

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



WORKCARESYNERGIES

Social care and work-care balance (WP7)

Political Implications of WORKCARESYNERGIES, an EU-funded support action with the aim of disseminating research findings of previous EU Framework Programme projects in the field of work and care in the following seven EU countries: Austria, UK, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Italy and Portugal.

November 2011

INTRODUCTION

Creating local awareness for EU research findings on social care and work-care balance

The WCS project in Italy aimed at making the work-life balance issue part of the public discourse not only by starting from a “simple” - so to speak – involvement of local policy makers, but rather from a discussion with the people who are or will be in the near future **challenged by the issue**, which means workers – from the profit and non profit sector, and in this second case also their representatives – and youngsters, who in the future will probably have to face the challenges of balancing their work with their family lives and more generally their public and private lives. The research team, not being alone in this, found that a in-depth discussion on the theme could not be further postponed in Italy, not only since it is strongly linked to the quality-of-life issue of single citizens and communities, but also since it has a strong link to the growth of our country from an economic and social point of view.

Many researches in the last few years pointed out these aspects very well, by going deep into the reality of lives and by producing interesting results, international comparisons and good practices which are though not always **well known at local level**, while they could help local actors in effective decision making and in developing effective policies. We refer in particular to the Workcare, Soccare and Working and Mothering projects which were carried out in the last few years and represent the database upon which the WCS strategy in Italy has been built.

In Italy a total of 9 events were carried out (5 in secondary schools in Padua, Florence, Prato, Rome and Naples) – 2 in companies – Rome and Naples – 1 public event with NGO representatives – Florence June 11th, 2011 – and 1 public event with policy makers – Florence, November 7th, 2011 –. During them discussions were carried out on these themes and suggestions, opinions and

proposals were gathered.

The passion and interest participants demonstrated towards the issue reinforced the team's belief that the issue is not only relevant, but also strongly perceived as such and being able to have a strong impact upon personal and public lives of citizens at present and for the future. It was particularly satisfying to see also how policy makers and politicians accepted to face the challenge during the public event we especially designed for them and wanted to go beyond rhetoric to take up the relevant results the project produced as working materials for further reflection and the development of effective policies which can no longer be postponed in Italy.

Discussion findings and local relevance with local actors

Events in schools and in companies had a similar structure. Before the events **discussion papers especially made for students and for workers were given** out to the ones who were to participate in the discussions. Each event was then started by a brief description of the project and the **screening of the movie** "Everyday life stories: work-life balance strategies in the third millennium", which was especially made for the project. A discussion would follow for an average time of an hour or two, and it was conducted in the form of a **focus group**. Reactions to the stories from the movie, feelings, opinions and life stories as well as individual and family work-life balance strategies were collected. The team also tried to stimulate the coming out of proposals and suggestions for actions which could then be brought to the policy makers' public event, so that they could in some ways, symbolically receive them.

The NGO Public event had a similar structure (introduction and screening of the movie). Moreover, as a further stimulus for discussion, a brief summary of the results from events in schools was used alongside with an academic report on further researches conducted in Italy.

The policy makers public event not only included the screening of the movie but also an in-depth reporting of all previous activities (events in schools and in companies, NGO public event) in order to deliver policy makers all the materials for discussion.

Results of local discussions are better described further.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Gender differences among youngsters...

Boys and girls who participated in the discussions seem to clearly know that their future family experience will be influenced by **gender contracts** – some of them slightly renewed, the most quite traditional – somehow imposed to them from the society and which they only partially feel they fit in.

Family models have a great influence too, either in the form of the models created by parents or by the consumer society, while in some cases the responsibility of the male privilege is given especially to mothers.

The image of the male breadwinner is still widespread and therefore also the one of the woman staying at home with the children (and this is both true for boys and for girls, even if a little more for the first ones and with some territorial differences, in the sense that the model is much more present in the South rather than in the North, with also the paradox that women from the South who keep a distance from the model do so in a more radical way).

This implies also a **wider cultural distance** which can be seen in the South between boys and girls of the same age, at least from boys and some of the girls, even if are only special occasions, such as our discussions, which explicit it.

When we ask boys and girls if these models are binding to them, opinions differ, though, in the sense that some of the girls accept, especially in the South, to subordinate work to family, taken that there is enough time for their personal achievement before children come. Girls from the Center and the North are rarely keen to accept this trade-off, even because of the family models they grew up in.

...and in Third Sector representatives' perspective

Regarding the Third sector representatives' perspective on the theme, they often refer to a continuous engagement they have in projects directly or indirectly dealing with work-life balance. **They work a lot with students** and youngsters in general and the feedback they receive is very good, they are interested. Too often though these experiences are in danger to be interrupted - even where they produce positive results - by the lack of financing and a reduced possibility for the public sector to invest in this kind of projects.

