high-quality long-term care](#)
- The OECD has published [Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality](#)



Have your say

Does your public health institute have any promising policies or practices in place that support the implementation of this EPSR principle? Send your thoughts to EuroHealthNet's Policy Assistant, Emilia Lindquist at e.lindquist@eurohealthnet.eu.

References and more flashcards

All EPSR flashcards are available at epsr-flashcards.eurohealthnet.eu. Scan the QR code to view more flashcards and to access the links to the references in this flashcard.



The European Pillar of Social Rights

Flashcard tool

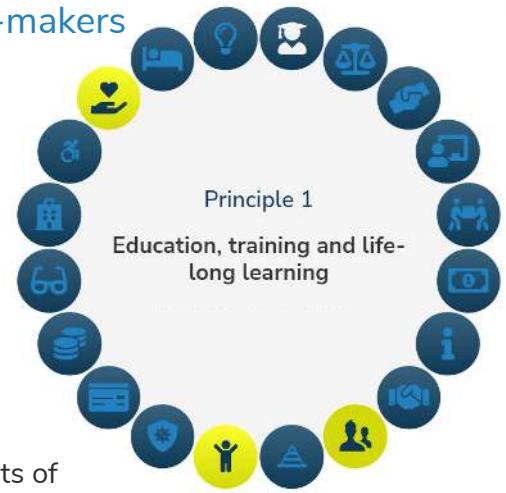
- A guide for public health professionals and decision-makers

What is the European Pillar of Social Rights?

The EPSR sets out 20 key principles, agreed upon by EU Member States, to **achieve sustainable and inclusive societies**.

The **EU Action Plan on the EPSR** sets out actions at European level to turn the principles in concrete actions. It also proposes headline targets for the EU to reach by 2030.

The EPSR sets the **aspiration and implementation priorities for a more social Europe for all**. A more social Europe paves the way for a healthier Europe. By addressing the underlying determinants of health, the European Pillar of Social Rights can be considered a **European Pillar for Health**.



About the EPSR flashcards

The flashcards are designed to **demonstrate how EPSR principles can contribute to achieving health and wellbeing**. Each flashcard explores a different principle and sets out what public health authorities across Europe are doing to help build progress.

Each flashcard sets out

- ✓ How the EPSR principle is relevant to public health
- ✓ Concrete goals set out by the EPSR Action Plan
- ✓ The EU tools available to implement the EPSR principle
- ✓ What European public health authorities across Europe are doing to implement the principle
- ✓ Available EU funding and contact points for further assistance

About EuroHealthNet

Building a healthier future for all by addressing the determinants of health and reducing inequalities.

EuroHealthNet is the Partnership of public health agencies and organisations building a healthier future for all by addressing the determinants of health and reducing inequalities. Our focus is on preventing disease and promoting good health by looking within and beyond the health system.

Structuring our work over a policy, a practice, and a research platform, we focus on exploring and strengthening the links between these areas.

Our approach focuses on integrated concepts to health, reducing health inequality gaps and gradients, working on determinants across the life course, whilst contributing to the sustainability and wellbeing of people and the planet.

To find out more about us, visit www.eurohealthnet.eu.



www.health-inequalities.eu

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