

How are workplace changes affecting work-life balance, and gender and generational divides? *Elizabeth Gosme, Director, COFACE - Families Europe*

(10 minutes)

The whole nature and understanding of “workplaces” is indeed in transition, as we undergo a kind of forced global workplace experiment, with major consequences for work-life balance, and gender and generational divides.

1. Health impact on families and children (based on evidence collected over the last months)

-The combination of teleworking and school closures means that parents who can telework are confined at home, trying to balance work, parenting, care and schooling, and are under increasing pressure with further consequences for the mental health of both children and adults. In many cases this results in a shift from work-life balance to work-life *integration*.

-Care service closure is leading to a mix of temporary unemployment for staff, digitalization of services and major changes in working conditions, and families with members with disabilities have been hugely affected by interruptions in care and support, meaning far more hours of informal care and unpaid work needed by families.

-Large families and one-parent families are suffering additional burden during confinements due to the nature of their household (e.g. large families have suffered overcrowding and seen reduced access to goods, as well as insufficient digital tools for all children in one family to continue their schooling adequately; and one-parent families cannot leave home without their children for shopping or other needs, and we're receiving reports of an increasing number of one-parent families living with no income due to job loss;

-For the families unable to telework or parents/carers needed in key sectors to face the COVID-19 crisis like public health, manufacturing, transport, food systems, there is urgent need for basic quality childcare and other forms of care, to enable them to continue working;

-We have received reports of job losses especially affecting women. The number of unemployed and threatened with homelessness is on the rise.

General message: Families are adapting as best they can, but the damage to their mental and physical health is already being felt, as reported by different family support services in the COFACE network.

2. Work, care and gender: some key trends and solutions

-We have received reports of parents (especially mothers) forced to leave their jobs in order to care for their children. This means labour market inclusion schemes for women are becoming even more essential, and must be central to implementing key principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights on gender equality, work-life balance, minimum income. **We hope the Commission will include clear measures to address this in the upcoming Social Pillar action plan early 2021, also ensuring that policies beyond the social field respect these social rights (economic policy, digital policy, education, and more).**

- There is a direct link between the unequal division of unpaid care in households and gender inequalities in the labour market. The bulk of unpaid care work in Europe is done by women (as highlighted by Eurofound and EIGE data), and this already hinders access to employment for women. COVID has magnified this gender inequality, this gender care gap. The German Presidency has made strong recommendations on how to address this (adopted just yesterday in informal EPSCO Council) including taking steps to facilitate the equal take-up of parental leave by women and men, in accordance with **the EU Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers**.

-We have received reports from family carers in our network (mostly women), who have felt completely forgotten and invisible during this crisis. We urgently need to increase the availability, affordability and quality of care services for children, older people and people with disabilities by promoting large-scale investments in the care sector. As indicated in our recently published COFACE brief on the changing face of work and family life under COVID: extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures to boost investment in social and healthcare services to support families. In fact, the European Parliament has just adopted a report on reversing demographic trends, which includes a recommendation for **a European framework directive on long-term care. Useful to develop minimum standards of support for both informal carers and professional carers.**

General message: the political will is there, but we need to ensure the measures reach families in vulnerable solutions as soon as possible through earmarking of budgets, mechanisms to make their access to support automatic, partnerships with civil society organisations, and more.