

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Developing services to the family to increase employment rates and promote gender equality at work

(own-initiative opinion)

(2015/C 012/03)

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On 26 February 2014, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on

Developing services to the family to increase employment rates and promote gender equality at work

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 30 September 2014.

At its 502nd plenary session, held on 15 and 16 October 2014 (meeting of 16 October), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 141 votes to 17, with 16 abstentions.

1. Recommendations

1.1 to the European Union, to:

- promote the exchange of best practice and disseminate statistics
- produce a set of recommendations for the social partners based on a gender-neutral comparison of jobs
- institute a prize for business innovation in services to the family
- promote social innovation in developing services to the family, regardless of the form these services take.

1.2 to the Member States, to:

- ratify ILO Convention 189
- legalise undeclared work by means of fiscal aid measures and simple declaration schemes to make family work a job like any other
- combat stereotypes to ensure that care work and household tasks are seen as activities for both men and women
- establish a general framework to encourage the emergence and development of a professionalised sector for services to the family, in accordance with the specific features and cultural practices of each Member State
- eliminate the legal barriers that are currently significantly reducing the declared, direct employment of employees by families.

1.3 to the social partners, to:

- recognise diplomas and certificates of qualifications, including accreditation of skills gained through experience during employment in private family homes

- negotiate collective agreements and job classification tables that take account of all skills, including those relating to psychology and relationships.

1.3.1 to business, to:

- set up companies and cooperatives to provide services to families and the status of employee to workers.

1.3.2 to unions, employers' organisations and works councils, to:

- promote the image of services to the family and upgrade jobs in this field
- promote training for those involved and certification of the skills acquired
- work towards setting up structures to bring services to the family together and organise them, while respecting traditions and differences between countries
- organise domestic worker and employer representation
- call, as one of the measures to promote professional equality, for services which create jobs and negotiate a financial contribution from businesses in order to promote a better work-life balance for all.

2. Background

2.1 This opinion deals only with services and jobs in private family homes, and not with all services (such as nurseries, retirement homes, school canteens, after-school childcare, etc.). Developing and professionalising domestic work is of strategic importance to achieving equality at work, because it is mainly women who carry out such work and who need childcare services, care for the elderly and home-cleaning in order to reach an equal footing with men in their career. These services benefit not only individuals, but also society as a whole. They create new jobs, meet the needs of an ageing society and help people reconcile their private and professional lives. They improve quality of life and social inclusion and make it easier for the elderly to remain in their own homes.

2.2 With regard to services to the family, however, three main areas need to be distinguished: home-cleaning, childcare and care for the ill, those with severe disability and the elderly. It is important to distinguish between these areas because the skills and qualifications needed, though often linked, differ to some extent, and also because institutional and organisational structures for these types of services vary from country to country, as do in consequence the situation, status and perception of the people who deliver them.

2.3 It must be remembered that a large share of assistance to families is currently provided by undeclared workers, which harms not only the workers themselves, but also families and the State.

2.4 In order to develop services to the family, efforts must be made to upgrade them and to lift the weight of tradition, as it means that these tasks, which are still carried out by women for free in the home, are still considered to be relatively unskilled.

2.5 Bringing this work out of the shadows, giving these jobs professional status and making them into real careers, with employment contracts, training, social protection, career progression and rights equivalent to those of other employees, are prerequisites for their development.

2.6 The EESC has already made useful recommendations on developing the 'personal services' sector⁽¹⁾, on the professionalisation of domestic work⁽²⁾, on combating the hidden economy and undeclared work⁽³⁾ and on the impact of social investment⁽⁴⁾. These will only be mentioned here in passing.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 44, 15.2.2013, p. 16-22.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 21, 21.1.2011, p. 39.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 177, 11.6.2014, p. 9.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 226, 16.7.2014, pp. 21-27.

2.7 The EU 2020 strategy sets a target of 75 % employment for men and women between the ages of 25 and 65. Progress on the female employment rate is stumbling, however, due to the issue of family responsibilities, among other things. The goal of professional equality is hampered by the fact that men generally take on few of these family responsibilities. The strategy is running up against austerity measures that are reducing public spending on care related services, which largely employ women, and results in an increase in care responsibilities within the family. This reduction in the provision of care infrastructure in many Member States and the inequalities between women and men in the sharing of unpaid household and domestic tasks are hampering the goal of professional equality.

