

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## **WORKCARESYNERGIES** **Work-Life Balance (WP4)**

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, the UK, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Italy and Portugal.

December 2011

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Creating local awareness for EU research findings on Work-Life Balance**

Work-Life Balance (WLB) and the quality of life and work are currently the focus of much attention in research. Therefore, it has become important to communicate the central research findings and to make them accessible at the local level, especially those containing comparisons between countries and best-practice examples. These findings may represent a major point of reference for local NGOs, politicians, workers' unions, employees' representatives, regional organisations and people working in the service industries, as well as companies and the general public.

We present selected research findings on the topic of WLB over the life course from the following EU Framework Programme projects: Household, Work and Flexibility (2000-2003), WorkCare (2006-2009), EQUALSOC (2005-2010); WORKS (2005-2009), MULTILINKS (2008-2011), EUROFAMCARE (2003-2005). Moreover, current statistics on the situation in Austria have been compiled and prepared.

We held nine public local events and five specific seminars for students of Business, Economics and Social Sciences at the Vienna University of Economics and Business. The events focused on WLB from the perspective of both children and parents, on the influence of working conditions and the compatibility of employment and care obligations (adult care and assistance). Which patterns could be identified in different countries? How could these be explained? What are the characteristics of the situation in Austria? And, finally, which recommendations to politics and the economy may be deduced from this?

## Discussion of findings and their local relevance

In two local events, two thematically different films were screened: “**Work-Life Balance: Our Children’s Visions**” and “**In Certain Cases. Caring Relatives in Austria.**” The information given in the films was backed up with scientific findings, followed by lively discussions. Positive feedback by the participants showed that there is a large public interest in easy-to-understand, accessibly presented findings regarding complex issues, relating scientific results to everyday practical experience.

In the first and second event (a public workshop at the Vienna University of Economics and Business, as well as a discussion round at the Austrian National Bank), the focus was primarily on reconciling employment and childcare. The main point here was the question of how the demands of a “new” world of work with its opportunities and risks for WLB are changing.

Another key issue was the topic of employment and care obligations (third event). Care concerns all members of society, even those without children. Rising employment rates render it a socially and politically relevant topic, and require raised awareness on the part of companies.

Further events (e.g. political focus group, seminars for university students) jointly treated the issues of profession, childcare and elderly care. The workshops as well as the press releases yielded considerable public attention. The results were published in print media (an article in the weekly journal *Profil* and one in the newspaper *Salzburger Nachrichten*) and broadcast on the radio (several programmes on *Ö1*, *Radiokolleg*) and on TV (film and interview on *Bayern Alpha*).

The majority of the events took place in the capital Vienna. Apart from this, however, other events could be organised in the rural areas of Vorarlberg, and in the cities of Innsbruck and Feldkirch, all in close cooperation with the Interfaculty Platform Gender Studies at the University of Innsbruck (Tirol), the Austrian Chamber of Labour and the Trade Union. The discussions there centred on local contexts and interests.

In the concluding conference held at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna, the results of the WU team were summarized and discussed once more with partners from other countries and guests.

The following summary presents the main findings:

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

### Factors influencing Work-Life Balance

Reconciling employment and private life, or job and family is not simply a question of “summing up the best aspects of both worlds”. A satisfying whole, both in childcare and adult care, requires a number of preconditions:

All over Europe, **socioeconomic factors** play a similar role. However, countries differ in the area of historically grown **social values and norms**, as well as in their **political, legal and economic frameworks**. The resulting consequences for the organisation of care (childcare and elderly care) are outlined in the following for the specific case of Austria.

### Social values and norms: „Bad mothers and bad children”

Social values and norms are particularly traditional in Austria as compared to other cases: *„The expression bad mothers or bad children for those who do not care for their parents are indicative of our value system. The rather conservative attitude that mothers should remain at home caring for their children until they are six years old finds its counterpart in elderly care: it’s women’s work, and it goes without saying.”* **“We’re stumbling over our own feet with our predominant family norms.”** (quotes by experts participating in the focus group). However, changes in these norms regarding the traditional division of labour and the related everyday practices can be witnessed (e.g. the majority of Austrians - 80% - is convinced that “Men and women have the same right to jobs if there is a shortage of employment.” [European Social Survey 2004/05]). **The Austrian percentage of agreement to the right to employment for both sexes** follows the European trend, which represents a crucial finding in the face of the economic crisis.