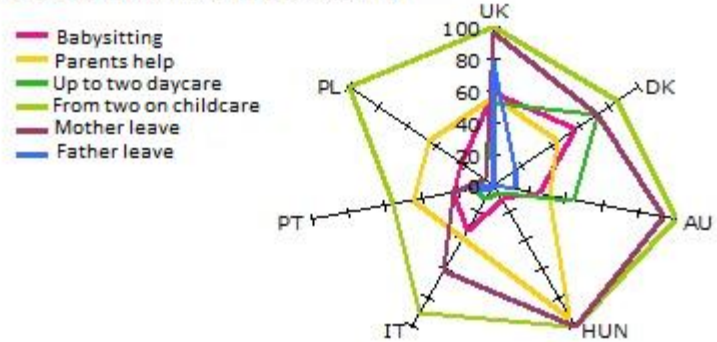
“New fathers” and “new mothers”

Putting themselves in the shoes of mothers and fathers, the juxtaposition related to gender roles becomes less heavy and the need for a better equality becomes more evident.

Facing the need to care for a child, a better equality is sought either in terms of sharing duties and roles, either in terms of the joy to be parents, often considering a great shift in fatherhood from the past.

Moreover, researches show how much behind Italy is respect to other European countries regarding caring facilities.

Countries differences in the use of:



From this point of view a great deal of **naivety** emerges in the sense that, even taking into account the present stereotypes, youngsters see in the future a great deal of opportunities, a possibility to negotiate solutions that everyone will seek on his or her own. This has especially to do with the education of children.

Facing this certainties given for granted, what strikes above all is that youngsters don't seem to perceive a real problem connected to work-life balance and they don't frame the question as **a matter of civil rights**.

The relationship youngsters have with the political system regarding work-life balance policies

It clearly emerges that an **anti-politics** point of view hides the real possibility to see a welfare system which could really help youngsters make the right choices in becoming parents.

What is really thought is that the State “cannot do much”, and even where it could make the difference, costs would be too high on citizens. The perception of a general indifference of politics and politicians for the real lives of citizens, which neither doesn't help in making work-life balance interventions to be perceived as a matter of civil rights, nor in creating a positive relation with local governors.

Work-life balance challenges are mainly related to time in workers' perspective

Workers mainly frame work-life balance as a problem linked to the “time” factor. Long hours and rigid schedules imposed by the working environment – especially where assembly lines are involved – are the first constraints workers have to face when in the need to solve family problems. **Part-time**, as well as schedule flexibility, can be seen as potential solutions, but they still are too hard to be put in place either because part-time in Italy is still too risky (once you get it, it is too often hard to go back to full time if you want to), either because schedule flexibility represents a **cost for the company** which is often a too heavy burden to carry if we are not talking small and informal adjustments workers put in place between themselves and for very short times, so that the impact on the company's productivity is very low. It is emphasized that in some cases, though, schedule flexibility, especially in starting and leaving work could even turn out to be an advantage for the company and not only a cost.

The lack of services directed to families within or near their working environment

Workers are well aware of the costs work-life balance services would represent for their companies, especially since they are **small and medium sized companies**, but the possibility to create common solutions, even between companies who insist on the same territory, could be explored, resulting in a benefit for everyone and more affordable costs. An important issue is then the one regarding the hard time workers have in synchronizing schedules, energies, even the intensity of duties between fathers and mothers, between husbands and wives. This is a very important dimension which opens up a not yet well explored scenario, at least at national research level, but which has a lot to do with the issue of quality rather than quantity of time. Working hours are not questioned, but rather the time that is everyday needed to go to work and to return home at night. When this swing takes a lot of time, it is considered to be something society could work on mainly by investing on public transport, even if everybody well knows how hard a time public transport is facing due to the lack of financing caused by the reduction in funding to local authorities.

Lack of information regarding work-life policies and related rights

The educational issue regarding work-life balance matters is frequent in the words of all the people participating in the events, since it is frequently underlined how crucial being well aware of the issue is for everyone – workers, employers and also students - and how important is to be able to recognize the advantages everyone can take from the existing laws and, in a more general sense, to be aware of the positive effects an improvement in the quality of work could have for workers in their private and working life. Making the **return from a maternal leave** lighter and less damaging on female workers – this aspect was well pointed out also by male workers – could for instance ease a potentially tense situation within the company.

Frail elderly people caregiving burdens awaiting workers

It is well known how much easier is to take a leave to care for a small child in respect to **take one to care for an old parent or relative**, but also how much this yet is - and more will be in the future - a challenge both for female and male workers.

The difficulty to overcome gender inequalities even if the “male breadwinner” has been model has been overcome

Linked to all this is also the fact that even expectations and good proposals couples make when they form step back when work-life balance tensions, mainly linked to the difficulty to deal with the sharing of domestic duties on a daily basis in couples where both work, emerge.