2.8 Inequality between men and women at work can be gauged by the wage gap and by the concentration of women in particular professions (a lack of gender mix in employment) and of men in others. Developing services to the family would help increase full-time female employment and access to professional training and improve career progression, both for providers and receivers of these services.

2.9 Creating jobs in services carried out in a family's home, for which qualifications and skills are recognised in higher wages and greater job security would also help attract men to these professions. Efforts should also be made to raise children not to see these tasks as women's work.

2.10 Developing such services could help create millions of jobs. If every family paid for someone else to do one hour of domestic work per week, 5,5 million jobs could be created⁽⁵⁾. Social and technological innovation could also play a part here, especially due to the growing needs arising from the ageing of the population and cuts in the provision of social services to families. In that respect, it is crucial to focus on households' freedom of choice to find suitable ways to respond to these evolving needs of families.

3. Developing services in private homes in order to achieve a better work-life balance

3.1 Every family has a home and clothes to maintain, meals to prepare, children to care for, elderly parents or ill or disabled family members who need help. Women often have to work part-time in order to carry out these tasks, missing out on the career for which they have trained or on time they would use for training.

3.2 The decision to use such services is not taken easily, however, because it is not easy to bring someone into one's home and especially because the cost of such services is too high.

3.3 These family services are still today often performed by women, who are poorly paid, often undeclared and in insecure employment situations, including immigrants, some of them working illegally. The concentration of women in the professions of cleaning, caring and childcare reinforces entrenched gender stereotypes that act as a barrier to some men, results in inequality between women and men and further undermines efforts to bridge the persistent pay gap. This concentration encourages women's work to be seen as second-rate jobs.

3.4 Domestic workers are those who work in the 'domus' or private home. The ILO calls workers in this sector 'domestic workers', but the word 'domestic' has a negative connotation in some Member States. Since many terms are used to describe this work⁽⁶⁾, including family employment, personal care services, home help, carer, mother's help, family assistant and cleaner, it is not easy to compile statistics.

3.5 The ILO estimates there to be some five million domestic workers in the European Union, but this is likely to be an underestimate, since in France alone, where fiscal aid measures have helped to legalise undeclared work and therefore to calculate how many such jobs there are, the figure stands today at two million; these jobs are mainly carried out through direct employment arrangements between domestic workers and families (60-70 % of the sector), without going through any intermediary.

⁽⁵⁾ European Commission, Staff Working Document on exploiting the employment potential of the personal and household services (SWD(2012)95, 18.4.2012, page 14).

⁽⁶⁾ Servants would live in their employers' home. This is still the case in some wealthy families or in embassies, but today domestic workers mostly only work a few hours per week for each employer or customer.

4. Barriers to their development

4.1 *Undervalued work*

4.1.1 It is clear that the jobs in question, especially in the area of home-cleaning, are still often considered not to require particular knowledge or skills. They are also seen as transition jobs (e.g. au pair) and are not considered to be a career choice.

4.1.2 In most cases families do not ask for either a diploma or a certificate and entrust their children, their elderly parents and the keys to their home to people they cannot be sure they can trust. Going into someone's home and adapting to a family's needs requires a set of psychological and technical skills that are underestimated and not necessarily well defined.

4.1.3 Because society does not hold domestic chores in high regard, it is often migrant women, leaving their own children and elderly parents behind in their home countries, who come to rich countries to take care of other people's, at a time when the European Union is struggling with high unemployment. Domestic workers often have a poor self-image, since they have not chosen these jobs and the jobs are deemed to be of little worth. Today, migrant women are often overqualified, but are being channelled into a sector which is one of the few possibilities for migrants to work and where their rights as workers are very often not guaranteed or respected. This 'brain waste' is cause for serious concern, not only for the individual migrant woman herself but also for the society in which they work.

4.2 *Work that is poorly paid, precarious and poorly protected*

4.2.1 This sector employs both unskilled and overqualified labour, employed by private individuals who are unable to pay a great deal for them if Member States cannot provide fiscal aid measures.

4.2.2 Working for family employers can be a precarious situation because of changes in family circumstances. Especially when families only need a few hours of work to be done each week, domestic workers have to take on several employers in order to live, and constantly have to find new ones to replace those who no longer need their services.