### Unequal opportunities for a „successful WLB“

**Women are flexible for the family!**  
**Men are flexible for their jobs!**

The results clearly present the potential **gap between the ideal and reality**. The traditional division of labour between the sexes is largely regarded as outdated now, but still, realising an equal distribution of workloads and thereby raising the chances for a successful WLB are dependent on gender: Women are flexible regarding family life and are often required to adapt their lives and interests to the demands of childcare and elderly care. Men, on the other hand, are mainly flexible in their jobs (mobility) and career development.

The **order of priorities** in the areas of work and private life therefore differs for men and women, even if the job is given a prominent position by both. Apart from sex, also age, education and profession as well as regional and social origin and a potential migration background play a role. Furthermore, lifestyles, career plans and job wishes as well as job and working time offers also matter.

### Requests by working parents:

What do working parents most wish for to help them reconcile job and family life?

### Coordination of schedules, flexible working hours and high-quality crèches, kindergartens and after school care centres

Opening hours and holidays of the institutions concerned should be compatible with working hours (24-hour kindergarten, open on Saturday mornings, especially for people working in trade, where the majority of employees are women). Professional childcare should be **available, affordable and desirable**.

### Needs of children: Children like to play and eat together

The following quote from one of the events sums up the requests most frequently mentioned: *“Flexible hours, and, first of all, not having to be at the office at 8 o’clock sharp; to have broad coverage of kindergartens; the problem of opening times of after school care centres, that a mother with a child of 6 or 7 years practically can’t work in the afternoon because there is no option for childcare in institutions; that there should be a possibility of having lunch in after school care, children like to eat together.”* Professional care should not represent the second best option after private care, as it is traditionally the case in Austria, but offers special learning opportunities for children which they would not get in a private context. First of all, children need clear structures and reliability, and these are factors which can also be provided by institutions and professional educators. Moreover, children do not only learn from their parents, but to a great extent also from each other.

### Children receive an education in public institutions

### Why is it so difficult to realise area-wide, high-quality childcare in Austria?

*„It’s simply the cheapest option, on the short run, if women keep doing the care work for free – but it is definitely not sustainable.“* (expert in the focus group)

Childcare in families (with childcare allowance) is cheaper than the expansion of institutions. What also plays a role here are the costs, forasmuch as infrastructural measures once taken (buildings, educational institutions, staff etc.) are more difficult to roll back than transfer payments.

### Care is more than just work

Childcare is **not deemed a profitable sector of the economy and is not being exploited in this way**, even though positive effects could be achieved on the long run, e.g. equal opportunities between people of different social and ethnic origin. The additional free but compulsory year at pre-school kindergarten lately introduced in Austria largely yielded positive feedback in the discussion. It raises the opportunities of children from lower layers of society, especially those with a migration background and a mother tongue other than German.

Care cannot be considered work in the conventional sense of the word, as it is **not possible to estimate the effect of assistance and care only in the monetary sense**. It includes caring for somebody and taking care of someone, and not all of its aspects

can be professionalised and outsourced. There is a desire for care to be private in certain phases of the life course – remunerated or for free, depending on the larger financial situation and social legislation framework. Attitudes and values of individuals already mentioned play a role here, too. *“If the predominant attitude of a society towards care is that it is an economic branch of a certain value, the political reactions would also be different. Acknowledging the role of the family and of care and assistance as an economic factor would be crucial.”* (expert in the focus group)

### Caring relatives:

Which assistance do caring relatives require in order to better reconcile work and family life?

### Privatisation in elderly care is problematic

What is needed is **more support** for private care of adults and a **greater choice of (consultation-) centres** (ambulant care), and new innovative forms of living (e.g. as shown in the film “In Certain Cases” at the example of a multiple-generation house in Burgenland). Area-wide coverage is still lacking, probably as a result of federalism which produced a lot of differences, amongst others regarding the areas of responsibility of the Austrian provinces.

### „There is no outreach work like it exists in streetwork regarding assistance to relatives“

There are only few organisations offering psycho-social assistance to carers. Those involved in care work largely see the necessity for aid and assistance as **limited to those who are being cared for**. Few are convinced that *„it is o.k. for family carers to also accept assistance“* (expert in the focus group)

### Requirements in a new world of work

### WLB requires autonomous organisation of working time, a culture of short working hours and job security

Models for flexible working times could improve the chances to achieve a successful WLB, as long as they don't have to bow to the pressure for flexibility within companies (especially regarding last-minute overtime, which often causes time and energy-based conflicts). A **large amount of autonomy** at the workplace and regarding the organisation of working time could help to achieve a satisfying WLB. A **culture of long working hours** in combination with checks on attendance, on the other hand, hinders the chances to WLB. Especially the Scandinavian countries provide best-practice examples for comparably short full-time employment, *“actually sticking to the closing times of 5.30 or 6 p.m. In Austria, people who do not work overtime still get strange looks; it is considered a lack of concern for the company.”* (expert at the focus group). **Job security** also contributes to a relaxed relation between work and private life, whereas insecure contracts cause stress and shortage of time.

