



European Commission
With support from the European
Community
DG Employment, Social Affairs
and Equal Opportunities

PROM project

DISCUSSION GROUP OF EXPERTS ON RECONCILIATION

The concept of reconciliation

One of the first elements to be debated in the group, spontaneously chosen by the participants, has been the conception and current limits of what people understand reconciliation of work and family life means.

Thus, the participants have spoken about the concept that people have today on the reconciliation of work and family life of women (not so much of men) with family responsibilities. However, it is considered more appropriate for reconciliation to also include personal life, as well as the possibility of reconciling work and some time for oneself (or for complementary training, for instance) for people that do not necessarily have children or family responsibilities. Furthermore, it is necessary for reconciliation to be viewed as something addressed to both partners of the couple; obviously to women, too, but also to men.

With regard to this, and now referring to the business and work realm, the participants state that if reconciliation measures or practices are only implemented for people with family responsibilities, then, this

circumstance causes problems in the other employees and creates a feeling of unfairness in those people that, because they do not have children or family responsibilities, are not taken into consideration by the system and cannot reconcile their professional career and their personal life (an aspect that it would be convenient to take into consideration).

In the same way, reconciliation policies seem to be addressed to make women reconcile, but it is high time for their approach to include the possibility for men to reconcile. This would have to involve both a cultural change (in the mentalities) and new structural actions addressed to both men and women.

Reconciliation in companies: problems, costs and benefits

Now fully referring to the business realm, some participants emphasise that reconciliation problems affect more small and medium-sized companies than large companies. On the one hand, small and medium-sized companies have little space left to apply reconciliation measures. In this case, the financial costs of personnel shifting or replacement increase noticeably. On the contrary, in large companies, due to their size, there is more space left for doing things and there are more real possibilities. Furthermore, the presence of trade unions in these companies encourages a greater compliance with reconciliation laws.

On the other hand, it is said that, in small and medium-sized companies, the mentalities are not ready to implement this kind of measures. Therefore, there is a lack of awareness in them that is not very successful among the managers of large companies either. This makes trade unions' activities and the existence of a legislation that makes it compulsory for companies to assume reconciliation measures especially valuable.

Nevertheless, the real problem for employees to use their rights happens in the informal relations established when the employee must negotiate

individually his/her case with direct intermediate executives. Too many demands, too many needs are not well viewed by both the managers and the intermediate executives that represent the former. Reprisals will never be made explicit, but they will appear in micro-social situations in the everyday life of companies (bonus denied, special treatment, greater inspection of controllers, etc.). It is said that, sometimes, this may end up in a situation of *mobbing*. This is why it is advocated for negotiations to take place collectively, not individually. However, one of the participants observes that personal attitudes are always important when making the decision of granting supports to some employees and not to others; it is very difficult for this to change because the specific problem is always a personal one.

Furthermore, reconciliation is not equally possible in every sector, or in all the fields of activity, or in every professional category. Thus, for instance, in sectors such as shop business or hotel business, the difficulties for reconciliation are especially significant. They originate in the intensity of work rhythms, the atypical nature of schedules (and today's century-old trend towards their extension), as well as contract precariousness. For all the participants it is obvious that the measures that may be implemented in a services company with highly qualified personnel are not related at all with the situation of sectors such as industry or subsectors such as the aforementioned ones and in low qualification categories. Therefore, it would be necessary to take into consideration formulas adapted to the different kinds of sectors and fields of activity.

The implementation of reconciliation measures is not perceived as something that might be too expensive for companies in financial terms, unless it is a small company, as it has been mentioned above.

In addition to it, it is said that, for companies, even if they are medium-sized or large ones, to implement a series of measures that are in favour

of reconciliation entails many organisational problems. This seems to be the main hindrance when implementing a whole series of measures; from this we may infer that, in the future, aids to companies will have to take into consideration the support to the organisation of reconciliation. In fact, there are already initiatives (of the Catalan Employment Service) in which a department exclusively devoted to study and deal with the issue of reconciliation has implemented measures such as subsidising the figure of a social agent for the organisation of reconciliation, but only planned for companies with more than 100 employees. However, what people criticise regarding these measures is that they do not seem to take into account that the Catalan business network is mostly made up of small and medium-sized companies, and not of large companies.

Going back to the organisational issue, the main problem may be found in replacing high-responsibility positions; they are really more difficult to replace. The distribution of attributions between the team members is not optimal either, for it overburdens them and, thus, work ends up being delayed as pressure increases. Furthermore, the reduced working hours of employees with high responsibilities or heads of teams usually provoke some anxiety in the employees themselves, for they must organise what they did before but with less time (for employees wish to be aware of everything, what in fact prevents them from really reconciling, or that this reconciliation is a low quality one because they are always expecting a cellular phone call, for instance). In these cases, some people say that the best would be to provide a period of leave without pay (full leave) and, afterwards, to go back to work full-time.

The issue of structuring the working hours in Spain has also appeared, criticising both the culture of considering that the employees that spend more hours at work are the best ones (not necessarily the most productive ones), as well as the establishment of long working hours, just the opposite of what happens in other European countries in which it is

said that in the mid-afternoon everybody has gone home. Transformations in this aspect would also entail a cultural change that would start by not considering the strict fulfilment of working hours a careless attitude of someone scarcely involved in the company anymore. However, participants think that this cultural change will only take place in the long run.