4.2.3 Until recently, work in private homes was excluded from the ILO's international labour conventions. This changed with Convention 189, which was adopted in 2012 but has only been ratified by two European states⁽⁷⁾.

4.2.4 Because domestic workers are scattered across private homes, they are difficult to unionise. In a great many cases they are not even interested in it. However, their demands and interests would be better recognised if they were supported and defended by strong representative unions. It is hard for domestic workers on their own to stand up for their rights against the families that employ them. This situation is all the more difficult when they are not fluent in the language, are trafficked and do not have access to their legal documentation.

4.2.5 There are increasing examples of plans for structuring this sector in the EU Member States, progressing at varying speeds and with different scopes, enabling a separate economic sector to be fostered and developed, with the negotiation of collective agreements being adapted to services to the family. Attention must be paid when collective agreements are being negotiated or renegotiated to the complexity of qualifications and the human relations dimension.

4.2.6 When taking measures to increase the professionalisation of the personal services sector, it is important to take into account the different types of employers in this sector (intermediaries or individuals), so as to prevent any confusion regarding status or responsibilities.

4.2.7 Cases of modern slavery have come before the courts, since there is trafficking in domestic workers. Migrant women thus find themselves at risk of labour and sexual exploitation. This helps to give the sector a bad name.

⁽⁷⁾ Italy ratified Convention 189 in January 2013 and Germany in September 2013. The European Council authorised Member States to ratify the convention in January 2014.

5. Creating decent jobs and high-quality services

5.1 *Taking action on cost: doing away with undeclared work and providing different sources of financing*

5.1.1 In order to switch from the current situation — a great amount of undeclared work, for several different employers — to real jobs, with skills that can be assessed as in other professions, there is a need for fair pay, better recognition and greater regard for these services, while they must remain accessible to everyone. These two conditions can only be fulfilled through additional financing, in the form of tax breaks or subsidised vouchers (such as the existing meal vouchers), social security benefits and contributions by users. In Sweden, tax breaks for individuals have proven to be useful for home renovations, creating jobs in the building industry. In France, domestic work emerged from the hidden economy when tax breaks were put in place. Furthermore, a 'service employment voucher' was brought in to simplify red tape. The arrival of the Internet then improved on this measure, by avoiding the need for paperwork.

5.1.2 Jobs can only be professionalised and high-quality services offered through a combination of public finance (tax breaks), social finance (family allowances, aid to business, mutual societies and health insurance, works councils, etc.) and private finance (payment for services by private individuals). Businesses can make a financial contribution to services to the families of their employees as part of gender equality plans and measures to balance work and family life. Some already do so. These good practices should be recognised and disseminated by the European Commission in order to encourage the creation of a 'service employment voucher' that could be rolled out to all Member States.

5.2 Taking action on employment insecurity: setting up new businesses, developing social dialogue in the sector, in accordance with the specificities and cultural practices of each Member State.

5.2.1 Faced with the increasing needs of families for domestic work, households' freedom of choice between the various services existing in Member States needs to be consolidated and stabilised, as does the complementary nature of these services, in order to create a new model able to promote social innovation in Europe.

Employment insecurity in the sector can only be tackled by putting an emphasis on two main issues: first, the need to professionalise jobs, in order to improve the quality of the services provided, and secure real professional development for domestic workers (see 5.3); and, second, the need to give official recognition to social dialogue in the sector, as this is a very important way to ensure the well-being of and decent work for both domestic workers and families, regardless of the form these services take. In this respect, it is crucial to help families access services provided by a professionalised and declared sector (see 5.1), by offering them the ability to choose the structure of their choice.

Moreover, the services offered to families in order to help them with childcare, care for the elderly, care for family members with severe disability or their work-life balance are not like any others: they directly concern the intimacy and privacy of households, and therefore cannot be entrusted to any unfamiliar person. For this reason, it is imperative to secure sectorial social dialogue, in line with the values of the European Union and the cultural specificities of each Member State.