### The transition from time to target control requires new boundaries between work and private life

The current transition from time to target control intensifies the **“dissolution of boundaries between work and private life”**, carrying the risk of self-exploitation and absorption by the job. Higher qualifications can't prevent time conflicts, to the contrary: the higher people are situated on the career ladder, the greater the risk of experiencing a WLB conflict.

**Values and norms influence politics, and vice versa**

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Offers made and measures taken should mirror the **variety of individual needs and desires according to life stages** (diversity). Values and norms don't change overnight, and changes in structural offers (e.g. high-quality kindergartens and organic, sustainably produced food) may trigger a gradual change in the attitudes towards care, so more and more people might start to question the dominant model of private, predominantly female elderly care and consider alternatives. This also regards childcare, which is still mainly provided by mothers, fathers and grandparents (mostly grandmothers).

Values and norms do not influence institutions in a certain determined way. It is rather a **process of mutual accommodation**. Therefore, politics neither can nor should use the traditional values of a certain society regarding childcare and elderly care as an excuse. The potential of changing values through adequate infrastructural measures and actions for reducing inequality on the job market should be exploited. Until the present day, the comparably generous transfer payments for childcare in Austria often trigger a female exit from the job market for the duration of a few years. Even highly qualified women leave their jobs in order to care for their children. Among the long-term consequences this entails feature difficulties to re-enter the job market, lower qualified part-time employment as a frequent reconciliation strategy, and a lack of security both in financial terms and in terms of the social legislation (especially in retirement).

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY-MAKERS

### On a national and European political level

- **Models for certain stages of life** which support the reconcilability of work and family life should be promoted. The quality of part-time work has to improve, and it should not be limited to economic sectors in which women predominate. To date, part-time work signifies lower payment and job insecurity, as well as short-term disadvantages before social law (in the case of unemployment or illness and in retirement). Rather, part-timing should become a transitional phase in the lives of **women and men**. A right to return to full-time employment, that is, to independently and individually secure one's livelihood, would be reasonable.
- **Short full-time employment, less extra hours and a transformation of the working-time culture** in companies, as well as **more secure contracts** should be promoted.
- **Care** (childcare; care of and assistance to care recipients) should be perceived as an important **economic factor** (an expansion of institutions could bring about social trade-offs between the layers of society, in contrast to transfer payments and tax concessions). Campaigns promoting professional institutions and affirming their quality as well as encouraging public responsibility can only benefit all parties involved on the long run and could increase the choice between public offers and private responsibility.
- Standardising and stabilising claims, minimum requirements and norms are preconditions for offering **high-quality options in the area of (child)care and assistance**. Therefore, scientific studies, continuous assessment evaluating the measures taken, and quality control of the institutions would be recommendable. However, the question remains whether conflicts between public institutions and non-profit organisations as compared to private companies exist.
- Promoting **quality** (e.g. also through targeted campaigns) could at the same time **build trust** in institutional care on part of the population. Continued education and trainings of professional care and assistance staff are not only a necessary part of securing quality but could also generate employment and create opportunities for career advancement in the area of social work.
- The payment in this dramatically underpaid segment of the job market should also feature as a compulsory point on the discussion agenda. **Low payment** for all jobs in the area of caring work belongs to the reasons for which fewer men decide to enter this profession.
- On the side of demand for social services, **access** should have a **low threshold** and be **affordable and flexible**. On the long run, these measures could contribute to a **change of mind regarding traditional role expectations towards men and women**.
- The topic of childcare and care should be campaigned in order to raise **public awareness** for it. We require more studies on the issues and problem-solving strategies in the triangle relationship between child – parents – educators or care

recipient – relatives – professional carer/assistant. Standards for working (time) conditions and the payment of caring and assistance staff and educators should be set. Assistance and care have to be distinguished; even if in practice, the border is not always clear-cut. Appropriate rules should take into account the similarities and differences between the two and facilitate a flexible handling of the situation according to each case.