However, irrespective of productivity, they consider that there is another element that prevents reconciliation strategies from progressing more, which is the company's wish to control its employees. Thus, it is said that, to a great extent, the lack of spreading of teleworking and the resistance to reconciliation are part of maintaining a certain conception of the system regarding the control of work that does not advice its temporal or geographic dispersion. Therefore, it would not only be an operational or economic problem, but a problem related to the control and the confidence between the company and the employee.

In contrast to reconciliation costs, the participants also speak about the fact that the scarce reconciliation of work and family life among the personnel entails costs for companies that appear indirectly (less productivity because employees are more devoted to other responsibilities linked to childcare, work absenteeism due to it, etc.). On the contrary, it does not appear that companies clearly perceive that these indirect costs are precisely due to their employees' difficulties regarding reconciliation and that, therefore, to implement reconciliation measures may be seen as a strategy to reduce the work costs resulting from the lack of reconciliation.

In fact, when we ask the participants if they think that the implementation of reconciliation measures increases or reduces productivity, all of them say that it increases productivity, although some persons add precision saying that it entails other kinds of costs, such as organisational ones,

which are difficult to value and quantify. But the receptiveness and the flexibility of the company to implement reconciliation measures in favour of employees improve their motivation and impinge positively on the work atmosphere. Nevertheless, this partly depends on the general attitude of employees. There are people that are motivated and become more resolute with less working hours and there are people that take advantage from this situation to work less.

Reconciliation in people

With regard to the repercussions of the current system on employees, it is said that the difficulties of reconciliation have a negative impact mostly on women (double presence, overburden, stress...), but also on children, due to a lack of family care and of contact with the father and the mother.

Often, this unsolved difficult situation of reconciliation of work and family life has the following consequence: women have to choose between having children and following their professional career.

Also, for some mothers it is better to quit working and staying at home to take care of their children than externalising these functions, for the costs of it for the family do not make up for the woman's work if her salary is not very good. Regarding these mothers that choose the option of leaving the job market to take care of their children, some participants think that they should be granted a subsidy that somehow would replace their salary.

But the problem of these mothers is more complex and worries the participants because if they leave the job market it will be very difficult for them to return to it later on, mostly because they will be behind the times in their training compared to the ones that stayed in the job market. In the long run, the consequence is that the reintroduction of these women in the job market is difficult, precarious and unstable. Therefore, when

they retire, they will receive very low retirement pensions, and this will perpetuate their financial precariousness.

At any rate, it is considered that reconciliation solutions are much more complicated in working class women, more than in professional or highly qualified ones who have more means and may assume the opportunity cost of externalising care functions in baby-sitters or other professionals related to the family care market. On the contrary, for low-income families, the only option that is left is a large family (preferably, grandmothers and grandfathers) and some solidarity networks made up of neighbours or community members. Regarding the state coverage of these situations, it is considered as being extremely insufficient.

Incentives and/or good reconciliation practices

It is considered that if there were more tax and economic incentives for companies it would be easier for them to develop a culture favourable to reconciliation. In this sense, the participants put the example of the legislative approach to maternity leave covered by the state as a good legislative practice.

Nevertheless, some people explain that companies are part of society and, in this sense, they should also contribute to the feasibility of this society; therefore, they should not face the reconciliation issue from a purely selfish point of view (calculating the costs and benefits for the company). It would rather be an ethical duty of any company that wants to be socially responsible.

They also propose that reconciliation policies redouble their effort to involve men in these practices, even by law if need be. Culturally speaking, the participants do not consider companies ready to assume that a man may also ask for reconciliation measures and that this is not seen as an anomaly or is interpreted in negative or pejorative terms. At

any rate, the distribution of leaves without pay between the mother and the father must be emphasised.

Options such as teleworking are considered feasible and an eventual resource; however, it is not easy, for the worker must have a rather strong self-discipline and a good ability to structure his/her own time at home in order to avoid constant interruptions and other incidents that may disturb him/her. It is considered a positive or a negative option, for it may greatly extend working hours, even being at home. The advantage is that if the teleworker has flexible working hours, his/her autonomy increases with regard to the availability of the time left for him/her.

Other institutional resources are rather critically valued, such as kindergartens or school hours. In the case of kindergartens, the participants criticise the absolute lack of enough centres so that the places that are really needed cannot be covered. With regard to school hours, participants think that they are not adjusted to the schedules and rhythms of the people (usually women) that would like to reconcile but cannot. They demand the public financing of these activities so that they are not a financial overburden for families.

In relation to the innovative alternatives of reconciliation services, they mention that, in Great Britain, there is the figure of a mother (or a woman) that takes care of several children at the same time, as an alternative to traditional kindergartens. However, they say that this model cannot entail the substitutory setting-up of institutions in which children are "parked" for many hours. Were this to happen, participants observe that children would have problems related to neurosis, for it is important for children to relate to their fathers and mothers. This is why, generally speaking, the group considers this option greatly inadequate, even though someone has proposed a kind of "day-care centres" for children when they are sick.

It would also be interesting to plan solutions for the people who quit their jobs partially or completely, so that they continue training themselves in the period of leave without pay in order to avoid being left behind in the job market.

However, the element that participants consider should be revised first is the extension of the working hours and their structuring. Thus, for instance, working days with a lunch break, often with two hours for lunch, are very negatively valued. At any rate, the issue of companies' schedules is considered fundamental, working hours should be more compact (continuous working days), and there should be flexibility for the employee to start earlier or later in the morning and the same in the afternoon when leaving work. Again, people say that the bottom line is, more than anything else, a matter of organisation.