

Commission improves work-life balance for millions with longer and better maternity leave

Millions of women throughout Europe will be entitled to longer and better maternity leave under proposals unveiled today by the European Commission. A separate proposal would also improve the situation of self-employed women by providing equivalent access to maternity leave, on a voluntary basis. The two initiatives form part of a package of measures to improve work-life balance for all Europeans – both women and men. They aim to update and improve existing EU legislation and will now be sent to the European Parliament and national governments for discussion. Meanwhile, the European social partners have launched negotiations to improve other forms of family leave, such as parental leave.

"Juggling work, family and private life is a huge challenge for millions of Europeans, men and women," said Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Vladimír Špidla. "But having children too often costs women their income and their job prospects. Only 65.5% of women with dependent children are in work, compared to 91.7% of men. Our proposals to improve maternity leave will help women to combine work and family life improving their and their family's quality of life. They should also help increase women's participation in the labour market and help face up to the challenges of demographic ageing: indeed countries with more women in employment also have higher birth rates."

Improved maternity leave

The Commission's proposal on maternity leave (revising the existing Directive 92/85/EEC from 1992) would increase the minimum period of leave from 14 to 18 weeks and recommend to pay women 100% of their salary but with a possibility for Member States to set a ceiling at the level of sick pay. In addition, women will have more flexibility over when to take the non-compulsory portion of their leave (before or after childbirth) and would thus no longer be obliged to take a specific portion of the leave before childbirth, as is presently the case in some Member States.

There will also be stronger protection against dismissal and a right to return to the same job or an equivalent one after maternity leave. Finally, a right to ask the employer for flexible working patterns after the end of maternity leave will be introduced although the employer will have the right to refuse this request.

More rights for self employed women

The proposal on self-employed women will provide equivalent access to maternity leave as for employees, but on a voluntary basis (replacing the existing Directive 86/613/EEC). At the same time, spouses and life partners (recognised as such in national law) who work on an informal basis in small family businesses such as a farm or a local doctor's practice (so-called 'assisting spouses') will have access, at their request, to social security coverage on at least an equal level of protection as formally self-employed workers.

Other work life balance provisions

As part of the same package, the Commission also issued a report today on the provision of childcare in the European Union and the performance of each Member State with regard to the targets set by EU leaders in Barcelona in 2002 (see [IP/08/1449](#)).

On 17 September 2008, the social partners at European level launched negotiations on parental leave with a view to revising the existing EU legislation (Directive 96/34/EC), itself based on a framework agreement concluded by European employers' and trade unions' representatives. The aim is to conclude negotiations within nine months.

In the longer term, the Commission would also like to improve other forms of family leave, such as paternity leave (a short period of leave for fathers around the time of the birth or adoption of a child), adoption leave (leave similar to maternity leave around the time of adoption of a child) and filial leave (to care for dependent family members).

Next steps

Both proposals will be discussed in co-decision procedure by the European Parliament and the Member States in the Council (qualified majority) and it is hoped that agreement will be reached during 2009. EU countries would then have two years to introduce the legislation into national law.

Further information

[Memo/08/603](#)

Communication on work-life balance

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=606&langId=en>

Proposal for a revised directive on maternity leave

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=607&langId=en>

Proposal for a revised directive on self-employed women and assisting spouses

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=608&langId=en>

European Commission website – poll on work-life balance

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/home.jsp?langId=en>