- In general, the social and economic **value of unremunerated work** could be rendered more visible, for example in the form of public campaigns, awareness-raising activities and the discussion of a “gender budgeting”, which is a term for statistics on the contribution of unpaid work to the total economic output.
- **More reliable data and studies, and both in larger numbers** are necessary. On a national as well as on the European level, the possibility of comparing care situations is not being exploited sufficiently. What is desperately needed are national studies on the situation in Austria and official statistics (one step into this direction has been taken with the new legislation on the care fund). The **rating for attendance allowance** could contribute substantially to surveying the facts. More information is needed on regional differences in care, on who cares, for how long and under which conditions, on changes in demand, the quality of the organisation of care and the measures that are required to improve the situation.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Project aims

WORKCARE SYNERGIES is an EU-Project (*Support Action*) with the aim of disseminating and discussing research findings of previous EU Framework Programme projects in the field of work-care. As a central part of this project, dissemination events are organised by local key mediator teams in seven countries (Austria, UK, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Portugal). For more information on the project and related events, please visit our website: [www.workcaresynergies.eu](http://www.workcaresynergies.eu)

WORKCARE SYNERIGES centres on the idea of information transfer – to make existing research findings available to local agents and other interested parties.

The public events were addressed to local NGOs, politicians, trade unions, labour representatives, regional organisations and services, companies and other interested parties.

The events featured presentations of selected results on the topic of WLB during times of childcare or elderly care and assistance, and stimulated discussions on the relevance of these findings in local contexts.

Two short documentaries (on the visions of children and the situation of family carers) were shown at the beginning of the event and can be viewed on the project homepage.

### Aims of the local team

**What?** The team at the WU prepared research findings from EU projects and stimulated the discussion on a local level. The topics addressed include:

Topic 1: Work-Life Balance: employment and childcare  
Topic 2: Caring relatives: reconciling job and care

**Why?** To support decision makers in the following points:

1. Improving the conditions for parents and carers regarding the reconciliation of employment and family life
2. Considering the respective needs during certain stages in the life course. Learning from the differences between and similarities of assistance and care.
3. Understanding the influence of current conditions on WLB in the new world of work and thus contributing to a greater variety of options and sustainable measures on part of politics and companies.

### Aim of the events

Key outcomes of the discussions should be communicated to EU bodies in the form of recommendations.

## PROJECT FRAMEWORK

<b>Project</b>	<b>WORKCARESYNERGIES</b> – Dissemination of Synthesized Framework Programme Research Findings
<b>Coordinators</b>	<b>Dr. Michaela Gstrein</b> , gstrein@ihs.ac.at <b>Dr. Liliana Mateeva</b> , mateeva@ihs.ac.at Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), Austria
<b>Consortium</b>	<b>Prof. Claire Wallace</b> , University of Aberdeen (UNIABDN), Scotland <b>Prof. Thomas Boje</b> and <b>Dr. Anders Ejrnaes</b> Roskilde University (UNIRUC), Denmark <b>PD. Mag. Dr. Barbara Haas</b> Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU Wien), Austria <b>Dr. András Gábos</b> and <b>Prof. Endre Sik</b> TARKI Social Research Institute (TARKI), Hungary <b>Prof. Renata Siemienska</b> , University of Warsaw (UWAR), Poland <b>Prof. Rossana Trifiletti</b> , University of Florence (UNIFI), Italy <b>Prof. Analia Torres</b> , CIES-ISCTE (CIES-ISCTE), Portugal <b>Prof. Jacqueline O'Reilly</b> , University of Brighton (UoB), UK
<b>EC contact</b>	<b>Monica Menapace</b> and <b>Marc Goffart</b> , DG Research and Innovation monica.menapace@ec.europa.eu; marc.goffart@ec.europa.eu
<b>Duration</b>	January 2010 – December 2011
<b>Funding scheme</b>	Seventh Framework Programme Theme 8, Socio-economic sciences and humanities (SSH), 8.1 Measures to support dissemination of research results
<b>Budget</b>	EUR 600.000
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.workcaresynergies.eu">www.workcaresynergies.eu</a>
<b>For more information</b>	Local events and materials, information about underlying FP research projects, short films, policy briefs, etc. can be found on the <b>website</b> : <a href="http://workcaresynergies.eu/work-life-balance/">http://workcaresynergies.eu/work-life-balance/</a>
<b>Local contact</b>	<b>PD. Mag. Dr. Barbara Haas</b> , barbara.haas@wu.ac.at <b>Mag. Dr. Nadia Steiber</b> , nadia.steiber@eui.eu <b>Mag. Anita Gritsch</b> , anita.gritsch@gmail.com