The role of employers

It is acknowledged employers can really make the difference, especially in small and medium sized companies, where they have often previously been employees, and therefore can better understand their workers' point of view. Lastly ,a **shared awareness** takes place that by implementing public services directed to families a raise in women's employment could take place resulting in a positive multiplying effect also at a national level, with an increase in income in the short a medium term.

The ability to build networks and to work on the edge for those who work on work-life balance issues

Mostly within the Third Sector, the awareness of the need and the opportunity to build cooperative networks between public and private bodies to build more effective interventions together– even on single local areas - is widespread and rooted.

Dealing with work-life balance (even reversed) on the workplace, daily, also by working on stereotypes

Evident is the ability Third Sector organizations have to “read” the feelings moving on territories, sometimes well before other bodies, and to start working on them, on the edges, so to speak. In saying this we refer to some experiences they have put in place to preserve some themes which are even not yet well taken into consideration by public bodies, such as the protection of maternity leaves for **self employed women** who are at risk of becoming even more precarious on the labour maker that the real “temps” are when we don't adequately take into account what having to deal with a maternity or a burdening caring activity really means for them. The dealing with other people's work-life balance issues by offering services (often care services, such as the ones directed to children or elderly people), thus allowing mothers and fathers, male and female workers to reach a better balance the different spheres of their lives is also strong in Third Sector Organizations daily life. They also deal with work-life balance issues within their organizations, often taking up a sort of “reversed work-life balance perspective” which allows them to safeguard male professionals in working environments where they are minority, such as educational services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

At European and national level

- ✧ A specific intervention on youngsters during the last years of secondary schooling is needed and it needs to be centred on the necessity to change the Italian society's developing model towards more gender equality and among generations and a better quality of life for all.
 - ✧ These interventions cannot be episodic but rather systematic and have to be carried out in collaboration with the teachers, who are the only ones who can bring to daily life the debate themes. Small financing to reward projects directly proposed by youngsters on work-life balance issues as well as public events to recognized them publicly and experiences abroad to visit other European countries to reward students who take up the challenge of facing the matter should also be put in place.
 - ✧ Good practices on work-life balance already exist within the Italian labour market, but they often are informal ones, based on the cooperation among colleagues and employees and employers. Those should be favoured and helped in emerging through economic support and de-taxation granted to employers who, especially in small and medium size companies, support them and allow them to become resources. This could be done even by coordinating them with other companies on the same territory, to overcome the fragmentation the experiences on the Italian law number 53/00 still too often face.
 - ✧ The assets in terms of experiences, projects, sometimes even small strategies which are put in place within families, within workplaces, on the services market investing on the culture of work-life balance are yet too fragmented, and therefore are not put in the condition to express themselves to potential and to spread and transfer good practices. Work-life balance is a mainstreaming issue, and this is the reason why it needs a re-qualification of the political action.
 - ✧ We cannot improve in wok-life balance without complex policies which really implement an enabling Welfare State. What seems to be a crucial issue is that a wide range of combinational possibilities between caring, leaves and part-time, informal ways of caregiving should be granted with a proper public recognition and protection. Everyone and every family needs to be able to combine all these means taking into account the real needs, while no technocratic solution can be considered to be sufficient to improve the country's quality of life and its economic and productive performance.
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PROJECT SETUP

Project Objectives

WORKCARESNERGIES was an EU-funded support action with the aim of disseminating research findings of previous EU Framework Programme projects in the field of work and care in the following seven EU countries: Austria, UK, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Italy and Portugal.

It “translated” (i.e. collect, summarize, make understandable and accessible) findings relevant for the local policy debate and addressed local NGOs, policy makers, trade unions, labour representatives, regional organizations and services, companies as well as other local actors and interested parties.

Local Team Objectives

Project Objectives in Italy

- To disseminate at local level and to specific audiences previous research results deriving from Framework Programme 5, 6 e 7 calls (documents and key messages) about social care and its relation to work-life balance
 - To disseminate at national and international level such results by periodic newsletter to be sent to selected and interested audiences
 - To transfer at local level and at European level the gathered knowledge
 - If possible to present main results to the European Parliament
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Purpose of Events

Disseminate and discuss results from previous research projects with local community, with the aim of producing an additional database and proposals to submit to the European Community.

PROJECT IDENTITY

Project

WORKCARESYNERGIES – Dissemination of Synthesized Framework Programme Research Findings

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Website	www.workcaresynergies.eu
For more information	Local events and materials, underlying FP research projects, short films, policy briefs, etc. can be found on the website , detailed information on “work-care tensions” in: http://workcaresynergies.eu/work-care-tensions/
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