5.2.2 Furthermore, the development of the sector also requires the development of businesses — cooperatives, associations or companies — which act as intermediaries between people requiring services and those who are qualified to provide them. The business is responsible for finding customers and for offering the employee a work schedule. The employee would then have a single employment contract, which would make social protection easier and would pay for travelling time between customers' homes, taking leave or taking part in training courses. This intermediary would also give a commitment to the customer: to send employees who are competent, honest, discreet and properly trained and that the service will be provided even if the regular employee is ill or on leave. The customer would no longer entrust his or her home or family members to an individual, but to the company.

5.2.3 Setting up companies will enable these workers to become employees like any other. This type of company already exists. The European Commission should identify and disseminate the different models, analyse them in terms of the service provided to the customer and the social conditions of employees.

5.2.4 Furthermore, when customers prefer to take on the responsibility of being the employer themselves, which allows them to choose who comes into their home, it must be ensured that these families are informed of their obligation, as the employer, to adhere to the rules. Member States should ensure that these rules are reasonable and can feasibly be complied with by an average family.

5.3 *Reforms in the sector*

5.3.1 In Sweden, a tax deduction scheme was introduced for domestic services in 2007. This tax credit made the purchase of domestic services considerably cheaper, reducing their price by 50 %. The customer pays half the price of the service and the other half is paid to the company by the tax authorities.

5.3.2 Previously, it was difficult to buy a declared domestic service. Today, seven years later, the facts show that the tax credit has created, and continues to create, new companies and new jobs, mainly for people who were previously outside the labour market.

5.3.3 The tax reform has had a positive impact on a sector in which, by and large, services used to take the form of undeclared work. The tax reduction has not only benefited the sector and its customers, but also society as a whole.

5.3.4 In 2013, the sector had a turnover equivalent to more than half a billion euro and employed over 16 thousand people. These figures have increased steadily in recent years. Between 2012 and 2013, the employment rate for domestic services increased by 16 %.

5.3.5 Most of the companies in this field have been set up by women, and often by women from immigrant backgrounds. More than one-third of customers for domestic services are over 65 years old and two-thirds are women. Overall, 62 % of customers are women, from all income levels, but are mainly from the middle class. Families are among the main users of these services. Two out of three employees in the domestic services sector were previously unemployed or engaged in undeclared work. Approximately 80 % are women and 40 % were born outside Sweden.

5.3.6 The main employers' organisation in the services sector signs collective agreements for domestic services with its union counterparts. Collective agreements provide for rules on pay, working time, paid leave, training, social security and other aspects.

5.3.7 The reform has resulted in more jobs, lower unemployment, less sick leave and, ultimately, in higher tax revenues, which makes the system virtually self-financing.

5.4 *Take action to provide professional status*

5.4.1 These tasks require technical knowledge (hygiene rules, how to operate machinery, use products, wash a child, help an adult to get out of bed, etc.). Relationship skills are also needed, which means inspiring confidence and being discreet, working without supervision and being able to adapt to each customer. Wage grids should be drawn up with a hierarchy of skills reflecting whether it is only the home that needs taking care of or whether there are also children or elderly people, whether the customer is absent or present and whether the customer is independent or dependent, both physically and mentally.

5.4.2 The paradox is that these tasks are poorly regarded, by some individuals, even though they are more rewarding than many others. Making a home clean, helping people and creating bonds with children is satisfying. Public bodies could, firstly, work with trade unions and employers to promote the professionalisation of these services, training for those involved and certification of the skills acquired and, secondly, work towards setting up structures to bring services to the family together and organise them.

5.4.3 To change the image of these tasks, they must be identified and assessed from the technical and relationship points of view, comparing them with equivalent tasks in other professions. Diplomas, qualifications and training should be established, validating the experience workers have gained. Some already exist.

5.4.4 It would also be useful to make it easier to switch to other tasks and even to other professions, within the same sector and in other sectors. This is especially important for overqualified migrant women who are channelled into the provision of services to the family, to avoid 'brain waste'.

5.4.5 Measures should be taken to eliminate trafficking in relation to services to the family, as this is a clear violation of human rights.

5.4.6 Trade unions have often neglected the unionisation of domestic workers, which is admittedly a complex matter, due to the fact that unions do not have access to private homes, their invisibility and their being highly dispersed. Unionising domestic workers may bring progress in the professionalisation of the family services sector. This professionalisation is one of the prerequisites for gender equality in the workplace.

Brussels, 16 October 2014.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Henri MALOSSE
