

# Equality between women and men in the European Union - 2011

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In 2002, the Barcelona European Council set objectives in regard to the **development of childcare facilities for young children in Europe with a view to sustainable and inclusive growth**: Member States were to remove disincentives to female labour force participation, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.

In 2008, a first review revealed that the demand for formal systems of childcare was far from being met, in particular for children under 3. It highlighted the high costs incurred by parents and the opening hours of facilities, which were incompatible with full-time work. Five years on, it can be seen in this second review undertaken by the European Commission that, despite a slight improvement, these challenges remain.

The report's main conclusions may be summarised as follows:

**A mixed picture:** more than 10 years after they were adopted, the Barcelona objectives have not been achieved by most Member States. Furthermore, the situation is deteriorating in several Member States. Significant improvements still need to be made to achieve a **satisfactory level of availability**, especially for children under 3. Also, the **cost of services** is still a significant obstacle for parents, as are **opening hours**, which are not always compatible with their occupational commitments. **Investment in quality education and care services that are universal and accessible to all must be continued**. This effort must be made largely at Member State level. The Commission is providing support on several fronts.

**The development of childcare services under supervision as part of the European Semester:** opening up access to the labour market and to employment for a second wage-earner from the household thanks to suitable tax incentives and the introduction of affordable, quality childcare services was identified as a priority in the [Annual Growth Survey](#). Nine Member States (AT, CZ, DE, HU, IT, MT, PL, SK, UK) have received a recommendation on the employment of women and on the availability of childcare services in 2012.

**The Structural Funds are an important lever:** in the 2007-2013 period, it is estimated that EUR 2.6 billion from the Structural Funds was allocated to actions aiming to promote the employment and sustainable participation of care services for dependants. In addition, around EUR 616 million from the European Development Fund was made available to Member States between 2007 and 2013 to finance childcare infrastructures. Almost all the Member States allocated resources to childcare services. However, the total expenditure varies enormously from one Member State to another depending on the budget available under the Structural Funds and the current state of provision of services.

In the report, the Commission undertakes to:

- continue to work with **social partners who play a key role in the area of work-life balance** in cooperation with the public authorities;
- strengthen **cooperation between its departments working on policies relevant to early childhood education and care (ECEC)**, such as justice, fundamental rights and citizenship, education and culture, employment, social policy, health, etc..

- continue to monitor the Barcelona objectives by helping the Member States to **develop their statistical capacity** by improving data collection and refining the way the use of childcare services is measured for the EU SILC survey, in particular by collecting comparable information on the barriers to these services (cost, unmet demand, etc.).
- continue to support the Member States:
  - whenever necessary, throughout the European Semesters, the Commission will continue to adopt specific recommendations calling on the Member States to achieve the Barcelona objectives and to **maintain public investment** despite the economic crisis;
  - when programming the European Funds, the Commission will work together with the Member States to make full use of the **cofinancing options** offered by the Structural Funds and other Community programmes such as 'Erasmus for all', including during the next programming period, for **developing ECEC services and services for other dependent people, staff training and improving service quality**.

The report points out that developing childcare services for pre-school children is not enough in itself to give women and men free choice of how to best achieve a work-life balance and it **does not take into account the difficulties faced at different stages in life**. The Commission must therefore act:

- by promoting a combination of measures to achieve a work-life balance consisting of flexible working methods, a family leave system and the availability of affordable, quality care services for pre-school children as well as for pre-adolescent children outside school hours and for other dependants;
- by also encouraging the Member States to remove barriers (including tax constraints) to occupational activity for women and to encourage fathers to take on more family responsibilities, for example by taking family leave in the same way as women.

This report reflects the Commission's own commitment, within the limits of its competences, to supporting the achievement of the Barcelona objectives and the development of affordable, accessible and quality childcare services in order to eliminate the obstacles to parents' participation in employment, to foster social inclusion and to promote equality of opportunity between women and men.